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**Ecodomesticity: Imagining the Landscape
in the American Domestic Novel**

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**Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in American Literature
University of Sussex**

September 2016

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

ANNA MAGUIRE ELLIOTT

PHD AMERICAN LITERATURE

ECODOMESTICITY: IMAGINING THE LANDSCAPE

IN THE AMERICAN DOMESTIC NOVEL

This is the first study to explore the representation of landscape by American women writers from within the genre of the domestic novel. This thesis takes an ecocritical approach to domestic novels by Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson and Barbara Kingsolver, exploring the imagining of the American landscape in the mid-nineteenth century, when the genre was at its peak, and its continuing influence on contemporary women writers. The thesis contributes to the literary criticism of American domesticity and of ecofeminism both by challenging the conceptualisation of the American landscape as a space apart from the home, and by reassessing the contribution of women domestic novelists to its literary construction. I argue for these texts to be read within a tradition of "ecodomesticity," which positions the home as a pivotal point in the construction of landscape, and as part of a broader ecological household.

Within the nineteenth century texts, I analyse the challenge to male representations of landscape and consider how a concern for social justice, and particularly abolition, influences the representation of the natural world within the genre. I then extend these concerns to the contemporary domestic novel, exploring how the representation of race is explored in relation to landscape, how the sentimental is rewritten and reproduced, and finally how the didacticism of the nineteenth century novel is translated into contemporary environmental concerns. I trace a development in the ecodomestic novel from personal reflection and silent contemplation to national and overtly political concerns. I conclude that ecodomestic novels dissolve the boundaries between home and landscape, and offer instead a vision of their interdependence. This call for a greater sensitivity to the human relationship to the natural world represents a significant and important revisioning of landscape, particularly within the current context of global environmental crisis.

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Introduction

The View from the Kitchen Window: Thesis Context

The narrative of Jane Smiley's *Good Will* (1989) calls immediately for a comparison to Thoreau's year and two months spent living "solely by the labour of my hands" in *Walden* (Thoreau 63). Her novella tells the story of Bob Miller's year spent living closer to nature, escaping to the woods to build his own house and to become self-sufficient. However, Smiley is well known for her feminist revisions of patriarchal master texts: *A Thousand Acres* rewrites *King Lear* and *Ten Days in the Hills* reworks *The Decameron*.¹ Thus, in *Good Will*, the Thoreau figure, Bob, is accompanied by his wife, Liz, and their child, meaning that domestic life and environmental project overlap. In Liz, Smiley reveals the domestic labour upon which Bob's self-sufficiency project relies, and she gives voice to a female view of the landscape, shaped from within the home. Looking out through her kitchen window, Liz observes:

The fog was sort of caught halfway up the mountainsides, as if tangled in the branches, and then it lifted off in big scarves, and the sun shone on the tree branches, and I saw the shapes of the trees, one right after another. Well, the outline of the lower branches exactly matched this imaginary line created along the tips of the upper branches, and it was beautiful and uniform (131).

Liz's vision of the fog rising from the mountains to reveal a picture of the surrounding woods is a revelatory, spiritual moment in the text, in which she sees a vision of the intrinsic beauty of the natural world. Her observation of the landscape differs significantly from that of her husband. Bob explains of his project: "My purposes aren't extreme, or political. My aim wasn't to choose the hardest path and prove I could do it. It was the same as everyone else's aim. It was to prosper" (104). Despite rejecting

¹ See also Glynis Carr's essay on Smiley's ecofeminist revision of classical mythology.

monetary gain or materialism, Bob still sees the land primarily in terms of its capacity to produce and to support his project. Liz's vision both contrasts in its observation of the landscape's inherent beauty, and happens, not while she sits in philosophic contemplation, but while she is undertaking routine food preparation. The narrative of *Good Will* thus challenges the dominance of the male environmentalist voice, while it simultaneously calls for a repositioning of the domestic sphere in relation to the imagining of the American landscape.

This thesis examines the view from the kitchen window, a recurring image in the domestic novel, by analysing how landscape representation in these texts is framed by the space of home. This aims both to challenge the predominance of male literary conceptualisations of landscape as a space apart, and to explore an alternative vision of the natural environment. Contemporary American women writers such as Marilynne Robinson, Toni Morrison, and Barbara Kingsolver have, like Smiley, written novels both set within the domestic sphere and that use this perspective to explore the human and, particularly the female, relationship to the environment. A number of these women writers are also engaged in environmental debates outside of their fiction: from Marilynne Robinson's study of the Sellafield nuclear plant, *Mother Country*; Jane Smiley's essay "So Shall We Reap" about the North American prairie ecoregion; to Barbara Kingsolver's journalistic memoir, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, following her family's attempts only to eat food grown by themselves or locally. This thesis aims to reconcile these activist concerns with their fiction set within the home by considering why and how women writers have (re)imagined the landscape of America within the genre of the domestic novel.

Jane Smiley's critique of Thoreau and those influenced by him, like Bob, represents a broader feminist struggle to reposition *Walden* and respond to Thoreau's dominant position in environmentalist writing. In fact, the character of the Thoreau-like male environmentalist recurs in Smiley's work, and is similarly critiqued or satirised: from Jess, in *A Thousand Acres*, who leaves his home town and discovers organic farming, to Paul from *Ten Days in the Hills*, a Los Angeles lifestyle guru who "isn't attached to things," as it does similarly in other American women's writing, such as Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney*s (100). In his seminal study of environmental perception in American literary culture, *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell notes of Thoreau that "no writer in the literary history of America's dominant subculture comes closer than he to standing for nature in both the scholarly and the popular mind" (Buell 2, see also Gatta 71). *Walden*, in particular, as ecocritical master text, has helped to form the image of the lone figure, living a life in close proximity with nature, so central to the representation of the landscape in US fiction. As Leo Marx and Annette Kolodny have suggested, the escape into untouched nature is a repeated theme in American writing, marking a desire to make real the dream of an Edenic existence, to begin again in a virgin continent. However, as Kolodny observes in the work of early settlers, this is a particularly male conceptualisation of the American landscape (see also Gatta 8). Stephen Fender similarly explains of *Walden* that the book "seems to re-enact another powerful constituent of national identity, the myth that a man (it is almost always a man) somehow grows to American maturity through an initiation on the isolated frontier" (xxii). *Walden* has not only "come to stand for nature," as Buell suggests, but the narrative is representative of a flight into the natural world that is critically tied to male self-development.

Criticism of the American Renaissance, of texts such as *Walden*, Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, has focused on the flight to the wilderness away from the restrictions of civilised society, to an unspoiled landscape set against an artificial urban environment (Marx). However, this is also described by Fiedler as the "flight of the dreamer from the shrew" (Fiedler xx-xxi), which as Gillian Brown suggests "defines the domestic as a pole from which the individual must escape" (5). Rip's long sleep in the mountains is not just an escape from society, it is, more specifically, an escape from the domestic demands of Dame Van Winkle, Huck's journey on the raft downriver stems from his need to run away from the civilising requirements of Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, and Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond marks a flight from the domestic patterns of his mother and sister (Brown 5). Reading these interpretations in combination, these literary tales of the growth to manhood are both a flight to nature in order to start anew, and a flight away from the domestic space of home, a space gendered as female. In this imagining of the landscape, a binary opposition is created that establishes the natural world not only as a space of freedom apart from society, but more particularly as a gendered dichotomy of a male exterior landscape against a female interior home. Freedom itself thus becomes defined as primarily a male preserve.

This critical reading of the male flight into the wild, however, not only overlooks the domestic sphere left behind, but ignores the continuing influence of domesticity in the space of the natural environment. Through its parallels to *Walden*, *Good Will* reminds the reader, in fact, that Thoreau's escape from society, like Bob's, is far from a journey from civilisation to wilderness. *Walden* is a project in discovering a different way to live, and is thus also focused throughout on the house and housework.

As critics such as Jane Tompkins, Elaine Showalter and Gillian Brown have shown, while male texts of the American Renaissance were embraced as canonical works by the mid to late twentieth century, the best-selling domestic novels of the period were all but forgotten. Nevertheless, during the mid-nineteenth century, the "d-d mob of scribbling women" berated by Hawthorne were commercially successful and the influence of domesticity was pervasive (Showalter 83). Stephen Fender suggests that the opening chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," draws from the guidebooks for young men popular at the time. However, Catharine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), for example, also covered topics of economy of expenses, the layout of the house, clothing, and care of the garden. Thoreau's time at Walden Pond, like Bob's relocation in *Good Will*, is both a flight to nature and a domestic project, representing a search for a new way to live on the land, and as such deserves a more nuanced reading in relation to domesticity.

In their feminist responses to *Walden*, Sarah Ann Wider and Laura Dassow Walls have explored Thoreau's representations of home and housework as a "liberating force" for women because of the way he reimagines domestic space (Wider):

Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper. (Thoreau 36).²

Rejecting the products of household consumption certainly suggests a domesticity that involves both a greater respect for nature and simultaneously offers freedom from the burden of housework that most frequently falls to women. Minimising housework was

² Buell also notes the influence of Thoreau on nineteenth century women writers: from the women who started the first Thoreau society to the first doctoral thesis on Thoreau, which was female authored (44-45).

also a goal of Beecher's *Treatise*, in which she suggests that "it is very poor economy to build a large house, or to live in a style which demands much labor" (761). However, Fender points out that : "Thoreau would call in at the house of his mother and sister on Main St....to eat a meal and get his washing and mending done" (xxiii). Just as Bob's environmental living project is reliant on the silent labour of his wife and child, Thoreau's more routine housework was simply displaced and this labour, as well as the women who perform it, rendered invisible in the text. Nevertheless, Wider and Dassow Walls draw important attention to the domestic themes of Thoreau's work, and the nuanced and complex relationship between conceptualising home and imagining the natural world. Although there is much work still to do, as can be seen in the example of *Walden*, the place of domesticity has at least begun to be examined in texts of the American Renaissance.³ This thesis, therefore, is not focused on the male texts of the environment and their engagement with domesticity but, in order to take these arguments further, with the domestic novel and its representation of the American landscape, which remains further understudied.

The criticism of domesticity of the past twenty years has challenged the idea of the home as an interior, private space, isolated from broader society. The publication of the "No More Separate Spheres!" special issue of *American Literature* in 1998 marked a pivotal moment in this debate; it focused on breaking down the binary opposition of a female domestic sphere and a male public sphere and encouraged women's writing to be read in a broader social context. Locating women's writing in a world beyond the home was, in many respects, a liberating move. Critics like Amy Kaplan and Gillian Brown have shown how writing from within and about the home has both reflected and shaped

³ See especially Gillian Brown's work on Hawthorne and Melville in *Domestic Individualism*.

broader American political life; this work both reconsidered the artistic value of women's writing about the home, and simultaneously revealed how it was implicated in reinforcing national ideologies of power. The desire to expand the scope of criticism of women's writing, to ensure that women do not remain artistically and intellectually trapped within the home, was an essential move. However, as Susan Fraiman explains: "by stressing the role of bourgeois domesticity in enforcing 'larger' structures of national, racial and class domination, post-spheres scholarship effectively tipped the balance still further toward negative views of the domestic" (Fraiman 480). Thus the expansion of criticism of women's writing, enabling and encouraging analysis of texts and topics beyond the home also led, until recent years, to a devaluing of the domestic as a field of study (resulting in the study of the domestic novel as something of a 'separate sphere' itself).

In more recent times, critics have begun to revisit the debate around the domestic in relation to women's writing. Some like Susan Fraiman, Lauren Berlant and Laurie Merish have revisited the genre with a particular interest in the sentimental. Berlant and Merish have shown how the genre has employed the sentimental as part of a larger, nationalistic and consumerist rhetoric, while Fraiman has questioned the automatic association between domesticity and sentimentality. Running alongside this concern about the place of affect in women's writing, is a renewed interest in exploring domesticity in terms of spatiality. Studies such as Deborah Clarke's *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth Century America* have reconsidered the association of the domestic solely with houses, while Kristin Jacobson's *Neodomestic American Fiction* suggests domestic fiction as a challenge to conventional conceptions of the space of the home, revealing how the contemporary novel revises and restructures

domestic space. These two separate areas of renewed interest, the extension of the domestic beyond the space of the house and the interest in the place of affect, are usefully united in criticism considering the nineteenth century domestic novel's close connection to social issues such as temperance or abolition. However, critics are yet to extend this to consider the connected interest in home and environmentalism in either the nineteenth century, or the contemporary, domestic novel genre.

Environmental historians, on the other hand, have clearly shown the important role of nineteenth century and early twentieth century American women in environmental activism, noting its close connection to women's rights. Moreover, they have revealed the link between the preservation of nature and domestic concerns of the period. Carolyn Merchant explains that the women representatives attending National Conservation Congresses "drew on a trilogy of slogans - conservation of womanhood, the home, and the child," seeing the preservation of the environment as a critical extension of women's roles at home (Merchant 73). Susan A. Mann notes that "The term 'municipal housekeeping' was used to describe this environmental activism" as women became engaged in issues of clean water, hygiene and safe food (Mann 7). Both black and white women's clubs were involved in environmental activism, and also played a crucial role in developing the conservation movement from an elite male enterprise to a wider movement (Mann 12 Merchant 57). These studies reveal, as also seen in the domestic manuals such as Beecher's, an intimate connection between the domestic practices of the home in the nineteenth century and broader environmental concerns. However, the research of these historians has not been extended into literature.

This study builds on the critical scepticism of the domestic as a space apart, considering its relationship to the wider natural environment, and suggests that women writers were, and still are, interested in representing the exterior landscape from the interior world of the domestic novel. While recognising that the figure of Thoreau that has come to "stand for nature" can be a "liberating force" for women, it is apparent that other writers, like Smiley, have used their fiction to draw attention to the male privilege embedded in the nineteenth century environmental text, and to reposition the female voice. The dominance of this literary perspective, in the form of a flight to nature away from the space of home, has represented a patriarchal separation from what remains a predominantly female sphere. Building on Kolodny's work in *The Land Before Her*, this study similarly argues for "the imaginative daring of the domestic fictionalists who challenged outright the nation's infatuation with a wilderness Adam" (xiii). Kolodny's book focuses on the movement West and the female dream of domesticating the frontier, which contrasted with the Euro-American male vision of the land-as-woman, both nurturing and inviting domination. I extend her interest in the female representation of the American landscape to a later period, and place it more fully within the genre of domestic fiction. This thesis considers how women writers have used the domestic novel to expose the artistic construction of the American landscape as patriarchal, and argues for a tradition within American women's writing that is "ecodomestic," imagining human domesticity as part of a broader ecological household.

Landscape and the Home: Methodology and Terminology

The methodology employed for this thesis, as indicated in my discussion of its context, draws from both domestic novel and from ecocritical theory. There is by no means a unilateral understanding of what constitutes the domestic novel and part of this thesis is therefore engaged with questioning and defining the categorisation of the novels I explore. The terminology used for the body of women's writing that is the focus of this study has, historically, reflected the divide between the affective and the spatial elements of these texts. The two most commonly used terms "sentimental fiction" and the "domestic novel,"⁴ have been used to describe this female literary genre, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and extending to contemporary times. The former term, "sentimental," focuses on a central characteristic of the genre, that is the use of emotion to provoke an empathetic response in the reader. However, this term is partly inaccurate, in that the novels frequently speak out against the indulgent, redundant displays of excessive emotion that the term implies.⁵ Instead they advocate a genuine emotional connection against manipulated tears: the central characters are called on to be calm and strong in a crisis, rather than to express the ineffective weakness implied by the term "sentimental." As Glenn Hendler explains: "Sentimental fiction asserts that theatricality is dangerous because it can evoke an 'improper,' inauthentic form of sympathy" (696). I find the term "sentimental fiction" problematic because it privileges the emotionality of the texts, rather than being indicative of their intent to use this as a technique to achieve the moral improvement of the reader. Similarly, the term "sentimental" gives no sense of their other shared narrative elements, such as

⁴ Nina Baym also employs the term "woman's fiction," although this term has largely been rejected by other critics because of its breadth as a term.

⁵ Baym notes her concern with use of the term for similar reasons in her introduction to the second edition of *Woman's Fiction* (Baym xxix), noting that, for female novelists of the time, the term was associated with the seduction novel.

highlighted clearly by Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins in their groundbreaking studies of the genre.

Claudia Tate uses a different term altogether to focus on the common character types and structural devices of the work, identifying this as "social melodrama" in her consideration of the use of this genre by African American women (6-7).⁶ This term usefully focuses on the shared narrative strategies of the genre, and the "social" activism at which the texts frequently aim. However, as with the term "sentimental," the term "melodrama" meaning "a sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters" suggests (unlike her thoughtful argument) an inflated fictionalisation within these novels, when writers were concerned with highlighting the real conditions and experiences of black women of the time (*OED*). The other difficulty with both the terms "sentimental fiction" and "social melodrama" is that these definitions ignore the shared setting of the house, which lies at the centre of the genre. My study encompasses three central aspects of these novels: the domestic settings, their narrative similarities, and their concern with affect. I use the term "domestic" precisely because it refers to the physical space of the dwelling (the house), the structure and character of the family or social unit inside (the household), and, simultaneously, the associated emotional concerns, particularly of love, comfort, and belonging (the home). In using this term, I acknowledge that it has not always held positive connotations for women's writing, that it has been employed as a derogatory indicator of popular, mainstream, or poor quality work, and my work uses the term in part to address misconceptions about the domestic novel.

⁶ Tate uses but does not define the term "domestic fiction" at various points. Her analysis, however, uses John G. Cawelti's definition of "social melodrama" as a theoretical lens.

The distinctive narrative traits of the domestic novel relate to these three central elements of domesticity (house, household, and home). One misreading of the domestic novel is the assumption that the narrative is only set within the house. While the house does stand at the centre of the text, these novels are primarily concerned with the tension between interior and exterior. Private, interior space is an important trait of the genre: Nina Baym explains that within the narrative is often "a smaller space, the room of her own that is the heroine's particular territory," and Tompkins notes that "[these] novels take place, metaphorically and literally, in the 'closet.'" (188; 151). However, this interior room is far from the only space of significance in the text, and while the domestic novel may centre on a family home, they are by no means restricted to one house. Nina Baym's definition is helpful here, as she explains that this fiction: "develops as its chief organizing metaphor the closed and structured social space" (188). The term "social space" describes the way these novels are concerned with representing, not simply the heroine's house, but the multiple spaces inhabited by a woman of the time. In these texts, women visit other women in their houses, move to a new family or marital home, and they frequently describe settings beyond the house, including landscape description, but they remain focused on spaces inhabited primarily by women. The movement between interior and exterior spaces, from house to house, is also used to emphasise the heroine's home as constantly under threat. Observing the number of heroines who are forced to leave their homes in these novels, Glenn Hendler notes, the genre has a "surprising tendency to disarticulate domestic spaces" (685). The house, then, is central to the genre but is a space of implicit (and sometimes explicit) instability, and by virtue of this is as concerned with exteriority as with interiority.

This instability extends to the household, and the families that inhabit the worlds of these novels. Perhaps surprisingly, this fiction does not centre on the relations of a 'traditional,' nuclear family. Baym observes that "There are very few intact families in this literature, and those that are intact are unstable or locked into routines of misery" (27). The frequent deaths, the multiple losses of children, such as Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or of parents, such as Ellen's mother in *The Wide, Wide World*, are cited as further examples of a melodramatic sentimentality in these novels. However, the separation of families, particularly due to higher mortality rates, was not unusual for this time. Death, grief, responsibility for siblings, a loss of power within a family, were all actual experiences or prescient fears for women of the time, allowing them to relate to these narratives and the struggles of the heroines. Moreover, as Baym points out, the separation of families is also a narrative technique that puts the heroine in a position where she is tested and must learn to develop the skills necessary to survive. The heroine's search for a secure home therefore extends from a spatial to a relational search, as she negotiates those closest to her for guidance and support.

The typical domestic novel narrative employs characters who may or may not be blood relations in a set of character types that are common to the genre.⁷ The heroes of these novels share similar characteristics; they are usually sensible and stable, but their marriage suit is rejected by the heroine, at least in the first instance. Set against the honourable hero is a dissolute male character, frequently the brother. For the heroine, who has usually lost one or both parents, it is usually the mother whose presence is missed most strongly. Her influence is replaced by that of a mean and petty aunt, who

⁷ Both Baym and Tompkins explore these character types in their studies of these novels and I am indebted to that work here.

falls short in her maternal guidance. Tompkins explains how effectively this cast of character types works: "Their familiarity and typicality, rather than making them bankrupt or stale, are the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation" (xvi). These character types combine to form a familiar framework that is the social unit at the heart of the genre, recognisable from novel to novel. As the heroine is drawn into a series of encounters with these characters, their personality types act as shorthand for readers, flagging the moral choices that she (and, by implication, they) should make.

The final aspect of domesticity central to these texts is the search for home, as the heroine searches for a physically secure house and family, but also struggles on a journey towards emotional stability. Such narratives are essentially coming of age stories, focused on a young girl's growth from childhood to adulthood, and these novels are explicitly didactic, written to provide moral guidance for the female reader.⁸ The central tale of the young woman's growth to womanhood is thus simultaneously a spiritual journey in the text, to find a safe home for the soul of both the heroine and, by implication, the reader. Critics have presented this primarily as an internal struggle, moving from the interiority of the house, concentrically, to the interiority of the heroine: "most of what they do takes place inside the 'closet' of the heart" (Tompkins 151). However, like Berlant and Merish, I am interested in reversing this reading, in order to expose how these private emotions are implicated in a broader, national rhetoric. The didacticism of the domestic novel employed the use of empathy, not purely for individual self-development, but in order to enact social change, uniting the female

⁸ Like Baym I do not use the term *Bildungsroman* here. She rejects the term because such works "value self-expression over self-discipline"(xix). I do not favour this term because the coming-of-age narrative is only one characteristic of the domestic novel genre.

coming-of-age by implication with a broader societal growth to maturity. The ultimate aim of these texts was to create domestic political change on both an individual and a national level; home is thus best read as a physical space, an emotional state, and the institution of the American nation.

These defining characteristics of the nineteenth century domestic novel, house, household and home, are therefore summarised as fundamentally marked by instability and shaped by the female journey to a moral and spiritual independence. Although there is a tendency in contemporary criticism to define the "domestic novel" simply by its focus on home and family, the quite specific features of the nineteenth century genre repeat themselves in a surprisingly similar way in more recent versions of the genre. The houses under threat, familiar characters, female coming of age story, and use of empathy to convey a moral message, frequently recur.

As this thesis analyses writing of the home that interprets and represents the landscape, my methodology spans both the critical theory of domesticity and the field of ecocriticism. In analysing the written observations of the landscape found in the domestic novel, I have tried, where possible, to avoid the term "nature." As Ian Frederick Finseth observes, the term has an "almost infinite flexibility of signification" (2), referring to everything from the physical environment to human characteristics, rendering the word extremely challenging to define. I have further avoided the term because I am all too aware, as many including William Cronin, John Gatta, Raymond Williams, and Mark Rawlinson have highlighted, that there is little that is "natural" about nature. I have chosen to use the term "landscape" for these descriptions of the physical environment precisely because it draws attention both to these representations as constructions and, furthermore, because it calls into focus the

significance of the subject position of the viewer. One troubling legacy of the term "nature" is that it continues to carry with it the idea that it is also "naturally," universally experienced and understood. The term "landscape," on the other hand, is "a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view." This definition references a creative, artistic attempt to encapsulate the transitory experience of the physical environment, as seen from a subjective perspective. In its form as a verb, the term further suggests the idea of shaping and modification, and this thesis highlights the human construction of "nature."

However, as "landscape" is a scene viewed at a distance, the term is not always useful for describing scenery in which a character might find herself immersed. In these cases, where possible, I have described the individual natural elements such as woods, mountains, jungle, and so on, to make this clear. I have also tried to acknowledge the traditions related to representing these different elements: the representation of the sublime experience in relation to creatively imagining the mountain, in Chapter 1, and the alternative African American relationship to the woods in Chapter 3, for example. Where it is not possible to use a specific term, usually where multiple elements or unnamed scenery is featured, or where a synonym might be needed, I have used the terms "natural world" or "physical environment." I recognise that the breadth of these terms is not always helpful, and have endeavoured to use them only when necessary.

The approach of this thesis is ecocritical in that it considers the environmentalism of the texts in question as they explore an alternative relationship to and representation of the landscape. In particular, I examine these novels through the lens of ecofeminist theory, which reads a relationship between the position of women and the treatment of the physical environment. The conceptual association of women

and the natural world risks repeating the problematic trope of land as nurturing mother, furthering a gendered reading of the landscape that entangles the feminine with the female. I use this theoretical lens, as Victoria Davion does, on the understanding that ecofeminism should be feminist rather than feminine. While ecocriticism, generally, questions the perceived division between the human and non-human, culture and nature, ecofeminist theory reads the human relationship to the natural world as both anthropocentric and androcentric. Its theorists read a fundamental connection between the way that women and the natural environment have been treated, stemming from patriarchal systems of domination. I position my work with critics such as Karen Warren and Val Plumwood, who have shown that the environmental crisis (specifically, deforestation, drought, and food scarcity) is of particular significance to women because it disproportionately affects them: their domestic situation is still likely to involve managing resources for the home.

Ecofeminist theory became unpopular for a time because it struggled to escape the label of essentialism: the accusation that in attempting to embrace a plurality of positions, it reduced the experiences of different subject positions to a shared, single perspective (Gaard 27). While there was some truth to this claim, it was responded to thoughtfully, and was not applicable to many of the diverse theorists in the field, as Greta Gaard has pointed out in her thorough study of the debate. Nevertheless, these accusations had a damaging impact on the field, to the extent that numerous feminists working on the environment chose to rename their approach. I use the term "ecofeminism" for the methodology I use in this thesis both because I find alternative

terms, such as "environmental feminism" less concise, but also to recognise the body of theoretical work that has already been completed in the field.⁹

Attention has returned to ecofeminist theory more recently because of a renewed interest in intersectionality. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen explain this perspective as fundamental to the history of the field: "Analyzing mutually reinforced logics of domination and drawing connections between practical implications of power relations has been a core project of ecofeminism, even before the term 'ecofeminism' was coined" (7). Rather than seeing the interest in multiple perspectives as reductive, intersectional theoretical perspectives now call for a greater understanding of the different racial, class, sexual and gendered subject positions at play in relationships of power. Ecofeminists have continually attempted to adopt this intersectional approach, but they further extend this to the natural world and human/non-human relations of power: "Though sometimes called 'utopian' or 'concerned with too many issues,' ecofeminist theory exposes and opposes intersecting forces of oppression, showing how problematic it is when these issues are considered separate from one another" (1). Ecofeminist theory thus presents a critical lens that considers racial, gendered, and environmental perspectives as intertwined.

This thesis follows ecofeminist literary scholarship, such as that of Ian Frederick Finseth and Rachel Stein, that aims to expose these intersectional power relationships in American writing about the natural world. In reading the "landscape" in these novels, I highlight the term's relationship to a tradition of artistic representation that holds an important place in visualising the American nation both in art, as I discuss further in

⁹ Like Gaard, I am sceptical about the blanket attempt to discredit this work, and the renewal of these interests in fields such as post humanism and animal studies, "moving forward with ideas initially developed in feminist and ecofeminist contexts, often without acknowledging those contexts as foundations for their work" (Gaard 42).

Chapter 2, and in literature. As critics like Mark Rawlinson, Annette Kolodny, and Leo Marx, have shown, this representation of landscape came to be dominated by a pastoral vision of an untouched Eden, waiting to be conquered and settled. Like Stein, this thesis aims to expose the intersectional relationships of power at work in this image, that: "the American formulation of nation out of nature was actually a propriative paradigm in which all that is identified with the natural will be subsidiary" (Stein 6).

Furthermore, this study considers how the domestic novel engages with and challenges this dominant artistic construction of the American landscape. The point at which ecofeminist theory and domestic novel theory intersect is in their shared interest in affect and, particularly, with the use of empathy. In these novels, I explore the extension of affect from the domestic sphere to the environment, and I draw particularly from ecofeminist theory to analyse this contrasting construction of the natural world. As Adams and Gruen explain, focusing "on affective connections, including compassion and empathy...shows how these connections have a cognitive or rational component" (3). In Chapters 4 and 5, particularly, I use ecofeminist theories of empathy and an ethic-of-care to read the domestic novel's didactic aims (as opposed to their "sentimentality") in relation to the natural world. I use the term "ecodomesticity" to describe the environmentalism in these novels, especially in reference to this extension of affect from the domestic sphere to a concern for the natural world. "Ecodomestic" novels consider home as a critical point at which the human relationship to the natural world is constructed, and they call for an ecological awareness of their interconnection.

Scope and Thesis Overview

This thesis considers the central question of why and how domestic novelists have imagined the landscape of America by addressing five questions that form key stages in the development of the ecodomestic novel. Like the texts themselves, this structure broadens outwards from the personal to the national; from the internal struggle and questioning of patriarchal representations of the landscape, to a wider, empathetic imagining of the landscape, which exposes American domesticity's participation in a national and global environmental context. This structure is not intended to suggest that the final novel is the most evolved ecodomestic text in comparison to the others, but rather that its ecodomesticity is the most overt, and can thus help identify a progressive exploration in the preceding texts. The chapters are ordered in relation to this structure, each focusing on a different text, rather than strictly chronologically, although they move from the nineteenth century to the contemporary domestic novel. I first reconsider the representation of landscape in the nineteenth century domestic novel, and show how this presented both a challenge to dominant male representations of the landscape, and an alternative conceptualisation of the natural world. I then analyse how the interest in social justice, and particularly in the abolition of slavery, further influenced the nineteenth century reimagining of the landscape. Situating race as central both to the domestic novel genre and to the representation of the American landscape, I next illustrate how these concerns are extended in the contemporary domestic novel. The penultimate chapter addresses the use of affect, establishing how the "sentimental" gets rewritten and reproduced, particularly in relation to an ethic-of-

care for the natural world. Finally, I ask how the didacticism of the nineteenth century novel is refracted into the environmentalist concerns of the contemporary novel.

This study is focused on contemporary women's writing that has, post-second wave feminism, continued to be based within the home, in order to examine ecodomesticity as a continuing tradition in the American domestic novel. In a contemporary context, the recent novels are invested in the politics of environmentalism, and follow the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which marked the point of both the founding of the environmental movement and of environmental literature (Gaard 27). This study also examines two examples of understudied nineteenth century texts in order both to reposition them and their authors within the writing of the time, and to trace a matrilineal heritage within the contemporary novels. While these mid-nineteenth century texts predate the environmental movement, there was a strong philosophical and artistic interest in the landscape in the period, as seen in the writings of Transcendentalism and in landscape painting. This also marked the period when domestic ideology and the domestic novel were at their peak, and is the body of work to which most critical attention has been paid, which makes it a useful period to examine as part of a broader tradition in women's writing. I do not intend to make claims for all nineteenth century domestic novels, but to suggest a reconsideration of these texts and to consider the continuing influence of the genre. I acknowledge that there are domestic novels outside of these periods that explore landscape representation but, particularly as a foundational study of ecodomesticity, I focus on the the nineteenth century novel when the genre was at its

peak, and the contemporary domestic novel because of the increasing interest in environmentalism.¹⁰

This thesis is focused on women writers of the domestic novel because domestic space remains predominantly occupied by women, who continue to hold, disproportionately, the caring and labour roles that are based within the home. Furthermore, it builds on critical work that has worked to reclaim the domestic as an important topic of study, challenging a gendered critical divide that has all too frequently designated women's writing about the home as popular, lightweight and unliterary. The work of domestic novelists remains critically neglected, despite the rediscovery and republication of a number of these texts, resulting in a continued exclusion from the academy. This does not mean to imply that women only write about the home, or that men have nothing of value to contribute, but rather that domesticity remains a significant female intellectual space. My intention, like Lora Romero's, is to try to avoid the polarisation of critics who have either read the domestic novel solely as a space of resistance (such as Tompkins) or as a space of conformity and conservatism (such as Douglas). This thesis aims to explore the genre as complex and conflicted, acknowledging the limitations of the domestic novel, particularly as a genre produced primarily by middle class white women, but also to read the radical political possibilities contained within the tradition.

As Andrea Levine and Valerie Sweeney Prince have shown, the domestic novels of the 1850s had a significant influence on later African American writers. However, the system of slavery meant severe restrictions to writing at all at the time, let alone

¹⁰ For example, the early twentieth century work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or the late 1950s writing of Shirley Jackson.

writing within the genre itself. Post-emancipation, in the late nineteenth century, writers like Frances E. W. Harper engaged with the genre in order to challenge ideals of domesticity, revealing instead the racial and class assumptions at the heart of these constructions of home. This study is focused on the domestic novels written prior to this period, both when the genre was established and reached a peak in popularity, but also in the period prior to, and during, the Civil War. This means that while the nineteenth century texts selected are both written by white women writers, the question of race is foremost, both in its invisible presence and, in particular, in the genre's vocal concern with abolition. This study considers the treatment and centrality of race to the construction of both the American home and landscape in the domestic novel, given the centrality of the legacy of slavery to the genre. However, the study of the relationship to and representation of the environment in domestic novels by African American women, not to mention that of Native American women, and Asian American women deserves its own, informed and in-depth study, and is beyond the parameters of this thesis. I mean here to acknowledge the limitations of this study, but I hope it might form the basis for a broader, more inclusive conversation.

Annette Kolodny's study of nineteenth century writing, *The Land Before Her*, is concerned with writing that explicitly represents the settlement of the frontier, and her selection of texts generally adheres to the criterion Lawrence Buell uses in *The Environmental Imagination*, of privileging texts when they foreground descriptions of nature. Conversely, this study considers texts that are primarily about home and which, particularly in the case of the nineteenth century novel, might not initially seem interested in representing the landscape. I have selected texts that conform to the criteria I established for the domestic novel above, in order both to clearly define the

genre, and to show its continuing influence. These texts are "domestic" in their focus on house, household and home, all of which are marked by instability. They feature a central female character and coming of age story, and are didactic, centring around a journey to locate an emotional and spiritual sense of home. In the nineteenth century, the natural world often features primarily as background description, whereas the later texts increase their explicit attention to representing landscape. Nevertheless, I argue that the view from the kitchen window makes a significant contribution to the imagining of the American landscape.

The first two chapters consider how the landscape of America was represented in the mid-nineteenth century domestic novel. I have chosen the novels of two of the most canonical female writers of the period, Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe, in order to consider the way their interest in landscape has been neglected by critics. I show both how these works have come to be overlooked as domestic novels, and highlight their struggles to represent the American landscape. Their canonical position makes their work of further influence to contemporary female authors, and underlines the legacy of the domestic novel, its empathetic concerns, and social message to this later body of fiction.

Louisa May Alcott lived at the heart of the transcendentalist circle, and Chapter 1 argues for a reevaluation of her philosophic exploration of the landscape, particularly in her engagement with the sublime encounter. Her categorisation primarily as a children's author, due to the success of *Little Women*, has overshadowed her other writing for adults, and my reading of her first published novel, *Moods* (1864), relocates the text within the domestic novel genre. I argue that she uses the coming of age plot and didactic message of the genre in order to explore the possibilities for a female

sublime encounter. Positioned at the limits of childhood, the novel's central character, Sylvia Yule, searches for a model of powerful womanhood through her encounter with the unknowable natural world. This chapter both considers Alcott's search for an alternative way to imagine the landscape, and examines her use of the domestic novel genre to challenge dominant transcendental and Romantic conceptualisations of landscape.

Chapter 2 further explores the challenge to patriarchal constructions of the American landscape from within the nineteenth century domestic novel, while it also asks how landscape is represented in relation to race in the genre. Abolition and social justice were at the heart of Harriet Beecher Stowe's writing, and I focus on her novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856); a title that signals its central concern with the connection between the institution of slavery and the landscape of the south. Although written earlier than Alcott's novel, Stowe was a more experienced writer and older than Alcott when she wrote *Dred*. As a more mature work, particularly in its abolitionist focus, I position it after Alcott's in this thesis. From my archival research, I analyse Stowe's use of Frederick Law Olmsted's *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, the source for the novel, as well as her own paintings and drawings, in order to consider her visualisation of a landscape she had never visited. I argue that Stowe creates a radical imagining of the landscape of the south as a space of potent organic growth. I reposition the text within the domestic novel genre, to show that, as in Alcott's novel, the story of female self-development that is central to the text is thereby extended to the landscape. For Stowe, this metaphor of organic growth represented liberation from slavery and the possibility for imagining a new American identity.

As a historical novel, *Beloved* (1987), by Toni Morrison, shows an explicit engagement with nineteenth century women's writing and particularly with the domestic novel genre that forms the basis of Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate how Morrison's novel extends the interconnection of race, landscape and home and develops themes explored by Stowe and Alcott. I consider the novel as a text of reconstruction, which seeks to analyse the significance of both the historical period and the psychological process of reimagining the traumatic past of slavery for African Americans, in order to locate a place of belonging in late twentieth century America. As in Stowe's novel, this process of reconstruction is centred on a critical reimagining of the landscape of the American South, but Morrison simultaneously reconstructs the genre in order to challenge the concepts of landscape and home as universally experienced and understood. I have selected Morrison's novel because even in its canonical status, its relationship to the nineteenth century domestic novel remains largely unexplored. I have positioned it as a key text before continuing to discuss the contemporary domestic novel further both because of its explicit historical intertextuality, but also because it remains a highly influential text for contemporary women writers, as seen in Chapter 5.

Housekeeping (1980), by Marilynne Robinson was written before *Beloved* but holds a similarly important status in American literature, particularly for its representation of landscape; however, like *Beloved*, it is rarely read in the nineteenth century domestic novel tradition. The publication of the third of Robinson's *Gilead* books, *Lila* (2014) shows a return, both to an interest in the genre, and to the representation of the American landscape. In Chapter 4, I read *Housekeeping* and *Lila* together in order to consider what place affect has in the contemporary domestic novel,

and the show how the "sentimental" gets rewritten in relation to the natural world. In particular, I consider the influence of the nineteenth century domestic novel on her use of the figure of the female orphan. Like Nina in *Dred* and Sylvia in *Moods*, Ruth, Lucille and Lila are motherless, meaning they struggle with a sense of an obscured matrilineal past, and must also learn to make their own way in the world. In the genre, the female orphan stood as a model for a socially sanctioned independent self, and simultaneously embodied the idea of dependence. Robinson employs the female orphan figure to explore the contemporary tension between American self-reliance and a feminist ethic-of-care. In doing so, she both challenges the domestic ideal and extends its empathetic message to the human relationship to the environment.

The final chapter focuses on Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) and considers how the didacticism of the nineteenth century domestic novel is refracted into the environmentalist concerns of contemporary writing. Although *Lila* is the most recent novel in this study, in many ways it looks backwards, remaining concerned with resolving the questions left unanswered in *Housekeeping*. *The Poisonwood Bible*, is an outward looking text and extends the question of home in America to the context of the nation's role as a neocolonial power. It is more explicit in its didacticism, and in this, as well as its analysis of domesticity in terms of national politics, clearly shows the influence of the genre from Stowe, and through Morrison. I suggest that Kingsolver's novel reveals the concept of "the wild" at the centre of the construction of the foreign, and challenges its separation from domesticity, revealing them instead as mutually reinforcing terms. I argue that by deconstructing the logic of domination that underpins colonial domesticity, Kingsolver employs Lori Gruen's concept of "engaged empathy" to highlight alternative subject positions, and to call for political change. Her use of

affect to initiate social action draws strongly from the nineteenth century domestic novel and thereby extends its didacticism to a contemporary context.

Chapter 1: "Don't Worry Your Young Wits with Metaphysics": Louisa May Alcott and the Search for a Female Transcendentalism

In Louisa May Alcott's novel *Moods*, Adam Warwick, a character who noticeably resembles Henry David Thoreau, warns the heroine, Sylvia Yule, against spending time alone in the woods contemplating her existence: "don't worry your young wits with metaphysics" (254). Warwick's words in the novel seem to have strangely prophesied both the novel's critical reception, and Alcott's own position as a female novelist coming of age at the heart of the transcendentalist movement. In an early review of *Moods*, Henry James questioned her ability to address more serious themes, asking "Has Miss Alcott proposed to herself to give her story a philosophical bearing? We can hardly suppose it" (219). James's dismissal of the novel's philosophical concerns echoes that of Warwick to Sylvia, suggesting that encountering and imagining the landscape in order to explore metaphysical questions was a domain from which young women, in particular, were excluded. Warwick goes on to suggest that Sylvia's thoughts should rather be concerned with "wholesome, homely realities" (254). James's dismissal of Alcott's work and Warwick's chastisement of Sylvia assume that a woman's creative reflection should be limited to the domestic sphere, a world of which she supposedly had better knowledge. The home is thus established as the rightful place for women against a philosophic contemplation of being and existence that is located in the imagining of the landscape. It is this question, of how to reconcile a female philosophic imagining of the landscape with her expected confinement to the domestic sphere, which stands both at the heart of *Moods* and was central to Alcott's own creative life. In this chapter, I consider how Alcott uses the domestic novel genre as a space in which to

explore the transcendentalist imagining of the landscape as a flight from the domestic sphere, in order to consider the possibilities for a female transcendentalism.

Contemporary interest in Alcott's oeuvre has, to a large extent, furthered the separation of the domestic themes of her work from the context of transcendentalist thought in which she grew up, and yet their interconnection seems highly significant for both ecocritical and feminist criticism. *Moods* was begun in 1860, published in 1864, revised and republished in 1882 and Alcott described it as "the book into which I put the most time, love and hope" ("Story of the Author's Own Struggle"). Her constant search for artistic satisfaction with the text makes it an important example of her work, although it is strangely overlooked by critics and understudied. Critical attention has focused on what it reveals about her development as an author, but has not addressed Alcott's exploration of transcendental freedom for women. Critics rediscovering Alcott's broader body of work have shown her to be an author adept at writing in many genres and yet her work continues to be defined primarily in two categories: either as children's literature or as part of her collection of passionate thrillers, mainly written under a pseudonym, A.M. Barnard (Elbert xiii; Alcott *Behind a Mask*). This division of critical attention to her work into didactic, popular and public versus private, passionate and radical, creates a problematic binary separation of her work in feminist terms, and also excludes her less easily categorised work. *Moods* is a victim of this divided scholarship because it does not fit neatly as either children's fiction or as sensation story, and therefore has been largely overlooked critically. In fact, the novel embraces both categories as it shows Alcott's continued concern with young women on the threshold of adolescence, while embracing the theme of forbidden love more closely associated with her sensation fiction. Although Nina Baym suggests that Alcott's work does not fit the

domestic novel genre, stating that she "presided over the waning days of woman's fiction, when it permutated into children's literature," Baym notably does not include *Moods* in her study (23). In fact, the combination of adolescent and adult themes means *Moods* shares the common plot and characters of the domestic novel and can clearly be read within this adult genre.

The novel shares the genre's concern with a female coming of age, as the narrative charts the journey of the central character, Sylvia, from impulsive, moody adolescence to adulthood as she leaves her father's home and moves into that of her husband. However, like other domestic novels, it noticeably does not culminate in marriage as the goal or ending of the book. There is a central moral issue, which is Sylvia's choice between her passionate love for Adam Warwick, and the stable, brotherly love of Geoffrey Moor. Sylvia loves Warwick but, due to a misunderstanding, believes him to be unavailable and to have rejected her so, after initially rejecting Moor, she impulsively agrees to marry him. On her honeymoon she discovers Warwick is both in love with her and free to marry her. Trapped in an unhappy marriage to Moor, she must decide whether to accept her duty to her husband, or to follow her true feelings of love. As in a typical domestic novel plot, Sylvia has lost a parent, leaving her with a father but no mother. Her maternal influence is a well-meaning but ineffectual older sister (who takes the role often adopted by an aunt). This leaves her in the dilemma of not having a central source of reliable advice, meaning she must, with the help of others, find her own way through this moral dilemma. In this she is guided, in particular, by the mother-figure, Faith Dane, but the narrative, as is typical in the domestic novel, revolves around Sylvia's trials and the development of her own moral choices.

As well as its difficult categorisation within the more familiar genres of nineteenth century women's writing, readers and critics have struggled to address the novel's interest in transcendentalist thought. In her journal in March 1865, Alcott expressed her frustrations with Henry James's review, emphasising his inability to take young womanhood seriously: "He gave me advice as if he had been 50 & I a girl" (*Journal 1863-1867*). While some, like James, thought the novel's philosophic themes stretched beyond her capabilities, others read them as a scandalous suggestion of a woman's autonomous thought conflicting with her duties as a wife. Her publisher wrote: "Somehow or other I can't beat it out of the community that your novel don't unsettle married people - they have got the idea that it is not a good book in effect, though beautifully written" (Loring "Letter 8th July 1865"). Alcott felt so strongly that her novel had been misunderstood that, unusually, she engaged in correspondence with readers to try to rescue her reputation, making quite clear: "if there is anything that I heartily detest it is the theories of Affinities, also Spiritualism & free love" ("Letter to Mr Ayer"). Her father, the philosopher Bronson Alcott, seemed to be the person who most appreciated her intentions, and she recorded his response in her journal: "Emerson must see this. Where did you get your metaphysics?" (*Myerson Journals* 104).

In fact, Alcott signals the novel's explicit concern with transcendentalist thought immediately, in her epigraph, which is taken from Emerson's essay, "Experience," and after which the novel also takes its name: "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads...each shows us only what lies in its own focus." The novel is a chain of vignettes that explore these "moods," moments isolated from each other on the chain of existence, as Emerson also imagines. This "string of beads," in narrative terms, is a set of scenes both located in the home, and also outdoors in the imagined scenery of river, sea, and

mountains in which Sylvia (her very name, in its proximity to 'Sylvan,' linking her to the forest) experiences a different "mood," or stage, of her life. The epigraph indicates the concern Alcott shares with Emerson for exploring the isolation of the individual, and with the experience of existence in separate moments of the present without an ability to comprehend its entirety. Alcott thus explores Sylvia's growth, as she learns from experiences she cannot see in their entirety, but that will become key in shaping her future identity as a woman. What makes *Moods* unique is its concern with this transcendental reflection from within the structure of the domestic novel.

Alcott's interest in Sylvia's growth through adolescence frequently takes place outdoors, as she experiments with a physical and philosophical freedom in the natural world, modelled on male transcendentalist thought. At the centre of Sylvia's philosophic explorations outdoors is her encounter with the sublime. The word sublime comes from the Latin sub "up to" and limen "lintel, or threshold," and marks the moment at which the individual encounters the limits of human experience, and yet gains a sense of that beyond (*OED*; Shaw 2). Alcott's use of the domestic novel genre, with its coming of age structure, suggests adolescence, from the Latin meaning "to grow up," involves a shared journey to be 'raised up' from childhood to face the unknown and difficult to comprehend territory of adulthood (*OED*). The struggle for human dominance over unknowable nature is compared to the young woman's struggle for an autonomous adulthood. In paralleling the critical philosophical encounter with the sublime and the journey not simply to adulthood but to womanhood, the novel explores and rejects the masculine sublime and instead asks whether there can truly be a female transcendentalism.

Moods as a Transcendentalist Novel

One critic of the time predicted that *Moods* "will derive its chief interest, I suspect, from the light it throws on the author herself, and on the truly romantic circle of which she has made a part" ("*Moods* Review"). Critics have tended to read the transcendentalist influences of the novel in biographical terms, for what they might reveal about the transcendentalist circle and Alcott's interpretation of its central figures. Alcott came of age under the close tutelage of her father, she borrowed books from Emerson's library, and went on nature walks with Thoreau, and so was in a position to observe them closely. It has been suggested that Alcott modelled the poetic and sensible Moor on Emerson, and the passionate philosopher, Warwick, on Thoreau (Elbert xxx; Deese 442). Helen Deese finds further character references to Channing and Fuller, and there are numerous parallels between Sylvia's father and Bronson Alcott, not to mention between Sylvia and Alcott, herself. Moreover, in her letters, Alcott writes that the story is "founded upon fact, and the characters drawn from life," and thus, as Deese puts it, the text is "a great transcendental stew" (Myerson *Letters* 107; 441). However, while these influences are clearly central to the text, a reading of the novel that focuses solely on the biographical mythology of the group both risks ignoring Alcott's own intellectual position within transcendentalist philosophy and risks furthering the exclusion of her work from serious critical attention.

An analysis of the river trip, set in a key imagined landscape in the text, gives an opportunity to examine these influences more closely. Sylvia joins her brother, Moor and Warwick on a camping trip along the river to explore the countryside. The critical analysis of this setting has suggested Thoreau's *Week on the Concord and Merrimack*

Rivers as the source for the river trip, however, there is no clear evidence to suggest this is the case (Elbert 281; Deese 442). Alcott inhabited the same countryside as the transcendentalists and the river was a central part of Concord life. Writing a few years after the republication of *Moods*, George B. Bartlett explains "many citizens of Concord and the neighboring towns enjoy delightful excursions on the beautiful rivers," describing the picnics, regattas, and boathouses frequented by the townspeople (82). In April 1858, May Alcott wrote to Alfred Whitman of his rowing trips with Louisa, asking: "I hope you will make her do the rowing and not blister your hands so again, I never shall allow you to do for me certainly" ("Letter to Alfred Whitman"). Louisa and May's trips with Alf may well have provided inspiration for the scene in *Moods*, particularly for Sylvia's lone boat trip with Warwick: the fact that Sylvia "demanded her turn" and "blistered her hands" echoes May's words quite closely (34). There is no reason to suppose Alcott's imagining of the landscape of the river did not come from her own experiences of life in Concord, and the privileging of a male transcendentalist text as a source problematically reduces Alcott's central river trip scene to a reworked version of a male narrative.

In her representation of Sylvia's interaction with the landscape, Alcott certainly references the male figures of transcendentalism, and particularly Thoreau. In her communion with small animals, as well as her observations of "a battle between black ants and red " and the way she "learn[s] the landscape by heart," are strong references to *Walden* (44; Deese 442; Thoreau 206-8). However, in the narrative, it is Sylvia who is the protagonist, the "young philosopher," and the emphasis is on her own effort to experience moments of transcendental solitude and reflection (48). As she floats down the river with Warwick, we are told: "both sat silent, watching the meadows that lay

green and low along the shore, feeding their eyes with the beauty of the landscape, till its peaceful spirit seemed to pass into their own" (50). This is a heightened transcendental moment, in which Warwick and Sylvia experience a spiritual connection to the landscape, and yet, notably, their experience is paralleled and described on equal terms. Alcott thus draws from transcendentalist thought but, more radically, she establishes Sylvia's search for an encounter with the landscape that will lead to her own transcendent experience.

Undertaking this philosophic exploration from within the domestic novel genre seems incongruous, given transcendentalism's explicit rejection of the routines of daily life. Although Emerson calls for a valuing of the everyday, to find importance in each moment, he suggests that it is easy to get lost in the trivial and repetitious duties of the home:

We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always returning he has a sanity and revelations which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. ("Experience" 310).

Emerson makes a notable separation in this passage between domestic routines that create a state of numbness, and moments of individual philosophic reflection. His observations are reminiscent of Thoreau's limestone scene, in which he rejects the drudgery of cleaning by throwing the limestone out of the window, and is left to his solitary contemplation of the world (34; Walls 139). There is a notable separation for both philosophers between the everyday and the domestic. Moments such as walking, thinking, or observing nature, are seen as ripe with philosophic potential. "To finish the moment" or "to set up the strong present tense" represents a call to be alive to existence (295; 297). However, the triviality of domesticity is established as a distraction from

this possibility for free thought. Household duties are the tasks that "make no impression" and "are forgotten," in contrast to spaces that allow for philosophic reflection.

Despite the domestic genre of *Moods*, however, Alcott draws inspiration from this transcendentalist rejection of household routine and call to solitary reflection. At the start of the novel, Sylvia is shown clearly in adolescence, at the point of puberty, or "dawning womanhood": she is moody and a "slug-a-bed," refusing to get up and do her household chores (23; 15). As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg shows, advice for young women at puberty "consisted of a routine of domestic tasks, such as bed-making, cooking, cleaning, and child-tending" as they were encouraged to remain at home, because "to women [puberty] brought increased bodily weakness" (Rosenberg 187; 186). When exercise was encouraged, as in Catharine Beecher's *Treatise*, it centred on domestic activity: "it is far better to trust to useful domestic exercise at home, than to send a young person out to walk" (*Treatise* 363). Sylvia, however, resists the increasing pressure from her sister, Prue, to remain at home, and shows an Emersonian dismissal of the triviality of domestic tasks. Prue, in the absence of their mother, stands as a role-model of the domestic responsibilities of a wife, but her obsession with the proper ways to run a household are satirised by Alcott, culminating in her 'happy ending' as the fourth wife of a portly husband with nine children. Sylvia does not envision her own future in a similar role, and she has a "dissatisfied and restless feeling" when facing the household duties that await her as a wife (75). Emerson's observation that "So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine" seems even more apt as she becomes Moor's wife and is unable to settle into the role expected for her, feeling an overwhelming lethargy and numbness ("Experience" 287). Alcott thus resists the

conception of puberty as a "female illness," requiring restriction to the home and instead establishes domesticity as a space of artifice and triviality. As for Emerson and Thoreau, it is the solitary escape to the natural world which offers Sylvia the greatest possibility for exploring her own existence.

However, Alcott's explorations in the natural world differ from those of Emerson and Thoreau, as they involve an examination, in particular, of her developing womanhood. This is seen most clearly in her focus on Sylvia's enjoyment of physical activity. Both Alcott and May's diaries reveal, as with the rowing description, their enjoyment of physical exercise. May makes constant references to sailing and riding, and describes her sister's passion for swimming: "Louisa was perfectly enchanted with her bath, she hated to leave the water and would get half way up the beach and run back again into it" (Diary 1854). Louisa describes her enjoyment of running, even as late as 1868, when she was in her mid-thirties and suffering from illness: "I am so full of my work, I can't stop to eat or sleep, or for anything but a daily run" (Myerson *Journals* 167). In *Moods*, Alcott similarly describes Sylvia's running:

they saw the girl running down the long slope of meadow as if excitement gave her wings....few girls know how to run or dare to try; so this new Atalanta was the more charming for the spirit and speed with which she skimmed along, dropping her cloak and looking back as she ran, bent on outstripping her brother. (249).

This passage conveys the sense of freedom, self-confidence and equality she experiences in the natural world. The image of Sylvia flying down the open space of the meadow contrasts with her depiction in the house, as she is freed from the expectations for young adolescent women that demanded weakness and immobility within the home.

Sylvia's involvement in physical activity outdoors seems typical of what France's B Cogan defines as the "Ideal of Real Womanhood" in the mid-nineteenth century, which contrasted to the domestic ideal that demanded weakness and immobility: "the first and most obvious demand the advice writers placed upon the young woman was for sheer physical exercise, preferably out of doors in the clean, fresh air" (Cogan 40). While this was a more liberating view of womanhood, it nevertheless remained framed as a "unique sphere of action and duty for women" (Cogan 4). Sylvia's physicality, however, tests the boundaries of the ideals of womanhood in her attraction to the masculine; she explains: "I am no helpless, fine lady. I can walk, run, and climb like any boy" (51). In adolescence, her physicality is a form of "tomboyism" in Judith Halberstam's definition, as "an extended childhood period of female masculinity" (5). She is positioned on the cusp of womanhood, but chooses to extend her childhood, "like any boy," instead of embracing either of these offered models of adult femininity. Alcott, too, associated her physical activity with masculinity: "As a long-limbed child, I had all a horse's delight in racing through fields.... Now I am half persuaded that I am a man's soul put into a woman's body" ("Interview"). In the garden, dressed in a loose blouse, heavy boots and a floppy hat, Sylvia is so "strong-armed and sturdy" as she digs that Moor mistakenly identifies her as "a lad" (21; 20). The flight to nature, as seen in the male writing of the period, thus offers a flight toward the masculine, offering a model of freedom and power not accessible in the models of domestic womanhood.

However, as Halberstam points out, the female masculinity of tomboyism does not offer the freedoms it promises because it is only considered acceptable for young women by mainstream culture while it remains within the boundaries of childhood.

Alcott removed the gender confusion in the garden scene in the novel's revised edition, presumably because Sylvia's identification as male was considered too inappropriate for her now well-established audience of young women. Halberstam explains that "Tomboyism is punished...when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification" (6). Identifying Sylvia as a man rather than like a man seems to have been a step too far for her publisher and readers. Furthermore, Alcott suggests that Sylvia's running is an activity in which "few girls" participate, and like Atalanta, the huntress who competed with men as their physical equal, she is set apart as an exception. In this exceptionalism, as well as the careful suppression of gender confusion, therefore lies a problematic association of physical freedom in the landscape not simply with the masculine, but with the male. While Sylvia can enjoy this physical freedom as a girl, this is not shown to be accessible to all girls, and there are limited possibilities for its extension into womanhood. As the wife of Moor, she must return to the house, and she is left with the troubling question of the materiality of her own female body.

Encountering the sublime

Sylvia's desire to escape from the limitations of femininity, placed upon her within the home, and to access the masculine, is epitomised in her encounter with the sublime. If the sublime marks the moment of facing the limits of human understanding in the face of the vast, seemingly limitless majesty of nature, this can be seen to mirror Sylvia's own struggle to make sense of the boundaries of her girlhood as she faces adulthood.

The sense of freedom she has enjoyed in her tomboyism, experimenting with the power

of masculinity, is heightened in meeting the sublime in nature. Feminist critics such as Christine Battersby, Anne Mellor and Patricia Yeagar have shown the gendered nature of the philosophic and literary imagining of this encounter. Battersby explains that, in writings such as those of Burke and Kant: "the sublime was linked to male power, to size, to strength. . . even sometimes quite explicitly to the sexuality of males" (4). The sublime encounter has therefore been represented in terms of masculinity: an overpowering, overwhelming experience, marked by a struggle for domination. As Philip Shaw explains, the sublime "is dark, profound, and overwhelmingly and implicitly masculine," and it marks the binary opposite to the conventional expectations of femininity that face Sylvia within the domestic sphere (9). She is drawn to this ultimate opportunity to access the masculine and to an experience that will allow her to transcend the limits of her female body.

The chapter entitled "Warwick" depicts a key moment of Sylvia's confrontation with the sublime in the text, describing the effects of a "wild storm" that has raged overnight, which Sylvia longs to experience (234). The opening is littered with images of captivity, as well as the "ennui" of the feminine entertainments in which she is allowed to participate while waiting for the storm to pass, until she runs to face its power (234). In contrast to the domestic space of repression, the storm continues the metaphor of landscape as a space of vigorous, free self-expression. At last she reaches the edge of the vast, tumultuous sea, and she experiences the exalted feeling closely associated with the sublime, as she recognises her own safety despite the power of the storm. Sylvia stands on the shore, and sings into the wind:

[she] let her voice rise and ring above the turmoil of the waves, as if she too felt the need of pouring out the restless spirit pent up in that young breast of hers.

Sweet and shrill sounded the mingled music, and the wind caught it up to carry it with flecks of foam, sea scents, and flying leaves to the cliffs above (235).

As Paul Outka explains the "feeling of being overwhelmed is not the sublime, but the precondition for it. The Kantian sublime occurs in the resolution of this feeling" (17). Sylvia initially experiences the Kantian triumph of the rational over the real as she conquers the experience of her body's powerlessness in the face of the stormy sea, and reaches a state of exalted transcendence. Just as in the literary tradition of male encounters with the sublime, her mind is able to overcome the "turmoil" of the sea, and she locates a powerful creative voice, literally embodied in her singing. In her initial encounter with the sea, then, Sylvia can be seen to achieve a transcendence that stands as an ultimate departure from the feminine domestic sphere as, through her mind's rationalisation and subjugation of the power of the storm, she achieves a creative exaltation and is freed from her body. Imagined as "sort of ecstasy," this also suggests Sylvia's sexual development, and a transitional moment from childhood to adulthood (235). The sublime encounter thus represents a critical moment in the process of coming of age, as the body of the girl, in all its powerlessness, is left behind.

However, this powerful moment does not last, and is quite literally swept away from her as the tide draws in, leaving her stranded and in danger. At this critical moment, Warwick comes to her rescue: "he looked very tall and powerful, standing straight and strong against the cliff, with the dark shadow of the pine upon him. A masterful man" (238). Here the landscape is presented as a space of Warwick's heightened masculinity, as opposed to Sylvia's, the pine and his corresponding erect posture implicitly symbolising his virility. Although Sylvia suggests later that she "could easily have saved myself by swimming," her female masculinity is trumped by

Warwick's, who proves his physical superiority by picking her up and carrying her to safety (237).

Sylvia's shifting situation in the face of the vast, dangerous sea in this scene, can clearly be read within Patricia Yaegar's definition of the female sublime, under the category of sublime encounter she describes as the "failed sublime" (201). She describes this scene from women's writing about the sublime: "We witness a woman's dazzling, unexpected empowerment followed by a moment in which this power is snatched away - often by a masculine counter-sublime that has explicit phallic components" (201). Sylvia experiences her initial moment of transcendence, as her "restless spirit" is raised up to the sky, and she feels the powerful self-expression she is unable to access in the domestic space of the house. However, this sense of empowerment vanishes suddenly as she recalls the limits of her imagination, and is replaced by Warwick, who stands on the edge of the cliff in his own encounter with the sublime, "tall and powerful," "straight and strong." The masculine sublime, rooted in images of domination, thus overcomes and subdues the female sublime encounter.

Yaegar proceeds to explain the consequences of the "failed sublime":

What remains in our minds after such scenes is not simply a sense of feminine failure, but a double burden. First, we learn that women, like men, are capable of joining the great. Second, we learn that something in the social order (either something external, or a set of beliefs internalized by the actant herself) intervenes, and the heroine finds herself not only stripped of transcendent powers, but bereft, in a lower social stratum than before. (201).

Yaegar's model is useful in applying to Alcott's work in its use of the idea of a "double burden" because it suggests the conflict at the root of the novel: both the intellectual possibility of the sublime experience for women, and its simultaneous inaccessibility. Before she is rescued by Warwick, Sylvia's sense of transcendent power has already

begun to shift, as she wonders: "Would she ever sail away across this wide sea to reach and rest in that fair country, peopled with all the beautiful, heroic shapes her hungry heart and eager fancy conjured up?" (236). Sylvia's mind is drawn back to the real; the experienced rather than rational encounter with the sea, which leads her to recognise the limitations of her imagined landscape of freedom and adventure. Initially, Sylvia feels "capable of joining the great," her rationalisation of the storm as distant and harmless leads her to feel a sense of power, and to imagine a world of freedom beyond her current existence. However, her rhetorical question indicates the moment that "something in the social order...intervenes" as she realises that her lived experience as a woman means the opportunity to "sail away" and to access the freedom to travel is unlikely. Escaping the domestic, she realises, does not necessarily mean accessing freedom as fully imagined while the material experience of her female body remains.

Sylvia is left feeling "bereft" by this recognition of the "failed sublime," as Yaegar suggests. This sense of loss is represented initially in a longing for her dead mother, suggesting a desire to connect with the maternal, an alternative model of female authority, but one that is similarly inaccessible to Sylvia (236). This association of maternal strength with death, as well as a continuing desire to escape from her gendered female body finally leads her to wonder "what the change would be when she landed on the shore of that other world," of death (236). Sylvia's "failed sublime" encounter, which leaves her "bereft" thus stands in stark contrast to the Emersonian "sanity" that "man" finds in his solitude. Rather, as the tide comes in around her, she is drawn towards death and thoughts of suicide. Sylvia's encounter with the sublime, her desire to transcend her female body, is thus shown to be both physically and psychologically dangerous. Alcott posits the sublime, therefore, as intrinsically dependent on and

intertwined with patriarchal power; achieving transcendence is not fully possible from a female subject position, and she suggests dangerous, real world consequences to those who believe otherwise. This is reinforced in Warwick's advice to Sylvia, following the rescue, to "keep to the happy, wholesome places in life, and leave the melancholy sea, the wandering winds, and craggy peaks to those who are made for them" (239).

Warwick thus asserts both his dominant embodiment of masculinity, and also posits his philosophic superiority over Sylvia. His biological gender difference, displayed through his physical strength, is shown to be inseparable from an associated ability to encounter and conquer the sublime.

As discussed, in *Moods* the sublime encounter is closely associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood, the moment of attempted escape from the body of the girl to a space of independent female empowerment as an adult. The "failed sublime" thus marks a similar failure to establish a fully autonomous female adulthood, and Yeagar's "double burden" can be extended to the moment of female adolescence. The girl is shown to be capable of a full creative, sexual, and intellectual transition to adulthood, and yet the dominant intervention of the masculine, in Warwick, leaves her "stripped of her transcendent powers." In addition to this, she is removed to a "lower social stratum" than that inhabited by Warwick, as she is reminded of the social expectations in relation to her femininity, and returned to the domestic sphere: "I will run home at once" (239). Halberstam suggests : "for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression. It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodelled into compliant forms of femininity" (6). The scene by the sea similarly becomes a lesson to Sylvia in the dangers of transgressing the boundaries of femininity, as established within the home.

To explore the landscape physically, imaginatively, and alone is shown to be a dangerous instinct that she must learn to curb as a part of her developing womanhood. The scene with Warwick thus seems to fulfil the didactic remit of the domestic novel genre, teaching the "moody" adolescent girl to suppress her desire to escape her duty and to conform to the feminine expectations of womanhood.

The second model of the female sublime proposed by Yaegar is the "sovereign sublime": "In this reinvention of the conventional sublime the woman writer appears to be appropriating a male genre in a straightforward and mimetic way" (202). In *Moods*, Alcott does not make this transition to a full adoption of a masculine sublime; the depiction of "a moment of blockage followed by a moment of imagistic brilliance" (202). Moreover, Yaegar's model emphasises the "failed sublime" as unsuccessful against the given standard of the masculine sublime. In this sense, Sylvia's experience by the sea is seen to fall below a set expectation, unlike the "sovereign sublime" in its appropriation of the male genre, and the emphasis on this sublime encounter is in what it does not achieve, its failure. However, in the "failed sublime" remains the intriguing, "dazzling" moment of "transcendent power" that precedes the moment of failure and, in *Moods*, this remains an impactful, significant moment. Sylvia's rising, ringing voice, carried up on the wind to the cliffs retains its climactic power in the chapter, in contrast to the rescue and moral lecturing of Warwick. Yet how can this moment of transcendence be read, if not solely in terms of its almost immediate failure? What is it that Sylvia voices in this heightened, creative moment of transcendence, and what Emersonian "revelations" does she discover? Critically, Sylvia's words in this moment of self-discovery and self-expression are swept away and

lost on the wind. If we refuse to read this sublime encounter in terms of failure, then, instead it becomes marked as a space of silence.

In fact, these silenced moments of female philosophic and spiritual revelation recur repeatedly in the text. On the river trip, Sylvia ventures into the woods alone, finding a more careful moment of solitude than her tempestuous visit to the seashore. She has again freed herself from the restrictive codes of domestic femininity with "no best clothes to disturb her thoughts," in preparation for a free, transformative encounter in the landscape (251). We are told that she "lingered for half an hour" but just as her voice by the sea is lost on the wind, we hear nothing of her spiritual reflections during this period of solitude (251). Instead she returns to join the men and "modestly hover[s]" until invited to hear their sermonising (251). She is permitted to sit before Warwick, who proceeds with his warning to her: "don't worry your young wits with metaphysics, or let romantic dreams take the charm from the wholesome, homely realities" (254). Repeating his warning by the sea, Warwick cautions her to stay in the realm of the "homely," her philosophic voice is restricted once more, and it is Warwick who asserts his own voice over hers. This scene similarly approaches a moment of the "failed sublime," as Sylvia's solitary encounter with the landscape is undercut by a dominant masculine discourse. Sylvia later explains: "I feel as if I found my soul there in the woods" (260). The text implies she has "laid to heart" Warwick's sermon of restraint and self-sacrifice, and yet her words remain ambiguous: could she have "found her soul" during the half hour she spent alone (259)? If so, the moment of spiritual transcendence, during her solitary philosophic reflection, remains silent once again.

The profound impact of the space of the landscape on Sylvia's maturing sense of self was clearly modelled on Alcott's own developing spirituality and metaphysical

reflection. In 1845, as a teenager, Alcott went for an early run in the woods and emerged into the sunshine of a meadow:

It seemed like going through a dark life or grave into heaven beyond. A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there, with no sound but the rustle of pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before (Myerson *Journals* 57).

Enjoying the physical freedom of running, just as Sylvia does in *Moods*, seems to have opened the possibility of a spiritual discovery. The indescribable encounter with the threatening darkness of the woods, approaches the Burkean notion of the terror of the sublime encounter, and this transitions into a transformative, transcendent experience (Shaw 48). Similarly, in an early journal entry, Alcott writes that she "ran on the hill till nine, and had some thoughts, - it was so beautiful up there" (45). In both of these incidents, Alcott takes the time to note these as significant spiritual and intellectual moments, and yet she steps back from explaining her "strange and solemn feeling," the way that she "felt God," or what her "thoughts" were. Just as she depicts in the character of Sylvia, she finds solitude in the landscape to be a space of profound reflection, and yet does not produce the "moment of imagistic brilliance" of the male literary sublime, or the female "sovereign sublime," and instead remains silent.

Matteson reflects on Alcott's run on the hill in his biography: "It is less easy to recreate the 'thoughts' that Louisa had on the hillside: thoughts she deemed memorable enough to mention in her journal but not significant enough to describe" (132). These moments of silent or undecipherable thought, both in the text of Alcott's journals and within *Moods*, seem more significant because, as Matteson says, she chose to include mention of them at all. However, her failure to describe them seems less because she thought them insignificant, but rather because she had to face an expectation of female

self-restraint and was also overwhelmed by the dominant male philosophic voices around her. The family practice was for the Alcott girls to show and share their diaries, thus Alcott probably kept her thoughts to herself, particularly away from her father, who was keen to scrutinise them for signs of moral development (Matteson 132). Similarly, Alcott shied away from contributing to the local philosophic discussions that she attended; she would sit in the corner absorbing the talk but not participating (Myerson *Journals* 79). In *Little Women*, Jo describes the critical response to the characters in her novel, which Alcott based on her own writing of *Moods*: "if my people are 'philosophical and metaphysical,' it isn't my fault, for I know nothing about such things, except what I hear my father say, sometimes" (270). While her father and the other transcendentalists supported her intellectual development, as a woman it was not deemed possible for her to reach the same level of 'genius' as the men who surrounded her. Alcott also describes this in *Moods*, as Faith Dane explains why, although Sylvia is drawn to Warwick's life of philosophic exploration, she ought not to share it: "It is like a woodbird mating with an eagle, straining its little wings to scale the sky with him" (181). To Warwick is attributed the possibility of an unimpeded philosophic exploration of sublimity, notably imagined again as masculine physical strength in the space of vastness, while Sylvia is encouraged to remain in her domestic space, a "safer nest among the grass" (181).

In fact, the moments of solitude in the landscape that enabled her philosophic thought were clearly important to Alcott, and in a journal entry, she reflected on these times: "Among my hills and woods I had fine free times alone, and though my thoughts were silly, I dare say, they helped to keep me happy and good. I see now what nature did for me" (*Journals* 61). Her dismissal of these thoughts as "silly" is revealing of the

way she undervalued her own intellectual abilities, and yet this note simultaneously acknowledges the significance of this solitary time and its impact on her maturation. In his essay considering the nature of genius in Alcott's writing, Gustavus Stadler observes: "While continually representing genius as a subject position she herself cannot occupy, from which she cannot speak, Alcott repeatedly portrays the figure of genius as oddly productive for those intimate with it but apparently excluded from its mantle" (658). Similarly, although quick to point out the inferiority of both her own and Sylvia's philosophic thought, she included the effectiveness of its impact in both her journals and the novel. Just as her journals reveal her own progression as a successful writer, in *Moods* Sylvia develops into a stronger moral guide than Warwick. As Stadler suggests, the space of exclusion was also one of power and significance for Alcott. The silences of both *Moods* and her journals thus represent a quiet rejection of the idea of female philosophic inferiority because, in practice, she continued to record and mark these significant spiritual and intellectual moments.

Resisting the masculine sublime: "Letters from the White Mountains"

Alcott's neglected "Letters from the White Mountains," which were written in parallel to the novel, give an unusual insight into both Sylvia's silent thoughts of the landscape in *Moods* and Alcott's struggle to achieve philosophic self-expression. Based on a holiday she took there in 1861, and published in the Boston Commonwealth in July and August 1863, the "Letters," and the trip on which they were based, coincide with the time of the initial composition of *Moods*. Following the success of the "Hospital Sketches" she wrote for a newspaper (later published in book form), Alcott undertook an assignment

to produce some travel writing, reporting back from her trip to the White Mountains in New Hampshire, a popular local destination. Rediscovered and republished thirty years ago in *Resources for American Literary Study* by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, the "Letters" have garnered little attention, again seemingly because they do not fit neatly into the critical narrative of Alcott's work. Like Charles E. Ireland, a historian of the White Mountains, who rediscovered the letters at a similar time to Shealy, I believe they are both "too good to keep hidden" and have much to contribute to scholarly studies of Alcott. There are clear parallels between the "Letters" and *Moods* and, written as a travel narrative, a genre more explicitly concerned with describing and imagining the landscape, they give an unusual insight into Alcott's struggle to achieve philosophic self-expression. In the "Letters" this is seen primarily in her reflections as she approaches the narrative dilemma of describing the sublime encounter with the natural world, central to transcendentalist thought.

Alcott's travel experiences are broken up into four "Letters" describing her journey to, and stay in, the White Mountains. They are told in the first person by a narrator who refers to herself as "Miss P," presumably a reference to Tribulation Periwinkle, the character she created in *Hospital Sketches*, who was also a thinly veiled autobiographical figure. Just as *Hospital Sketches* was based on Alcott's own time spent as a Civil War nurse, the "Letters from the White Mountains" are grounded in her experience staying at the Alpine House in Gorham, New Hampshire. The "Letters" most clearly show the influence of Alcott's trip to the White Mountains on the "Honeymoon" chapter of *Moods*, set in the mountains and featuring the culmination of Sylvia and Moor's honeymoon. In the "Letters," Miss P observes two sets of honeymooning couples, and their romantic intimacy at the hotel is interrupted by a

group of "lads," just as Sylvia and Moor's time together is broken by the appearance of Warwick.

During Miss P's travels in the White Mountains, she exhibits a similar attraction to the masculine as Sylvia has earlier in *Moods*. She watches the group of young collegians who arrive at the hotel with "envy," and finds herself "wishing I too could be 'one of our fellows,' could wear a hat without any brim, tuck my trousers into my boots, and 'lark' off whenever I like" (13). Like Sylvia, she is drawn, in particular, to the physical freedoms offered in the landscape, but is restricted by the expectations of femininity. Nevertheless, Miss P embodies the tomboyish traits of both Sylvia and Alcott, cocking her hat and striding off forcefully, alone, in the opposite direction to that she is advised to take. From the start she sets herself and her observations apart from that which is expected: "the idea of "doing" the mountains in the regular, everyday, guide-book style, was not to be entertained for a moment by me" (7). Alcott thus establishes an individualism in her exploration, thought and writing about the landscape that is reminiscent of the transcendentalist call to solitary, independent thought. Just as the "lads" can set off on their own adventures in nature, or as Emerson calls for a retreat from domestic duties to solitude, or as Thoreau escapes to the woods to "live free," Miss P is drawn to a separate, individual experience of the mountainous landscape (*Walden* 77).

In *Moods*, "Sylvia's Honeymoon" describes Sylvia's first experiences of the landscape as a married woman. Initially, Sylvia's marriage to Moor appears to offer access to a shared experience of nature, and to the physical activity to which she was drawn before her marriage: "Sometimes they walked a mile or two, ran down a hillside, rustled through a grain field...or feasted from fruitful hedges by the way, as care-free as

the squirrels" (120). Sylvia is able to enjoy nature's pleasures spontaneously, and her husband's company appears to offer her access to the freedoms of nature without concern for the gendered expectations about her behaviour, which she experiences on the river trip and by the sea. However, on the last day of their honeymoon, they reach the "crowning glory" of the mountain range and Sylvia chooses to stay and sit alone with the mountain peak, rather than accompanying her husband on a group tour of the landscape (121). Sylvia's choice here is much like Miss P's decision to reject the tourist trails in the mountains, as she is similarly drawn to a solitary experience of the landscape. Ultimately, Sylvia's experience of the landscape with her husband does not seem to give her access to the freedom for which she has longed because it is dependent on his presence. Her desire to find the Emersonian solitude for individual reflection remains as elusive as ever because, even as she sits alone, contemplating the mountain, Moor's presence is felt in the bugle he blows from his trip as "a sweet reminder that you are not to stray away and lose yourself" (122). Her exploration of the landscape on her honeymoon thus remains bounded by her role as a wife, and Moor's words recall the dangers of the sublime encounter.

Although interrupted by her husband's bugle, and later by the appearance of Warwick, we are told that Sylvia "sat for half an hour" alone, finding a moment of reflection (122). However, yet again, just as when she is alone in the woods and by the sea, and as when Alcott ran on the hill and "had some thoughts," Sylvia's contemplation of the mountain peak before her remains silent. Like Sylvia, in the "Letters" Miss P also manages to find some time alone in the mountains: "Choosing a secluded nook, I sat myself down in the shadow of a rock and sat there for an hour" (20). Again, just at the moment of contemplation of the landscape, comes a period of silence.

Alcott's "Letters from the White Mountains," however, are of particular significance in that, as a travel narrative, they demanded explicit description of the landscape, and thus they give a fuller understanding of this resistance to defining a sublime encounter with nature. "Letter Three" describes the ascent of Mount Washington, and as such, parallels Sylvia's silent contemplation of the "crowning glory of the range" of mountains on her honeymoon. Miss P is accompanied up the mountain by her cousin, Will, who, she tells us, has been up and down so often "he considers the mountain a neat little production of his own" (126). Will's proprietary attitude towards the mountain is grounded in the struggle for domination at the centre of the sublime encounter. He dictates how the vastness of the mountain should be experienced and described, directing Miss P, as they ascend: "don't look back till we are fairly up, because I want you to have it all in one burst, and to hear what you'll say" (128). Will's attempt to control Miss P's experience of the mountain may be seen to reflect the dominant influence of the model of the masculine sublime over Alcott's experience of the landscape. Will's emphasis, like Emerson's, is on an individual, transformative encounter; the experience of "revelations" in a moment, which is then translated into description. Philip Shaw explains the sublime encounter as a move towards a solitary, masculine state: "the transcendental ego must strive to detach itself from nature, from society, from the emotions, from the body, and above all from the feminine" (105). Similarly, Miss P is asked to shut out all around her, to isolate herself, in preparation for a "burst" of overwhelming awe that she will then reason into descriptive form.

However, although Miss P tries hard to meet these expectations, she struggles to view the mountain as Will expects. She dutifully shuts her eyes but in front of them, as they reach the summit, is a waggon full of other tourists and the revelatory moment of

her encounter with the sublime is interrupted by a mother shouting: "You dreadful boy! you've sat on the sandwiches" (129). Miss P's response to the mother, child and the other tourists means her reaction to the view from the summit of the mountain is far from the powerful encounter with nature for which Will has hoped: "The sublime was overpowered by the ridiculous, and...I broke into a fit of laughter" (19). The critical moment of the sublime encounter is thus displaced by humour in the scene. While this means Alcott again sidesteps a direct description of the female protagonist's reflections on the scenery before her, she is shown to do so because this state of Emersonian solitude with nature is so difficult to achieve. In the contemplation of the awe-inspiring view from the tallest mountain in the range, it is impossible for her to forget the human presence that constantly intrudes. It is no coincidence that Miss P's laughter is caused by a mother upbraiding her child: Alcott can thus be seen to employ humour to disrupt the transcendental model of an escape to the "solitude" of individual thought, away from the domestic sphere. The presence of the household affairs that for Emerson are "forgotten next week" are shown to be ever present and constantly intruding for Alcott (310). Not only is it impossible to achieve complete separation from the presence of the feminine, she suggests it is ludicrous to imagine this to be possible.

The sublime encounter with Mount Washington is thus transformed into a moment that satirises both the blindness and privilege of male transcendental reflection. While Emerson suggests the tedium and triviality of domestic femininity, in *Moods* Alcott extends this to show the sense of entrapment and suffocation felt by a woman who does not share the same freedom to leave the house as and when she pleases. Through the vignettes of Sylvia's encounters with the landscape, as with Miss P's descriptions in the "Letters," Alcott emphasises that "The solitude to which every man is

always returning" was not an easily accessed space for women of the time ("Experience" 310). Just as Miss P's encounter with the sublime is interrupted by tourists, Sylvia struggles to find herself alone for long in the landscape. In almost every scene she is subject to the male gaze, as the men of the novel appraise, judge, desire, or watch over her. By the coast Warwick looks down on her from the cliffs and comes to her rescue; on the river trip all three men are her guardians; in the mountains she is accompanied by her husband and his bugle; even in the garden her body and character is assessed by Moor. The landscape, then, offers, not a full escape from the triviality of the domestic sphere, but a carefully policed extension of her world within the home; a space she is permitted to explore under male protection.

Contemplation of the sublime in order to experience a weighty, metaphysical reflection is shown to be a pressure that is both impossible to achieve and exhausting for Alcott's female protagonists. She uses identical language to describe Sylvia and Miss P's contemplation of the mountains, explaining that each woman was "wearied by the immensity" of the landscape, a response that is far from the fear-tinged exhilaration typically prompted by the sublime (*Moods* 122, "Letters" 27). Yet this weariness, rather than marking failure, represents the futility of trying to use human reason to conquer that which is beyond full human representation and comprehension. In *Moods*, Alcott explains of Sylvia's observation of the mountain peak, that she saw: "the wonders of a scene that is indescribable, for words have limits and that is apparently illimitable" (121). Miss P similarly explains: "I hope no one expects a description of the indescribable" (20). These female silences in the face of the grandeur of nature therefore tell of a resistance to the idea that the experience of sublime nature can be fully captured and described as an imagined landscape. This suggests not Alcott's sense

of inferiority to the male philosophers, not that she did not have the requisite "genius" to reach the "eagle" heights of philosophic greatness, but rather a resistant questioning of the pursuit of a separate, contained comprehension of the natural world.

Resolving the Sublime Encounter

A rejection of the masculine sublime as a model for a female search for transcendence, however, still left the pressing, real world question of the possibilities for greater autonomy in womanhood. Sylvia's unresolved attraction to Warwick may simultaneously be read as her unresolved longing for his life of philosophic contemplation in the space of the landscape. The central moral dilemma at the heart of this domestic novel is thus whether Sylvia should choose an adulthood of "restraint, punishment, and repression" and sacrifice her feelings for Warwick in her marriage to Moor, or whether she should find a way to pursue the intellectual life he represents (Halberstam 6). Following the rejection of the traditional male sublime encounter, "the desire to efface the material nature of human experience" and to comprehend and represent the sublime through language, Alcott continues to search for a fulfilling female encounter with the sublime (Shaw 28). This desire for a resolution to the question of a female transcendent escape from a restrictive domestic life is depicted most clearly in her struggle to end *Moods*.

In the first edition of the novel, Alcott resolves this in a narrative technique typical to the domestic novel: through death. Sylvia writes to Moor to call him back to her and when he returns he finds her on her deathbed, after illness. Beside the bed stands a vase of snowdrops: "All day they had stood by her couch, as fragile and as pale

as she, and many eyes had filled as loving fancies likened her to the slender, transparent vase, the very spirit of a shape, and the white flowers that had blossomed beautifully through the snow" (214). The paralleling of the "transparent vase" and Sylvia's dying body, being gradually emptied of her blossoming life, employs a key image of the genre. Jane Tompkins explains that in the domestic novel: "The ideal of behavior to which the novel educates its readers is the opposite of self-realization; it is to become empty of self, an invisible transparency" (182). Tompkins's emphasis on the message of self-sacrifice at the centre of the domestic novel can be readily applied to Alcott's first ending for *Moods*. Like the vase, Sylvia's dying state renders her transparent, both embodied and invisible spirit, and this in-between state allows her to become a bridge between the earthly and the Godly, to see herself as "a blind instrument in His hand" (215). Her final words offer a message of religious salvation, suggesting her earlier feelings towards Warwick as mistakes to be corrected and part of a broader moral lesson, "to bring good out of evil" (215). In this sense, her death is the ultimate act in her duty to conform to domestic expectations: she has shamed her husband but has not followed her passion and has, instead, repented and died, leaving them free of having to resolve the practical reality of an unhappy marriage. The 'moody' demands of the self have been erased, in order to become a vessel for godliness.

Simultaneously, however, Sylvia's death can be seen as a process of transcendence because, through death, she also escapes the duties demanded of her at home and the expectation for her to fulfil her role as wife. She finally overcomes the restrictions of femininity associated with her female body, by leaving her physical existence entirely behind her. Her association of death with freedom and female autonomy is seen in her apocalyptic dream of the world ending in an enormous tsunami,

a "strange and solemn vision" that alerts her to her forthcoming death (210). As great waves roll in, Sylvia dreams she stands on a "shadowy house-top" facing the end of the world, watching as the waiting throngs of people are swept away to God (210). Sylvia's dream returns her to her sublime encounter by the coast, where she again leaves the domestic sphere and stands at the edge of a vast, stormy sea. However, instead of the "failed sublime" experience, in her dream of death she achieves a state of spiritual transcendence, merging into those around her, as she is swept away: "I seemed such an infinitesimal atom of the countless host that I forgot myself" (211). This time, she is not pulled out of her reverie by the reminder of the limitations of her female body. Instead, as she senses her body's weakness in its illness, she feels "my soul grew strong" (211). Separation and dissociation from her declining body is shown to free Sylvia to discover a perfect pathway to transcendence through the sublime encounter. Sylvia's moment of sublimity is disrupted as she awakens, but she retains the sense of the dream as prophesy and faces death with a sense of purpose: "Sylvia had not known how to live, but now she proved that she did know how to die" (213).

Just as Sylvia has thoughts of her mother as she faces the stormy sea before her rescue by Warwick, in her apocalyptic vision, she again sees her "beautiful benignant face" (211). For Sylvia, the space of death reached through the sublime encounter is closely associated with the maternal and represents an alternative female space to the one offered on earth. In her analysis of death in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Gillian Brown offers a useful reading of this parallel between death and the maternal, suggesting that death in the domestic novel becomes a space of restoration. The patriarchal traditions of the earthly world are marked by rupture, and heaven therefore comes to stand as a maternal space in which families can be reconstituted: "Dying therefore becomes the

ultimate domestic act" (Brown 34). Brown and Tompkins both read the complex contradictions in the act of dying in the domestic novel; for while this essentially represents a sacrificial act, and one that conforms to the domestic ideal of feminine submission, dying also stands as a moment of significant empowerment. Sylvia's mother represents not earthly conformity to the ideals of the domestic sphere, but escape to a model of maternal power, and her presence at the moment of the sublime encounter is particularly symbolic of Alcott's exploration of a female sublime.

Her apocalyptic dream, unlike her encounter by the sea, is not marked by a struggle for articulation, as seen in the traditional sublime, but is a moment in which "Utter silence filled the world," after which 'Amen' is written across the sky in huge letters (210). Here the silence that has marked her response to the sublime is connected to a divine language, in which there are no words for the "illimitable" other than the word of God. In this heavenly space, the female sublime is directly connected to the divine, in an ultimate transcendent unity. Through Sylvia's death, Alcott shows woman as a vessel for the spirit of God in a radical appropriation of transcendentalist philosophy: here, women are shown to share a silent understanding of the sublime, which opens a pathway to Heaven, becoming religious conduits to a 'higher,' maternal space. Alcott's first ending for the novel thus manages to reconcile the public requirements for her novel and domestic demands for female conformity, with her struggle for female empowerment.

Of course, there is a highly problematic premise underlying this model of the female sublime because it suggests that, for women, the only possibility for a true spiritual transcendence is through death. As a coming of age story, this offers little possibility for an empowering intellectual womanhood, and instead subliminally posits

a troubling model of death as the culmination of the journey to adulthood for young girls. By the time Alcott came to revise *Moods*, she was a well-established children's author, was further from her own adolescent experiences, and felt her responsibilities to her young readers keenly. In the preface, she explains: "thirty years later, having learned the possibility of finding happiness after disappointment, and making love and duty go hand in hand, my heroine meets a wiser if less romantic fate" (225). In the revised ending, Sylvia has suffered a dangerous illness but says: "I longed to live that I might atone" (277). She struggles back to health and returns to her marriage to Moor. In both endings Warwick dies at sea, and so is conveniently removed, both as a temptation and a reminder of the philosophic life to which Sylvia cannot gain access. Sylvia therefore avoids death, but this demands a return to the domestic sphere, "to the home where she no longer felt an alien or a prisoner" (279). This is a largely unconvincing compromise, except against an alternative that involves death. However, it was generally seen as an improved "wholesome" ending by critics: "she nobly conquers the weakness of her own and lives...for the good man who has loved her" (Dall).

In the revised ending, Sylvia's dream of the day the world will end remains. However, it is no longer a portent of her fatal illness, but rather a sign that she should return to her life with Moor. Sylvia no longer stands on the roof of the house, having escaped its restrictions, but instead is on the cliffs with Moor. As the wave of the tsunami rolls in, she faces the same sense of transcendence, merging out of her body and into a larger "host" (278). However, the face she now glimpses through the wave is that of Warwick, as he is swept to his death: "I had seen him as he will look in Heaven" (279). This transcendent space, accessed through the sublime encounter, is no

longer a space of female escape: it returns to a transcendental patriarchal domain. In this space, Warwick's philosophic ideals may continue without the taint of marital scandal, but this is a masculine space once more, and inaccessible to Sylvia. She still leans towards this sublime encounter, "longing to be taken," indicating both her physical and intellectual desire for transcendence to the masculine (278). However, she is "held fast" by her husband, and pulled back to the domestic world of her marriage; finally, she explains to Moor: "I clung to you longing to be kept" (278). Sylvia thus surrenders the sublime as a maternal realm of female ascendancy, recognising the threat of death and its very real consequences, and returns to her domestic responsibilities. Her sacrifice is a practical choice; it is a decision of survival: "I caught my breath and was so glad to live" (278).

Following the publication of the first version of the novel, Alcott wrote in a letter of her feelings that *Moods* had been misunderstood: "The design of *Moods* was to show the effect of a moody person's moods upon their life" (Myerson *Letters* 110). Here Alcott references her epigraph from Emerson, and the chain of "moods" that "shows only what lies in its focus," suggesting the individual lives in the moment and has an inability to gain perspective on his or her broader existence. Alcott extends Emerson's thought to suggest not only this inability to conceive the whole but, for women, the later, real-world consequences of instinctive, impulsive moments. She understood the very real price exacted from those choosing to live an unconventional ideal from her own upbringing. In the short story, "Transcendental Wild Oats," a semi-autobiographical tale about the time in her childhood spent living at Fruitlands, her father's Utopian farm project, she explains the vitriol unleashed on those who try such an experiment: "the failure of an ideal, no matter how humane and noble, is harder for

the world to forgive and forget than bank robbery or the grand swindles of corrupt politicians" (376). Her father's philosophic experiments and his publications were subject to much criticism and ridicule, and the family felt the effects of this, particularly financially. The revised ending of *Moods* is a practical ending, one that avoids the consequences of shame, scandal, and poverty for Sylvia, were she to follow her impulse to leave her husband for Warwick. This ending also avoids the idea of escape in death, and suggests that women ought to focus on a stable, less impulsive path. Sylvia is not permitted to leave Moor and be with Warwick as an intellectual equal, and she must learn to sacrifice her own desires: "she turned from the painted romance to the more beautiful reality, to live, not dream, a long and happy life, unmarred by the moods that nearly wrecked her youth" (280). She rejects the sublime and its possibilities for a transcendental escape to a higher intellectual plane as fantasy, a "painted romance," positing instead a return to the world of the feminine, represented as a return to the safety of domestic space.

The idea of returning to a "beautiful reality" is particularly significant as an opposing philosophical position to that of the sublime because it posits a concept of the beautiful that is closely associated with the feminine. Philip Shaw explains that the concept of the beautiful has historically been set in contrast to that of the sublime: "The sublime is greater than the beautiful...the beautiful is light, fleeting, and charming and implicitly feminine" (9). Sylvia's return to beauty may thus be seen as a choice, not only to reject the sublime as a model for female philosophic experience, but as a strategic attempt to reclaim the feminine as a valid and important space. In the mountains, both Sylvia and Miss P turn away from the sublime encounter to explore "beauties close at hand" (122). Miss P explains that in contrasts to the overwhelming

sublime experience: "it was often a relief to rest my eyes and mind in some sunny spot where ferns were the only forest, mossy stones the hills, with dragon fly and gnat to play the parts of hawk and eagle" (27). Miss P's observations are of a miniaturised landscape, which is more easily processed and contained. Initially, this seems reminiscent of Faith Dane's remonstrances to Sylvia to stop "scaling the sky" with the "eagle"-like Warwick and instead to stay in her "safer nest among the grass" (181). As if, as a woman, she ought to remain concerned with smaller, domestic matters, because she is unable to cope with the large scale philosophy of the men around her. However, seen alongside Miss P's experience at the summit of Mount Washington, this should be read, rather, as a rejection of the grandiose terms of a transcendental philosophy that continues to insist on the triviality of domestic experience. Both Sylvia and Miss P find an appreciation of the beautiful, of the smaller, less grand spaces of nature, of the seemingly insignificant that mirrors her own subject position within this philosophic framework.

If the two published endings of the novel reject the male sublime, firstly, for a model of the female sublime located in the afterlife and, secondly, reject the sublime encounter altogether for a return to the feminine and the beautiful, there remains a third model for the female philosophic encounter with the landscape that was unpublished. A letter discovered in 2003 shows that neither of these endings provided the conclusion that Alcott originally wanted for *Moods*. She wrote: "my idea is not carried out if S[ylvia] & Moor settle down in a happy pair...her recal [sic] of Moor was not to tell him she loved him but to say goodbye....I intended to have her spend the rest of her life alone, busy & happy" (Deese 452). Alcott was never to publish this ending, presumably because she had to meet the conventional expectations of her publisher and the

marketplace, and this did not include a single, happy heroine. However, she does model the ideal of single life in *Moods*, in Faith Dane, who tells Sylvia: "I never met a man who could satisfy me. My ideal is a high one, and I believe that whatever we are worthy of we shall find and enjoy hereafter" (271). Faith shares the idea of the first ending to *Moods*, that female transcendence can be accessed through a heavenly ascent at the end of life. However, she represents an alternative model to Sylvia's choice between a life of feminine self-sacrifice in the domestic sphere of married life with Moor, and the inaccessible philosophic model of transcendental freedom represented by Warwick. Through Faith, Alcott attempted to show how a woman might enjoy a fulfilling and practical domestic life.

Faith's life is shown to be virtuous and independent because she lives alone, romantically separate from men. Little of her life is described in *Moods*, but she plays a major role as a mother figure and moral guide for the young Sylvia, setting the example by which she might follow. Alcott explored the independent lifestyle more fully in her essay, "Happy Women," in which, as in *Moods*, she cautioned young women against rushing into marriage. Instead, she offers young women seeking happiness a model of the lives of "superior women who, from various causes, remain single" (203). Woman A in the essay appears to represent Alcott herself, who in her own life modelled an independent, single existence (Showalter *Alternative Alcott* xvii). In "Happy Women," sexual desire and romantic love are sublimated and replaced with "filial and fraternal love" and the contentment of hard work, as they are for Faith in *Moods* (205). Faith's life apart from men is presented as an idealised combination of the domestic and the landscape in perfect harmony:

the gray cottage nestled in a hollow of the mountain side; a pleasant hermitage, secure and still....none of the gloom of isolation darkened the sunshine that pervaded it; peace seemed to sit upon its threshold, content to brood beneath its eaves, and the atmosphere of home to make it beautiful (176).

Faith's house is positioned at the heart of nature's sublime, on the rugged mountainside, and yet although it approaches Emerson's ideal of solitude, this is not a space of detachment, isolation, or male sublime encounter. Rather it is tempered by the feminine: the "beautiful" and the domestic (176). Faith's life in her cottage comes closest to Alcott's more practical vision of a lived female transcendental ideal, a space that unites the interior domestic sphere and the external spiritual landscape.

While Alcott's ending depicting an idealised domestic life within the natural world was not fully explored in *Moods*, her longing for a space of free philosophic thought in the landscape remains present in her writing. There comes a moment in "Letter Two" of the "Letters from the White Mountains," when Miss P visits Willis's Gap and she sits for an hour. This is not the moment of the grand summit ascent, but a quieter moment, when her cousin Will and the rest of the party have wandered away, leaving her alone. Finally, Alcott shares her description of the landscape:

As I sat aloft there the mountains all about me seemed made of shaded velvet, so unbroken was the smooth sheet of verdure stretching to their tops; forests of maple, oak, and pine, where all manner of wild things live undisturbed, for many of these forests have never been explored; and there they stand as they were made, untouched by axes, untrodden by human feet. I never knew trees gave such an impression before, but it is a strange and rather solemn sight, these unknown wildernesses living hundreds of years with their solitude unbroken, and no little man to pry into their mysteries or to shorten their beautiful lives. (121).

In this passage, Alcott shows an appreciation for the beauty rather than the power of nature. As opposed to the craggy peaks and vertiginous views of the sublime encounter, she imagines the thick woods on the mountainsides and the details contained within. As

in her observations of the landscape in miniature, she again imagines the "beauties close at hand," and privileges the variety and detail of the beautiful over the majestic sublime. This is a feminine space "untouched," "untrodden," and unpenetrated by "little man," suggesting a virginal space apart, separated from the sexuality of womanhood, much like Faith's cottage and life apart from men. However, it also represents a step removed from the domestic, where "all manner of wild things live undisturbed," filled with "solitude unbroken"; it is thus an imagining of a longed for landscape of womanhood for Alcott, in which she would have the freedom to explore her silent thoughts and a space of metaphysical reflection beyond patriarchal control.

In *Moods*, Alcott establishes space in the domestic novel for a female transcendentalist exploration of existence, centred on the transition from girlhood to womanhood. She imagines a model of emancipation from the home, particularly for adolescent girls who were often restricted there, inspired by the male transcendentalist rejection of domesticity and flight to the natural world. While drawn initially to the sublime encounter, through which she represents Sylvia's confrontation with womanhood, and the search for intellectual autonomy, she ultimately rejects this. Sylvia's experience in the novel becomes a "failed sublime" encounter because of the material reality of her female body, which continually intervenes in her struggle for autonomy. Her satirisation of the sublime encounter, in "Letters from the White Mountains," as well as the revision of the first ending of *Moods*, reveal the impossibility of a binary separation from the domestic sphere for a woman at the time. Nevertheless, she explores briefly in Faith Dane, and more fully in her own life, a space of female independence, which combines the domestic with a closer relationship to the natural

world. This vision of the landscape that also embraces the concept of home, as I will show, is a repeated theme in the ecodomestic novel.

Moods is interesting in its exploration and challenge of male transcendentalist thought and the masculine sublime encounter, but is most revealing in its silent contemplation of the landscape. The text calls for a recognition of that in the natural world that cannot be conquered and controlled intellectually, and suggests a parallel to the position of women. This is seen extended in Stowe's work, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, who also took a more critical stance to the male construction of landscape but who offered a clearer alternative view, based on closer observation and a greater recognition of the unknowable in the natural world.

Chapter 2: Visualising the Landscape of Freedom in Harriet Beecher

Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*

In *American Visual Culture*, Mark Rawlinson suggests: "the process of picturing the landscape – representing what can already be seen – has been and continues to be central to American national identity" (17). Harriet Beecher Stowe had never visited North Carolina when she imagined its landscape in *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, and yet her depiction of the scenery and vegetation of the South was critical to her exploration of American identity in the novel. She, like Alcott, used the domestic novel to challenge a culturally dominant, patriarchal view of the American landscape, and she further exposed the gendered construction of national identity. Just as Alcott's work disrupted male conceptions of the sublime, Stowe's writing confronted the formal tradition of composition that had come to dominate the artistic representation of landscape in the nineteenth century. This chapter argues that Stowe challenges the dominant "magisterial gaze" of nineteenth century landscape painting in both her own art and in the novel, as she reimagines the landscape of America through her abolitionism.

In this chapter, I consider the construction of landscape in the nineteenth century both through landscape painting, and Stowe's source for the scenery of the Great Dismal Swamp, Frederick Law Olmsted's *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, in order to consider why and how Stowe creates her depiction of the southern swamp in *Dred*. With reference to Stowe's sketches and paintings preserved in her archive, I show the importance of the metaphor of organic growth to her work, as a model of liberation from slavery. Edward Clayton, the novel's hero, observes this impulse much as Stowe

does, as he reflects on the slaves on his plantation: "in this day, minds will grow. They are growing. There's no help for it, and there's no force like the force of growth" (586). I suggest that Stowe's visualisation of the landscape of the Great Dismal Swamp and its inhabitants enabled her to reimagine national identity, as "the force of growth" impelled America beyond slavery. Furthermore, I argue that this reading creates a parallel between the disempowerment of the domestic novel heroine, people who were enslaved, and a landscape containing a repressed dynamic force, which prefigures the intersectional concerns of later ecofeminist ideology.

In this chapter, I explore the concept of landscape because it played a critical role in the imagining of the natural world in the nineteenth century, particularly due to the difficulties of long distance travel and before the widespread use of photography. The origins of the term "landscape," as well as its current meaning, are inseparable from art: the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the word was introduced as a technical painting term. The description of landscape as an artistic form seems straightforward: "a picture representing natural inland scenery as opposed to a sea picture, portrait, etc." However, a landscape painting does not always omit these elements, and may contain figures, or a glimpse of the sea, for example. A further definition is of landscape as "the background scenery in a portrait," which further complicates the idea of its opposition to portraiture. The term's boundaries then, are blurred and the concept of what should or should not constitute a landscape in artistic terms were frequently questioned, as Karen Georgi has shown. The term's more general definition, as it has come to be understood beyond its technical meaning, is as "a view or prospect of natural inland scenery such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view" (*OED*). This emphasises the importance of the observer (or artist): a single person who looks from one place and

summarises a view. "Landscape" thus refers to the representation of nature in artistic form; to a human and subjective construction of nature, rather than to nature itself.

The central decades of the nineteenth century marked an important moment for American landscape painting as an art form. Artists, like American writers, were keen to follow the call to establish a unique national identity in their work, and the desire to make sense of and to represent the natural world was at the heart of this movement. The white settlement of the land and expansion Westward demanded an accompanying cultural vision that would both assert and support white dominance. Art historians, such as Barbara Novak and Albert Boime, have argued that landscape painting of the period shared a number of common features. Novak explains that the development of landscape painting coincided with the mass destruction of wilderness (4), and from this developed a shared language amongst not only artists, but also patrons and the wider public in the mid-nineteenth century: "The taking of the continent was powered by an undisputed Christian consensus, a missionary zeal, a largely benign interpretation of progress" (xvii). Landscape artists showed the natural world as infused with signs of God's immanence, suggesting the white settlement of the land as a divine national destiny. As Boime argues, the desire for dominance that was expressed in landscape painting was "inseparably linked to American national self-consciousness and its political expression in the form of Manifest Destiny" (3). Landscape painting thus worked to reinforce the narrative of a privileged elite engaged in a process of the removal of native peoples and the destruction of wide regions of wilderness.

Boime's concept of the "magisterial gaze" is helpful in understanding how this translated into the artwork, both visual and literary, in technical terms. His convincing

study identifies a significant number of landscape works that share a very similar, raised viewpoint, looking down and outwards across a scenic panorama:

nowhere else do we find such a major body of visual and literary texts sharing a spatial and chronological coherence and constituting a collective expression of the "peak" experience. It is this systematic projection of the unlimited horizons as a metonymic image of America's futurity that makes this body of material unique in its geographical, national, and temporal setting. (23)

The idea of the raised vantage point placed both artist and viewer in a position of privilege, facing a future of progress that would shape the nation. These paintings typically moved from wilderness in the foreground, to cultivated middle ground, to a future lying over the horizon, in a reflection of this forward progression (Boime 9).

In order to consider Stowe's work in relation to the artwork of the time, it is helpful to look at Thomas Cole's *View of Monte Video, the Seat of Daniel Wadsworth Esq*, painted in 1828, which provides a typical example of the magisterial gaze (Fig. 1; Boime 54). Boime suggests the painting depicts: "the dispossession of Indian land, its transformation into property, and the visual projection of this metamorphosed land in the view from the summit" (53). The jagged trees in the foreground, covered with vines, depict a wilderness that in its darkness is symbolic of an unenlightened land. The middle ground is a pastoral scene of hedged fields and Wadsworth's mansion, reflecting the successful settlement of this wilderness. In the distance, lie wooded hills to be tamed and utilised for their wood, suggesting the progression of the colonial project. The composition opens outwards, the dark frame of the wilderness in the foreground expanding across the vista of the plains, into the light of a heavenly sky that dominates the top third of the canvas. The viewer is positioned, like the painter, in a position of dominance and surveillance over the land.



Fig. 1 View of Monte Video, the Seat of Daniel Wadsworth Esq by Thomas Cole, 1828. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Despite the compositional patterns in nineteenth century American landscape painting, however, Karen Georgi suggests that what did, or did not, constitute landscape art remained disputed:

the successful representation of nature, 'proper' landscape painting, denominated as such, required certain discursive decisions. Some forms were rhetorically given the power to say something, to have meaning - to be nature, that is - and others were denied the ability to stand for anything beyond the mere physical existence of their referents. (229).

The critical debate over that which had a greater artistic meaning and that which was merely observational reflection, she suggests, lay at the centre of the struggle to define landscape. This focused on a tension between "the real and the ideal": the balance between a realistic attention to detail, and a broader view creating an imagined grandeur

(Novak). To return to Cole's painting, this is seen in the highly detailed foreground, which is as tightly controlled in approach as a botanical scientific study in the nineteenth century. Set against this is the broad, sweeping middle and background of the painting's magisterial gaze.

View of Monte Video is of further interest because of its inclusion of a woman. Figures are common in nineteenth century American landscape painting, and they are typically small, "dwarfed by nature," but they are less often female (Novak 161). More typically a male figure takes up the role of spectator, guiding the viewer's eye across the vista below. The woman in Cole's painting assumes this position of surveillance, but she is half turned away from the scene, as if unable to properly appreciate it. She sits close to the foreground, associating her with the wild, less developed portion of the landscape. Her hat lies by her side and the skirt of her dress is ruched, hinting at impropriety and sexuality, but her dress is also lit a bright white, the symbol of purity. The male artist is thus positioned as the creator and surveyor of the landscape, and is also a voyeur into the woman's private moment of freedom from social convention. Boime describes a common figure-type in these landscape paintings as the "image of the stupified savage confronting the signs of civilization on the march" (79). A dualism is established of undeveloped native against progressive white man, wilderness versus cultivation. The woman in Cole's painting assumes a similar position: she is associated with the wild, the unaware, the sexual (and, conversely, the virginal). Unlike the artist or viewer, she is not looking at or creating the landscape but is rendered a part of it as the viewed object, an extension of this unexplored territory in need of mastery.

It is this combination of artistic elements, so central to the mid-nineteenth century landscape painting that Stowe both draws on and challenges in order to create her representation of the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina. The tension between a scientific detailed study of nature and the grand panorama; the magisterial gaze; the concept of a divine right to destroy the wilderness; and the position of women as a part of the landscape are challenged as part of her abolitionist vision.

Imagining the Landscape of *Dred*: Resisting the "Magisterial Gaze"

Following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and as tensions intensified in the country in the lead up to the Civil War, Stowe felt driven to write another book that would allow her to answer some of her critics and reveal her continuing concern for abolition. In a letter to the Duchess of Argyle in June 1856, before travelling to England to have the book published, she explained: "The book is written under the impulse of our stormy times --- How indignant yet how undaunted we are --- how the blood and insults of Sumner and the sack of Lawrence burn within us I hope to make a voice to say" ("Letter to Elizabeth Georgiana Campbell"). As Judie Newman observes: "*Dred's* composition reveals a woman responding instantaneously with her pen to the most pressing political events of the day" (11). *Dred* was a book composed in outrage, and it was written at speed in order to reflect and comment on contemporary issues. Copyright demanded she be in England at the point of publication (she had lost royalties on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in England), and she finished the book at a rate of twenty pages a day, as she travelled by boat ("Letter to Moses Dresser Phillips").

The lack of time she had in which to compose the novel, if it were to make the maximum impact, as well as Stowe's fame following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which suggested she was under threat, meant that she was unable to travel to the South to see the Great Dismal Swamp. She was handed a copy of Olmsted's new book, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* upon its publication, while she was in the midst of writing *Dred*, and she read its description of the landscape with close attention. In the letter she wrote to him after reading the book she explained:

I have plunged into it with deep interest the more so that I am in the midst of a novel the scene of which is laid in North Carolina and therefore anxious for details.[...] I wish very much if you are in our vicinity in Boston that you would make me a call for I should like very much to read you some parts and get a little help from you about laying out the topographical details --- It is absolutely necessary for me to get a perfect definite idea of the country where I suppose the scene will be laid and in conversing with you I could do it. I am charmed with your book" ("Letter to Frederick Law Olmsted").

Stowe's request to Olmsted is noticeably a scientific, rather than an artistic approach, as she appeals for factual information, the "topographical details," that will help her to map the landscape she has not been able to visit in person. Furthermore, her emphasis on gaining "a perfect definite idea of the country" reveals the importance of realism in her approach to imagining the landscape of the swamp.

Olmsted was already a published author of a book retelling his travels in England, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, when Henry Jarvis Raymond, editor of the *New York Daily Times* asked him to produce a similar work about the American South (Roper 84). Olmsted visited the South from December 1852 to April 1853 and his work was originally published in the *New York Daily Times* in 1853 (Olmsted xxx). He revisited the South in November of the same year, added more material and then published the book in 1856 (Olmsted xxix). William P. Trent, who

wrote the introduction to the 1904 edition, places Olmsted and Stowe in parallel in their work to educate Northerners about the South: "*A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* must probably rank along with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*...as one of the...books that did most to open the eyes of the North to the true nature of the plague of slavery" (Olmsted xxxii). However, Olmsted did not write the book as an anti-slavery tract, but rather as a travel narrative, particularly concerned with the land management of the Southern states, much as he had done in *American Farmer*. It was to be "A series of articles on southern agriculture and economy as affected by slavery," to provide the factual information he felt Northerners were lacking in their assessment of slavery (Roper 84).

Olmsted was well aware of Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and in his chapter on Virginia, Stowe would have read of the vehement opposition in that state to her book:

As to "Uncle Tom," it is generally criticised very severely, and its representations of slavery vehemently denied. I observe that it is not placarded outside the booksellers' stores, though the whole fleet of gunboats that have been launched after it show their colours bravely. It must, however, be a good deal read here, as I judge from the frequent allusions I hear made to it. (109).

The idea that the novel exaggerated the ill-treatment of slaves was a position that angered Stowe, and it is probable that reading this passage in Olmsted's book would have added to the indignation that fuelled the composition of *Dred*. Olmsted, however, aimed to remain objective in his discussion of slavery, and although he met a former slave-owner who had read the novel and accepted that "cases of cruelty and suffering, equal to any described in it, might be found," Olmsted also discussed the book with a slave owner who tried to emphasise that slaves were not ill-treated (108; 269). Despite his attempts at impartiality, Olmsted's book was also not well-received by the southern press (Roper 90). Nevertheless, although Olmsted did not support slavery, he is far from

positioning himself as an abolitionist in *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* because his approach to slavery in the text is primarily economic, rather than humanitarian.

Although Stowe sets *Dred* in North Carolina, Olmsted's clearest depiction of the swamp is in his section on Virginia (the Great Dismal Swamp crosses the border between the states). He introduces the swamp with an overview of its size: "It is divided by creeks and water veins, and in the centre is a pond, six miles long and three broad, the shores of which, strange to say are at a higher elevation above the sea" (166-7). Mart A. Stewart notes that "Large areas of the South remained uncultivated in the plantation era - nearly 80 percent of the region in 1860 - and forests, wetlands, and savannahs were part of every plantation district" (12). For Olmsted, this land was being used inefficiently and was prime for agricultural development. His description of the swamp is noticeably topographical, as he describes the pattern of its rivers, and scale and elevation of the lake at its centre. Olmsted would go on to become most well-known for designing and building New York's Central Park, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and the Boston Park system, among other projects. The human relationship to nature was therefore at the centre of his vision but, just as in *American Farmer*, this was also a concern for assessing, surveying and shaping the land to meet human needs, as is seen in this description of the swamp. He also notes the proliferation of trees that originally covered the land and their value as "shingles," "ship timber" and "fencing material" (168).

His son, who wrote a biographical sketch to the 1904 edition, is nevertheless keen to emphasise: "He was before all an artist" (Olmsted xxvi). The idea of this artistry, seen also in the beauty of his parks, appears to contradict his scientific,

economic and geographic approach, much as Stowe's emphasis on topography can seem out of place for a novelist. However, as Boime observes, the project of surveying and categorizing the land during this period was often inseparable from the artistic projects of landscapists. A similar conception of landscape is shown in Olmsted's topographical view of the swamp, in which he adopts the painter's magisterial gaze, positioned from above, looking down and out across the land. Like the nineteenth century landscape artists, he surveys the land in an expansive motion, from the dark, useless wilderness of the foregrounded swampland, in which "The quarry is giving out" and "the business... almost at an end" (170); out to the horizon of future swamp work, in the Florida Everglades, where he notes that canny businessmen are already at work draining for new resources. Olmsted's perspective as geographer, surveyor, and business man is thus also that of the artist, viewing the march of human progress across the panorama of the American South.

In her preface to *Dred*, Stowe extends the concern for realism she expressed to Olmsted as she explains she has chosen to write "a subject from the scenes and incidents of the slaveholding states," suggesting the text not primarily as fiction, but as a study based on regional fact (3). However, just as topography and art are intertwined for Olmsted, she proceeds to emphasise the importance of art to this work: "In a merely artistic point of view, there is no ground, ancient or modern, whose vivid lights, gloomy shadows, and grotesque groupings, afford to the novelist so wide a scope for the exercise of his powers" (3). In her description of the contrast of "vivid lights" and "gloomy shadows" and "so wide a scope" she recalls the landscape paintings of the time. She thus emphasises the panorama, the unenlightened wilderness, and bright

horizon of futurity as seen in these paintings, while recalling the travel narratives and scientific surveys of landscape seen in texts such as Olmsted's that documented the Southern States. Outside of her career as a novelist, Stowe forayed into the fields of art and of geographical study, and a closer analysis of her work shows her struggling with the adoption of the magisterial gaze, and gives a better understanding of her challenge to predominant conceptions of the American landscape in *Dred*.

Stowe enjoyed painting and drawing as a pastime, and although she never aspired to become a professional artist, she was clearly proud of her accomplishments, displaying her finished paintings for guests in her house.¹¹ Her sketches and paintings are noticeably primarily landscapes and botanical studies, showing her keen interest in recording and imagining the natural world. The largest sketchbook from her personal belongings, in the archives at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, dates from around 1853-60, and covers the period of writing *Dred*, allowing further insight to her conceptualisation of landscape during this time. These sketches show scenes from her trips to Europe and from Andover, Massachusetts, as well as some unlocated drawings. The sketchbook contains noticeably few full, finished landscape paintings and focuses on closer studies of trees, plants and flowers. Outstanding in the sketchbook, both as a full colour painting amongst pencil sketches, and as a full landscape study, is a painting of the Alps. Although not an American landscape, its composition is very revealing of the influence of the formal landscape conventions of the time. In *Early Morning Rise in the Alps* (Fig. 2), she does not look up at them from below in the manner of the Northern European "reverential gaze," but instead adopts the elevated viewpoint that

¹¹ These can still be seen in situ today at Stowe's former and final home in Hartford, Connecticut.

Boime describes as typical of American landscape painting (Boime 24). The position of the artist and viewer looks down and outward, towards the horizon. The foreground is dark, and marked by jagged trees similar to those of Cole's painting, signifying the past, and a wild undeveloped land. The eye of the viewer then progresses beyond this, to a light horizon, marked by heavenly peaks: thus we see the frame of the magisterial gaze.



Fig. 2 *Early Morning Rise in the Alps* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

Stowe's school book, *First Geography for Children*, also published during this period, in the year before *Dred* in 1855, was also a text in which Stowe attempted to capture the landscape of the Alps. Building on her successful position as a maternal and moral educator, through the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the book explains to children how to map and document the landscape geographically (in national and international contexts). Her sister, Catharine Beecher, wrote in the preface: "It will be

seen that the child is first made to have a clear idea of *distances* and of the *map-making* process" (4). This was to be a book of precise measurement and observation, teaching the scientific techniques of categorisation in much the same way as Olmsted divides the trees of the Great Dismal Swamp according to categories of their human use. Beecher goes on to explain: "The child is made to commence at home, and gradually to enlarge his ideas of extension, till town, county, state, country, continent, and finally the whole world, are presented on maps" (4). This system of surveying the land, from the local outwards, in a broad sweeping gaze, again mirrors the structure of the panoramic landscapes of nineteenth century American painting, and the colonial project of forward progress.

Stowe sets this specific mapping task for students using the example of a Swiss landscape, whereby they look at an etching depicting an island and a lake, which they must transform into a flat map drawing, as seen from above (19-25). Nevertheless, as the reader reaches her descriptive pages of Switzerland, Stowe's language undermines her efforts to neatly summarise the landscape in map form. She describes the Alps:

At sunrise you will sometimes see these mountains sparkling with the light and looking as if they were capped with fire. Between these lofty mountains are most lovely villages, with calm, blue lakes, and trees, and flowers, and pretty cottages. Sometimes the wild roses and rock flowers will blossom on the very edges of the perpetual snow.(120).

Here is Stowe as artist, describing that which is more difficult to render as topography, such as the "wild roses and rock flowers." This is the detail that detracts from the magisterial gaze: from the untamed flowers to that which is shown to be beautiful for its own sake, rather than as a source of food, fuel or monetary gain.

Similarly, in *Early Morning Rise in the Alps*, despite its frame of the viewpoint of the magisterial gaze, the middle ground of the painting is noticeably unrealised. The area that typically displays the scene of the pastoral fantasy of the present, pushing towards future progress, is filled with thick cloud. This may well be the scene Stowe saw as she looked at the Alps, but the artist always has the option to wait for mist to clear, or to use the imagination, and Stowe chooses to do neither in this painting. The cloud suggests mystery and an inability or reluctance to "read" the landscape of the present human relationship to the natural world. This is an area, she suggests, that the magisterial gaze fails to capture and cannot fully know. The purple and grey hues of the painting also stand in contrast to the dramatic, blue or golden skies and lush green vegetation of the Hudson River School and luminist painters. The impactful colours of these paintings add to the sense of optimism towards human progress, the light from the heavens suggesting a warm, divine approval. The overall tone of Stowe's painting is instead muted and cool, adding to the sense of mystery, dissatisfaction, and isolation of the viewer. Much as her description of the Alps in her geography textbook contradicts the book's project of mapping the landscape, the mist-filled middle ground of *Early Morning Rise in the Alps* disrupts the standard framework of American landscape painting of the time.

***Dred*, the Domestic Novel, and the "Force of Growth"**

Dred has not typically been read as a domestic novel, but understanding its position in this genre is crucial to interpreting the representation of landscape in the text. Robert S. Levine suggests that in the novel:

Stowe tries out a number of different ways of addressing the problem of slavery, offers conflicting views on race, and shifts between romance and realism as if she were struggling to find the proper novelistic form that could tell the story of both the slave plantation mistress, Nina Gordon, and the black revolutionary, Dred. (Levine x).

Drawing on multiple genres, as well as the use of historical fact, however, is typical of the domestic novel tradition.¹² The struggle Levine identifies, between "romance and realism," reflects Stowe's artistic effort to find the balance between the "real and ideal," an imagined landscape of American progress and the dark reality of slavery (Novak). However, as I will show, Stowe uses the domestic novel format, not to experiment with "conflicting views," but deliberately to encompass multiple perspectives in the narrative. In doing so, she challenges the painterly position of a single, privileged male vantage point and undermines the master narrative of patriarchal progress, much as she does in her sketches.

As an anti-slavery text, the story of *Dred's* central female protagonist seems out of place to critics. Levine notes that "the novel begins rather conventionally by focusing on the travails of the eighteen-year-old plantation belle" and observes that the text "at first glance can seem oddly indebted to the plantation novel tradition" (xviii; xvii). For Levine, the character of Nina and the plantation house setting serve primarily to frame the text as an answer to the responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Natasha Saje similarly identifies Nina as a Southern belle figure, a "coquette protagonist who is reformed into a 'true woman'" (158). Whereas Levine and Saje read Nina's plot as separate, or a distraction, from the novel's primary focus on slavery, Nina Baym reads the issue of slavery as separate from the domestic novel's focus on female self-development. She argues that Stowe's novels generally do not fit the genre "because the good women are

¹² This struggle to categorise the text will also be seen later with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

not engaged in their own cause, either as individuals or in the interest of their sex, but in a cause where their own welfare is not directly involved" (233). What these readings share is a separation of implicitly gendered private and public spheres: of domestic novel from abolitionism, of the female heroine from black slave. In fact, Stowe's work (and life) was explicitly concerned with uniting these themes, and exposing the network on which oppressions are based.

It is the structure of the text that provides the greatest challenge to reading *Dred* as a domestic novel. The narrative diverges repeatedly from a focus on its heroine, considering the stories and perspectives of other characters. It is not uncommon for a domestic novel to contain a broad cast of characters, or to contain scenes that do not include the heroine. However, in *Dred* other characters are considered in greater detail than is typical and they share the focus of the narrative to a greater extent. Moreover, Nina dies roughly three quarters of the way through the novel, and although heroines do die in this genre, it is rare for the narrative to continue for so long without her. From the novel's title, Dred is signalled as the central protagonist, and is interpreted as such in many readings of the novel. However, he does not make a full descriptive appearance until over two hundred pages into the novel, and does not feature fully in the action of the narrative in his own right until Volume Two of the two volume book. Similarly, Dred also dies not long after Nina, before a substantial amount of the action of the novel is concluded, as the rest of the characters escape to a new life in the North and in Canada. The split in the narrative, between domestic and anti-slavery themes, perhaps explains the division in critical approaches to the novel, as Newman explains: "*Dred* tells two stories, that of Nina, the white woman, and Dred, the black man" (24).

However, to see the text in its entirety demands a focus on these as deliberately combined themes within the novel.

Despite its shared focus on Nina and Dred, and the foregrounding of other characters, such as Tiff, Harry and Milly, *Dred* conforms to many of the structural expectations of the domestic novel. Stowe positions Nina as the heroine and central protagonist at the start of the novel, as she is introduced by the opening title "The Mistress of Canema," privileging both her and the house, and the novel centres on domestic spaces, such as Harry and Lisette's cabin, the Cripps cabin, and the plantation house. Nina is on the cusp of adolescence, orphaned, and under the care of her fussy aunt, as is typical of the genre. As the novel opens, she has become engaged (by accident) to three men, and the two inappropriate suitors are contrasted with a sensible stable one, Edward Clayton. Despite being an heir to Canema, she has little concern with overseeing the household, and makes the adolescent assertion that "all I want is to have a good time" (35). However, her home on the estate is under threat and perilously close to financial ruin, while her older brother is dissolute and unreliable, further threatening her security. Her return from school places her in a position where she must confront her responsibilities: with no reliable adult role models she must learn to make her own way in the world. These are characters and a narrative that recur repeatedly in the domestic novel: its setting in the world of women and focus on the house and household; its structure focused on familiar character types, with a central heroine on the cusp of adulthood; and its didactic message.

"The story of female self-development" is at the heart of the domestic genre and "the heroine's 'self' emerges concurrently with her growth from child to adult" (Tate;

Baym 37). These are narratives of adolescence, centred on exploring the possibilities and limitations of womanhood, and focused on the heroine's moral development, as she learns to act selflessly and submit herself to a higher, divine power. In Baym's reading of Stowe's work as outside of the domestic novel genre, the idea of the development of female autonomy is set apart from broader societal issues. However, as Jane Tompkins explains: "These stories are all didactic in nature - illustrating the importance of a particular virtue such as obedience, faith, sobriety or patience" (153). As Tompkins, Claudia Tate and Baym, herself, have pointed out, the development of the heroine was frequently connected to a particular societal issue, such as temperance or suffrage.¹³ In *Dred*, Stowe's combination of domestic novel heroine with abolitionist message stresses the interconnection between private female self-development and the public, political sphere, suggesting that the two must be united for progression from adolescence to full maturity as a woman.

Tompkins explains the narrative technique of using the instantly recognisable characters and plot of the domestic novel: "Their familiarity and typicality, rather than making them bankrupt or stale, are the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation" (xvi). In *Dred*, the heroine and characters that open and structure the text are used to help the reader to make a shortcut from this fictional and familiar domestic world to the complex political environment of slavery in the Southern States. Just as Olmsted seeks to portray the region in his travel narrative, Stowe sketches out its domestic landscape in the novel. Using these "stock characters" and the familiar narrative of female self-development in *Dred*, provided a more accessible entry point to

¹³ Cynthia S. Hamilton's reading of the novel suggests further public issues, providing a revealing reading of questions of temperance in *Dred*, and Stowe's exposure of the link between alcohol and slavery.

her broad readership; from Northern abolitionists who, like herself were unable to travel South, to her large British readership, who were keen to understand more about the structure of slavery (Levine xviii).

The development of the novel's heroine is thus extended to the slave, Tiff, who is similarly positioned on the cusp of domestic change when his genteel mistress dies and he is left to look after the cabin with only his corrupt and immoral master in charge. His position echoes that of the genre's heroine, as he is effectively "orphaned" by his master and mistress and left to make his own moral way in the world. As Hazel Waters observes: "he is also taken seriously as a practical, resourceful, loving man.... He is highly feminized...this being a prominent aspect of his goodness; he cooks, cleans, sews and lovingly tends the Cripps's children" (81). When Nina dies, the narrative focus shifts to Tiff, and his feminised portrayal transforms him into an alternative 'heroine,' thus aligning the coming-of-age of the heroine and slave. The didactic message of the text is therefore not restricted to one type of person but is presented as a moral and political issue with a broad impact, shaping the lives of a diverse, but equally important, range of people. Stowe extends the concept of self-development from the journey to womanhood to the question of the self-emancipation of the enslaved black members of the household.

As an artist, visualising a landscape of the south, Stowe thus begins in a position close to the dictionary definition: "a view or prospect...such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view." This is a survey, from the position of the white, middle class woman at home, across the panorama of the plantation and surrounding area. However, in her transferral of focus from Nina, to Dred and Tiff, and her consideration

of more minor characters, Stowe challenges the idea of a single point of view. She explains this further in the novel:

There is no study in human nature more interesting than the aspects of the same subject seen in the points of view of different characters. One might almost imagine that there were no such thing as absolute truth, since a change of situation or temperament is capable of changing the whole force of an argument. (555).

Stowe thereby calls into the question the magisterial gaze of the artist, undermining the idea of a single raised view point to capture a true vision of America. In the domestic novel, the woman as subject is used to challenge the ideology of male power, using her knowledge and experience to question patriarchal authority and to validate a contrasting model of female power. In extending this to the perspective of her black characters, Stowe uses the familiar structure of the genre to challenge the notion of the "absolute truth" used by the male politicians and artists shaping the landscape of the South to validate the system of slavery.

For Stowe, underlying the domestic novel's central characteristic of self-development is the concept of growth. Although Saje suggests that over the course of the novel Nina is "reformed" (158), in the domestic novel the heroine typically "finds within herself" the attributes she needs to mature (Baym 22). Clayton observes this potential present in Nina's character: "I think she has yet a wholly unawakened nature. She has lived only in the world of sensation, and that is so abundant and so buoyant in her that the deeper part still sleeps. It is only two or three times that I have seen a flash of this under nature look from her eyes, and color her voice and intonation" (47). Clayton's description here is organic, as he envisions her "under nature" as a dormant kernel inside her that is yet to wake and grow. Stowe suggests this potential for female

self-development is inherent and deep, rather than an external force that shapes the individual.

The concept of an "unawakened nature" that awaits development is extended from the heroine to the black characters of the novel, as Clayton's ambitions to awaken Nina's character are paralleled with his sister Anne's mission to educate their slaves. Just as Nina's "under nature" is shown to lie dormant inside her, Anne observes of their slaves: "If a mind will grow and rise, make way and let it. Make room for it, and cut down everything that stands in the way!" (405). As in Clayton's observation of Nina, Anne reads the potential for intellectual and spiritual development in their slaves as an organic metaphor of growth. Stowe's presentation of black minds as dynamic and unstoppable in their growth was particularly radical at this time, when the education of slaves was often illegal, and the idea of black intellectual inferiority was widespread. For example, at the annual meeting of the Medical Association of Louisiana in 1851, 5 years before *Dred* was published, Samuel A. Cartwright, as chair of the committee, gave a "Report on the Diseases and the Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race." In this, he observed: "According to Soemmerring and other anatomists, who have dissected the negro, his brain is a ninth or tenth less than in other races of men" (68). Cartwright finds that it is a "defective hematosis, or atmospherization of the blood, conjoined with a deficiency of cerebral matter in the cranium" that renders the race slaves (68). He believes that the state of slavery actually improves intelligence because black people are forced to exercise through their labour: "It is the red, vital blood, sent to the brain, that liberates their mind when under the white man's control; and it is the want of a sufficiency of red, vital blood, that chains their mind to ignorance and barbarism, when

in freedom" (69). This type of racialised view of black intellectual potential, supported by supposedly evidential scientific research, presented a challenge that Stowe was keen to counter. In a letter in 1856, explaining how English donations to the anti-slavery cause were spent, Stowe wrote that \$237 had been given to black education projects:

This I consider on the whole the most efficient of all the means to be used against the system of slavery. The grand argument for slavery is that this race is fit for nothing higher. Examples therefore of cultivated and intelligent persons in all departments of learning literature and art are particularly valuable in making out our case. ("Letter to George William Frederick Howard").

The education of slaves and freed people who were black, in order both to provide them with the tools to progress and the opportunity to prove their potential, thus became a critical project for Stowe in the fight for abolition.

However, this ideological stance is also problematic because, while it does see the possibility for the education and intellectual development of enslaved peoples, it also stems from a paternalism that assumes their current and inherent inferiority.

Clayton explains his feelings of responsibility towards his slaves: "They are to us in the condition of children under age" (372). Here slaves are presented as child-like and Anne and Clayton assume responsibility for teaching their slaves, with no recognition of their independent knowledge, skills, and maturity. Aligned to Nina's own position on the cusp of childhood, it is a perspective that pervades the text. In recounting her reading of the Bible to Tiff, for example, Nina describes him as "an old child man", revealing her own feeling of intellectual superiority, as she reads aloud to Tiff and the children as if they are at the same stage of development (430). As a white woman of an upper class family, she is assumed to be his intellectual superior, undercutting her earlier alignment with the slaves.

The idea of the childlike nature of black people also appears in Stowe's letters. Earlier that year she wrote of her exasperation at complaints in Frederick Douglass's paper about the lack of funding for an industrial school, an idea she did not support but felt prominent black abolitionists could fund themselves: "Will they *ever* learn to walk?" she wrote ("Letter to Wendell Phillips"). Stowe's presentation of a childlike nature comes dangerously close to Cartwright's racialised "science": "The excess of organic nervous matter, and the deficiency of cerebral - the predominance of the humors over the red blood, from defective atmospherization of the blood in the lungs, impart to the negro a nature not unlike that of a new-born infant of the white race" (69). Stowe's organic metaphor approaches Cartwright's vision of excessive "organic nervous matter," and an association of blackness with an undeveloped brain.

Nevertheless, Clayton's perspective shifts as the novel progresses and he exposes the failures of the legal system to support a paternalistic ideology towards the slaves: "I had before flattered myself with the hope that it might be considered a guardian institution, by which a stronger race might assume the care and instruction of a weaker one....This illusion is destroyed" (450). Although Clayton fails to question the idea of a "stronger race" caring for a "weaker one," he acknowledges the illusion of a "guardian institution" of slavery that protects the enslaved. He also falls into a violent conflict with Nina's dissolute brother that leaves him in the care of Dred and the maroon community within the swamp, meaning that the narrative reverses the idea of white paternalism. Instead it is Clayton, now a vulnerable and disenfranchised white man, who needs the care and support of the black community. Levine observes more broadly of the novel's ending, depicting emancipated slaves in the North and Canada, that: "A

novel that begins with whites in a paternalistic relationship to seemingly child-like black slaves concludes with images of self-reliant free blacks nurturing white children" (Levine xxix). While still problematic in its limited vision of black people such as Tiff and Milly as the carers of white children, a traditional role in the slave household, they are presented as free, self-sufficient, and independent. Although tentative in her challenges to white paternalism, Stowe's portrayal of Clayton's shifting attitude towards the legal system and the development of Tiff and Milly's parental characteristics is significant in its emphasis on intellectual fluidity; that "a mind will grow and rise," whether black or white.

Whereas Cartwright's observation of an "organic nervous matter" in the brain of black people was used to suggest their inferiority, Stowe uses the undeveloped, childlike state of both the slaves and Nina to suggest an overlap in their positions. Without equalising their subject positions, Stowe suggests a connection between the white woman who finds herself at the mercy of unjust, powerful men, and the black members of the household, such as Tiff and Milly. Furthermore, Cartwright's damning diagnosis is inverted: rather than evidence to confirm dependence and thus to support enslavement, the "organic nervous matter" agitating in the brain is portrayed by Stowe as a sign of great potential. Just as the domestic novel focuses on adolescence as a critical point of self-development, and a transition to the power of a fully developed "true womanhood," Stowe envisions a race on the cusp of autonomy. In this metaphor of growth, unlike the artist viewing the progress of manifest destiny across the canvas, as seen in Cole's painting, Stowe sees an internal unfolding of potential. Represented as germane, lying like a dormant seed in the dark that will sprout when in the light, Stowe

draws on scientific discourse to create a counter-narrative to Cartwright's, suggesting an inherent, biological tendency that cannot be restricted. This organic image further inverts the artistic representation of woman or racial other as associated with the "wild" and savage, "confronting civilisation on the march" as depicted in Cole's painting.

Instead of containing a proliferation of landscape drawings and paintings, Stowe's sketchbook contains a number of closer studies, as if she rejected the panorama as an art form in favour of more detailed observations. Her sketches, *Elm at Andover* (fig. 3), *Elms and Ferns* (fig. 4) and *Untitled Landscape* (fig. 5) show much closer attention to detail, and reveal her developing observational techniques, particularly of trees and vegetation. As Georgi observes, paintings of the time that were too concerned with particularities of the natural world, giving too much attention to one element, were often dismissed from the category of landscape. The critic that critiqued an artist's paintings at the National Academy of Design rather as "portraits of two huge trees" might offer a similar reading of Stowe's sketches (232). However, read as sketches for landscapes, these become works that stand in opposition to the magisterial gaze.



Fig 3. *Elm at Andover* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.



Fig. 4 *Elms and Ferns* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.



Fig. 5 *Untitled Landscape* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

Elm at Andover and *Elms and Ferns* position the trees they depict at eye-level, with the artist and viewer looking directly ahead and up at them. In both drawings the trees dominate the foreground and middle of the composition, blocking a view of the background. *Elms and Ferns* has a high and distant horizon but little sense of middle ground, and in *Elm at Andover* the horizon is not visible at all (although the line of the ground is traced beneath both trees suggesting a definite composition rather than a rough sketch). In *Elms and Ferns*, the ferns of the foreground dominate, blocking a view of a significant part of the canvas, and drawing the viewer's attention to the detail of the plants. *Untitled Landscape* shows a more fully developed landscape sketch in this style, with the trees dominating but a more fully realised middle ground. The artist's position is raised but remains below the trees, in deference to nature, while the

only human traces in the middle ground depict small cottages nestling in the woods. The landscape beyond is blurred by the smudging of the pencil, and the sky remains blank. If we apply the principles of the magisterial gaze to these landscape sketches, Stowe has blocked out the celebration of the march of manifest destiny across the canvas. The future, the work implies, cannot be fully seen and it suggests a greater attention to the nation's past and present. This is a fore and middle ground marked by the human relationship to nature, and she depicts this as one that demands respect for nature's power and history.

Her sketch, *Untitled Tree* (Fig. 6), demonstrates this shifting attitude towards the representation of landscape further. A study of a single tree, the painting looks like a development of her *Elm at Andover* sketch. Georgi notes of mid-nineteenth century landscape painting that: "the criteria for judging the picture a success or not, or if it was in fact a landscape, centred for all parties around the issue of whether a landscape painting should dwell on the particularities of the material world" (235). The need for scientific observation clashed with the desire for an imagined vision of futurity in these works. Stowe's painting has developed from a rough sketch into a detailed painting, and yet she rejects the broader landscape altogether for a fuller close study.

The tree itself, despite being a close study, does not show a botanical attention to detail. Instead, like the drawings in her *Elms* series of sketches, the painting is shaped by a rough, dynamic energy: a proliferation of dots of paint, in almost pointillist style, suggest thick foliage hanging from shaggy branches, while the rough bark of the trunk spirals down towards a tangle of roots. Despite its place amongst her sketches of Northern elms, the tree nevertheless suggests a tropical origin in its hanging, moss-like

branches, and exposed and curling roots that recall the mangroves of swampland. The *Untitled Tree* sketch thus marks a landscape style that parallels the creation of *Dred* around this time, its untamed energy and dynamism recalling the writing of the novel itself, and the organic "force of growth" that drives the narrative.

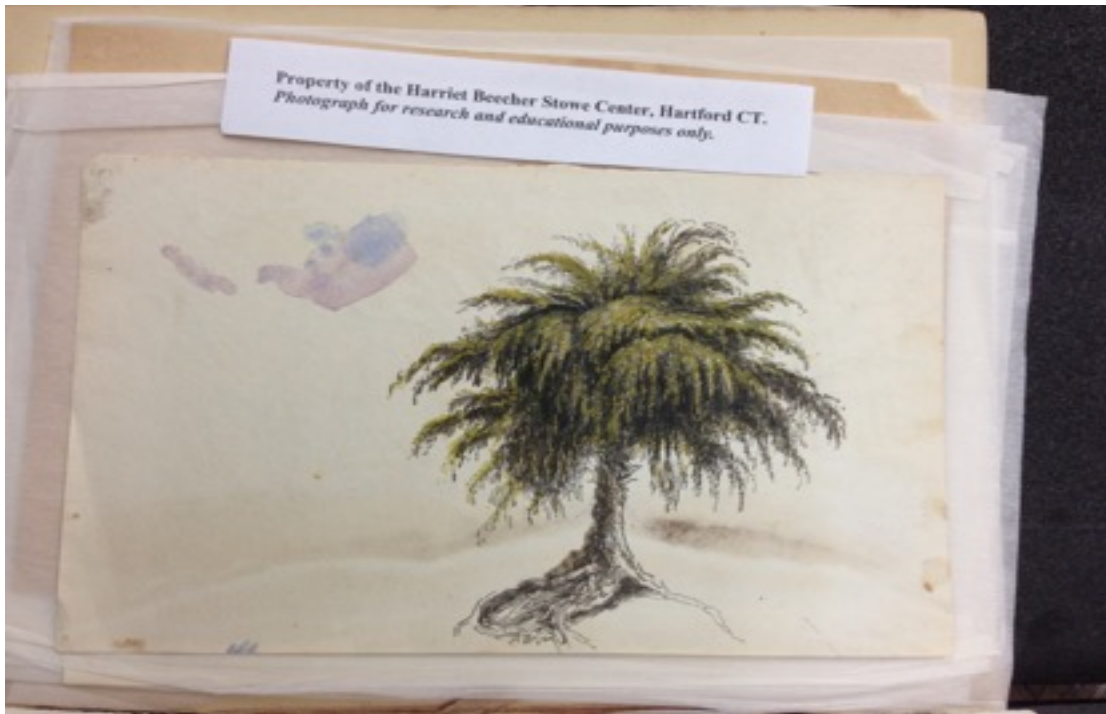


Fig. 6 *Untitled Tree* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

"The Language of the Leaves": Nature's Agency

Olmsted was mindful of his Southern readers and at pains to portray a "balanced" view of the region. Like Cartwright, he represents the black race as prone to laziness, but his position is anti-slavery because he sees slavery as an inefficient system of labour that encourages this tendency. Instead he praises situations in which slaves are offered wages but offers these as examples of an improved mode of production, rather than highlighting any inherent wrong in slavery. In his description of the Great Dismal

Swamp, the region that was of "deep interest" to Stowe, Olmsted describes his encounter with Joseph Church, a black slave who works in the swamp. Olmsted explains that most of the work to extract natural resources from the swampland is undertaken by slaves, but he comments on their motivation and trustworthiness compared to field slaves. He notes that "No force is used to overcome the indolence peculiar to the negro" and that although these enslaved people were rented from their masters, they were allowed to keep a small amount of earnings themselves (170-1). Due to their location deep in the swamp, such a slave "lives measurably as a free man" (171). In his encounter with Church, Olmsted emphasises the success of this practice: "He expressed entire contentment with his lot, but showed great unwillingness to be sold to go on to a plantation. He liked to 'mind himself,' as he did in the swamps. Whether he would still more prefer to be entirely his own master, I did not ask" (177). In Olmsted's encounter with Church, the swamp is a space of more efficient production, and the question of his freedom is circumvented; nevertheless, his mention of liberty raises the question of the immorality of slavery as a subtext to their conversation.

In his description of the escaped slaves who have run into the swamps, Olmsted demonstrates this technique further. He explains that the dismal swamps have been home to escaped slaves, but that there are far fewer of these at present because of an increase in slave-hunters with dogs. He asks Church about this: "There were people in the swamps still, he thought, that were the children of runaways, and who had been runaways themselves all their lives" (177). Church has known these men and he describes the system of support that the black slaves working in the swamp have used to help out these men who have escaped, who struggle with poverty, and a lack of food

and clothing. Despite Olmsted's belief that there can be few such slaves left, his conversation reveals the swamp's role as a space of black opposition and mutual support, as Gatta explains: "Southern swamplands set geographically on the margins of white settlements likewise became centres of black resistance during the slave and Reconstruction eras" (Gatta 176). It is Church's description that clearly inspires Stowe's representation of Dred, who is the heir of the black revolutionary, Denmark Vesey, suggesting a legacy of black rebellion. Furthermore, his relationship with fellow maroons and local black slaves confirms the idea of a continuing black solidarity within the space of the swamp. Joseph Church even describes how he "had helped to bury bodies recently dead," much as Dred is buried in the novel (177).

As Robert S. Levine has shown, in *Dred*, Stowe paid closer attention to black voices, and especially those of freed slaves and black abolitionists. In her response to Olmsted's text she shows a similar attention, in that it is Church's voice, rather than Olmsted's, to which she listens most closely. While Olmsted suggests Church's supposed contentment and observes the trustworthiness and productivity of the slaves who work in the swamp, Stowe sees beyond this to Church's description of the slaves who would rather be shot than recaptured, and to the "strange" and haunted look of the escaped slaves. This firm resistance, bravery and spirituality is echoed in the figure of Dred. Therefore, rather than the "stupified savage" watching the march of progress across the artist's canvas, or the content slave rendered part of Olmsted's assessment of the land's resources and profitability, Stowe's observation in *Dred* represents the same, close attention to detail as seen in her landscape sketches.

For Stowe, it is the primitive impulse of organic growth inside the slave that renders him or her closer to a force running through the wider natural world. Whereas Alcott imagines power in the natural world primarily as associated with the masculine, for Stowe this "natural" instinct is unequivocally feminine, further linking heroine and slave which, while limiting on the terms of both gender and race, also allows her to manipulate the codified terms of the genre in order to meet her abolitionist aims. Like the feminised voice that renders both Nina and Tiff close to the natural world, seen particularly in their ability to grow, decorate and appreciate flowers, Dred is feminised and shown as close to nature. He, too, displays traditionally feminine, domestic attributes, centred on qualities of nurturing and caring. Not only does he care for and teach the children after they arrive in the swamp, he is also trusted by the animals: "there was in him a vein of that gentleness which softens the heart towards children and the inferior animals" (558). Of course, Stowe's representation of Dred is problematic, in that for a black man, and particularly a slave, the association with the feminine typically works to emasculate and to disempower in order to remove the threat of rebellion. Nevertheless, Stowe uses the codified traits of femininity, his sensitivity and gentleness, to connect with her domestic novel readers and to justify, quite radically, the possibility of black slave revolt. Dred's femininity thus signals his higher moral character:

He was not a man of personal malignity to any human being. When he contemplated schemes of insurrection and bloodshed, he contemplated them with the calm, immovable firmness of one who felt himself an instrument of doom in a mightier hand. (558).

Finseth suggests Stowe "imagines a principle of creative destructiveness in the natural world that works to philosophically authorise slave rebellion and violence" (252).

However, Dred's acts of violence are shown to be at odds with his character, and are

thus transformed into necessary acts controlled by God, over which Dred, the man, has little influence.

Consequently, Stowe hears the black voices of the swamp that are silenced in Olmsted's text as closer to an understanding of nature, and therefore of God. As John Gatta explains: "The dread powers of God seem indeed to stand behind this character" (Gatta 178). Dred repeatedly experiences religious visions and hears voices from God, telling him what to do: "He showed me that there was a language in the leaves.... I rose and looked, and, behold, there were signs drawn on the leaves, and forms of every living thing, with strange words, which the wicked understand not, but the elect shall read them" (560). Stowe here draws from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, who "found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers" that he believed were God's message to him to initiate a rebellion, which he did in 1831 (qtd. in Gatta P176-7). In this "language of the leaves," nature is a sign of the presence of God in the physical world and, most significantly, it is only a select group of people that can read his message. In his essay on the apocalyptic message of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Kevin Pelletier explains that Stowe's representation of slaves as God's chosen people was one of her most daring statements: "For Stowe, there is nothing politically regressive about being chosen by God to inherit the earth....From her Christian point of view, in fact, this is the most radical anti-slavery gesture of all" (281). The idea of black people as the "elect" of the earth, who will be saved by God in the final day of punishment for Man's sins, is similarly seen in *Dred*. Just as Dred reads a "language of the leaves" in the swamp that is unseen by others, Stowe sees her reading of the force of

organic growth running through the slave's body as a calling to listen to the higher law of God.

Frederick Finseth further suggests *Dred* as a revision of Stowe's religious perspective: "the novel actually celebrates a spirituality that, while not exactly incompatible with orthodox Christianity, often resembles natural theology, and in certain places approaches animism or transcendentalism" (264). This reading of Stowe's radicalism can be extended to suggest a proto-ecofeminist perspective. Val Plumwood argues that power is systematised in a series of dualisms in which the subordinate part of each dualism frequently shares the categorisation of "nature": "the category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature" (4). To be identified as female or as black is thus to be associated with the savage, non-rational, and instinctual, which is shown to be inherent and unchangeable ("natural"), thereby reifying a condition of powerlessness. However, it is in her representation of *Dred* that Stowe most clearly questions this Western rationalism by disrupting the language of a binary opposition of reason/nature. She explains:

The hot and positive light of our modern materialism, which exhales from the growth of our existence every dewdrop, which searches out and dries every rivulet of romance, which sends an unsparing beam into every cool grotto of poetic possibility, withering the moss, and turning the dropping cave to a dusty den - this spirit, so remorseless, shows us no such indefinite land. There are but two words in the whole department of modern anthropology - the sane and the insane; the latter dismissed from human reckoning almost with contempt. (353)

Stowe questions the denigration of *Dred*'s spiritual visions as insanity in contrast to established institutions of religion, and she challenges the idea of "growth" as grounded in logic and reason rather than instinct and imagination. The imagery here reveals the

dominance of a rationalistic logic to be at the expense of the destruction of nature, which is imagined as a drying up, a loss of fertility, in which growth, "possibility," is stunted and destroyed. Her call is to revalue the "indefinite" land, a space she represents as shadow. Her use of the imagery of blackness is no coincidence here, and she cleverly inverts the negative associations of this space; rather it is in the dark space of "nature," both as inner instinct and as physical environment, that Stowe locates powerful possibilities for those categorised as such.

Just as Stowe demands that the reader listen to the female and black voices silenced in Olmsted and Cole's representations of the landscape, she further asks, as seen in her sketches, for a closer attention to the detail of the natural world. In her letter to Olmsted, she writes:

Of what species is the pine of which you make so great mention and of which the greater part of the Pine Forests are composed? Are the mosses and flowers which grow under them of the same species that grow in the Pine Forests in the Northern States? Did you notice that white crisp frosty-looking moss which grows on pine lands with us? --- Also the feathery green ground Pine? --- Pray what is the Cat briar of which you make so frequent mention? Is the Holly like the English? --- Have you ever seen it employed for hedges?" ("Letter to Frederick Law Olmsted").

Stowe's concern for accuracy is indicative of her desire to represent the South as convincingly as possible: a precise portrayal of the landscape would bolster the authority of her representation of slavery. However, the attention she gives to understanding the plants of the swamp is microscopic and at odds with Olmsted's observations of the land primarily as a natural resource. Olmsted describes the swamp as a "vast quagmire, the soil being entirely composed of decayed vegetable fibre, saturated and surcharged with water; yielding or *quaking* on the surface to the tread of a

man" (166). Once the local businesses have finished mining the swampland for lumber, he suggests it will be "dead property" (174). For Olmsted, the swamp is essentially a dying space, which surrenders itself to mankind's "march of progress." He reads the land "quaking" in its subservience, much as Cartwright believes "organic nervous matter" indicates a black race lacking vitality and awaiting domination.

Stowe's interest in the variety and detail of the plants of the swamp reveals a contrasting perspective. For, just as she envisions dormant minds full of potential in Nina, Dred, Harry, Milly and Tiff, she represents the swamp as a space of wild growth. She describes its:

regions of hopeless disorder, where the abundant growth and vegetation of nature, sucking up its forces from the humid soil, seems to rejoice in a savage exuberance, and bid defiance to all human effort either to penetrate or subdue. (275).

The swamp in Stowe's vision is far from Olmsted's "decayed" and "saturated"

"quagmire." As Newman observes, Stowe's swamp is both a "metaphor for social ferment" and "is also fertile, free" (25). The "quaking" that Olmsted portrays is, to Stowe, agitation rather than subservience; a force of growth that will unfurl in its rebellion against humankind's attempts to subdue and dominate it. Nature unbridled here recalls the hidden "under nature" of Nina and Dred, signifying an internal agency that exists in powerful contrast to dominant societal attempts to deny it. The "savage exuberance" of the swamp is echoed in Clayton's observations of the force of growth: "I have seen a rock split in two by the growing of an elm-tree that wanted light and air, and would make its way up through it" (586). The powerful elm breaking through the rock, and the swamp's "savage exuberance," suggest a violent force that is necessary in order to remove obstacles preventing an inevitable, natural development. Stowe therefore justifies the idea of violence where necessary, as shown previously in Dred's

divinely sanctioned acts of insurrection, and by implication supports the rebellion of the slave population in order to self-emancipate.

Stowe comes closest to a contemporary ecofeminist perspective in her extension of these principles to the swamp itself. Nature is not simply a conduit to God for the disempowered characters of the novel; through their connection to nature they come close to an understanding of its own, autonomous agency. Thus Tiff listens to the forest: "No sound was heard but the shivering wind, swaying and surging in melancholy cadences through the long pineleaves, - a lonesome, wailing, uncertain sound" (125). While on her walk, Nina notes that "the flowers really seemed alive; it seemed as though I could hear them breathing, and hear their hearts beating like mine" (149). Through the wailing wind and breathing flowers Stowe observes the independent existence of the land of the swamp. Paul Outka observes:

While nature is as heavily textualized and invested a term as there is in the language, that does not mean that its referent is simply a human linguistic projection. Nature also does not *mean* anything; its importance for humans lies in part in the way it unmakes our constructions. (19).

Stowe's depiction of the independent presence of the wind, flowers and "savage exuberance" of the swamp "unmakes" Olmsted's construction of the swamp as a resource for human profit. Moreover, Stowe suggests a power in nature that exceeds that of humans. During the cholera epidemic, she tells us: "the birds sang on as they ever sing, unterrified by the great wail of human sorrow" (636). Far from Olmsted's depiction of the land as on the verge of becoming "dead property," Stowe suggests the Great Dismal Swamp as indifferent to human intervention: a space that will endure.

In her depiction of the landscape of the Great Dismal Swamp, Stowe repositions that beyond human control, the "abundant growth and vegetation," from the foreground

frame of the magisterial gaze to replace its pastoral centre. Nina explains to Clayton that her mother, having travelled in England and admired the hedges there, brought American holly from the woods and set it up as part of the grounds at Canema but "You see it all grows wild now" (162), and images of the holly in its natural state recur in the swamp (275). Here Stowe rejects the European pastoral as seen in the cultivated holly, used as a garden border, associating it with an anti-revolutionary sentiment and an aspiration to Englishness. The American holly, Stowe suggests, is intended to be wild and will revert to a principle of freedom that sets it apart from those plants found in English soil. Similarly, Dred explains to Harry why he rejects a life within the slave household:

You sleep in a curtained bed. - I sleep on the ground, in the swamps! You eat the fat of the land. I have what the ravens bring me! But no man whips me! - no man touches my wife! - no man says to me, 'Why do ye so?' Go! you are a slave! - I am free! (263).

Like the holly, Dred refuses to participate in a culture based on the values of a privileged elite, and instead returns to a state of wildness in the woods. As Mary Kuhn suggests: "the theories of plant growth and vitality she engages refute the strict classification and cultivation practices associated with slavery, disrupting the logic used to segregate humans from each other and from the environment" (490). Stowe further suggests the "force of growth" found in heroine, slave, and swamp as an impulse towards a freedom that is quintessentially American, radically rewriting the terms of national identity.

In moving the wild elements of the swamp to the centre of her landscape study, Stowe challenges the magisterial gaze that framed an understanding of the natural world in nineteenth century American art. She replaces the "march of progress" with the

principle of moral development that was intrinsic to the domestic novel genre, and positions this at the centre of her composition. Those previously at the margins of the visualisation of the American landscape, the savage and undeveloped, are brought from the shadows, and repositioned by emphasising their potential for growth.

However, in suggesting the connection between heroine, slave, and swamp, Stowe falls into the trap of what Plumwood terms "uncritical reversal", treating difference "not as constructed within a power relation but as a given, and as problematic only to the extent that it is inferiorised, not adequately recognised, or not authentic" (62). Just as landscape art functioned on a series of dualisms of civilisation/nature, male/female, white/black, Stowe reverses this approach, privileging that which has previously been subordinated. This is problematic because in maintaining the connection of heroine and slave to nature, she furthers the definition of their gender and race as biologically grounded. A woman's potential to assume power, therefore, is limited by her "natural" biological inferiority (so Nina dies from cholera despite successfully managing the plantation through the epidemic), and the slave's potential to live a free existence in the South remains limited by his "natural" racial intellectual inferiority (so, although free, Tiff remains a servant). Similarly, in tying moral authority to an "undeveloped" state, their full growth to power becomes problematic because it relies on a lack of growth and development, which runs counter to the coming-of-age concerns of the narrative.

Nevertheless, reading *Dred* as a domestic novel reveals Stowe's radicalism, which was both to revision the representation of landscape and to see dynamic possibilities for development and autonomy for both the white heroine and the

disempowered black slaves. Clayton's words in the novel might well have been spoken by Stowe herself: "I reverence people as I do the woods, for the wild, grand freedom with which their humanity develops itself" (329). The radicalism of *Dred* may be seen in its own potential for "growth": in the seeds of ecofeminist theory that will germinate in writers in the following century. In Chapter 3, I examine the extension of these principles to the contemporary ecodomestic novel. Morrison is similarly interested in the intersectional connections of race, gender and natural world but, unlike Stowe, she exposes and challenges their human construction.

Chapter 3: Taking Root: the Search for a Home in the Landscape of American Reconstruction in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, Sethe summarises the challenges of her life in America during Reconstruction as twofold: "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house" (15). The "tree" on her back is the deeply branching scar left by the lashing she endured before she escaped slavery, while the "haint" in her house is the ghost of the daughter she killed to prevent her recapture. Like other freed people following emancipation, Sethe wants there to be: "No more running - from nothing" (15). Sethe's words underline the challenges of living with the physical and psychological memories of slavery, but also of the need to heal the scars and exorcise the ghosts of the past in order for African-Americans to establish a home on the American land. *Beloved* is thus a text concerned with the question of home both conceptually and spatially: to find a sense of home that can be reconciled with the memories of slavery and can be shaped from the American landscape.

The juxtaposition of the image of the haunted house with the tree-shaped scar suggests the enormity of the struggle to create a home, both while haunted by the memories of slavery and in a landscape which has been constructed by white people, and violently inscribed upon the black body. In *Landscape and Memory*, historian Simon Schama observes: "Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock" (61). Schama exposes the way that our received images of the land are culturally and historically situated, and Morrison is similarly concerned with calling into question an image of the American landscape as universally experienced and understood. The tree on Sethe's back is a

symbol of a landscape that has been drawn by a white master at the cost of the black body. As Paul Outka suggests: "Whipping is a form of nature writing, like the tree it inscribes on Sethe's back in Morrison's *Beloved*, both the construction and instantiation of a violent and wholly instrumentalist view of the natural world, and the conflation of black people with that instantiated construction" (69). The nineteenth century image of the Southern landscape, whether as plantation, as agrarian estate, or as space of leisure, was a white construct created through the real enslaved labour and abuse of black people. In *Beloved*, Morrison suggests that the white vision of the American landscape, like the tree on Sethe's back, is rendered inaccessible and permanently scarred for black people because it is an image that relies on their subjugation. The challenge for African Americans is to access their own imagined space in nature, to find a place of belonging in a landscape which has been constructed from a position of white privilege that excludes the lived experience of slavery.

Thus, just as Sethe's life during Reconstruction is dominated by her tree-shaped scar and haunted house, *Beloved* is focused on these two central challenges during slavery: defining and making a home, and the deconstruction of and reorientation to the American landscape necessary to achieve this. Like Alcott and Stowe, Morrison seeks to challenge a patriarchal construction of nature, rooted in ideals of sublimity and domination. However, she extends this to consider not just the gendered but also the racial control of the American land through its artistic representation. In this chapter I read *Beloved* as a pivotal novel in the domestic tradition, which in its work to consciously revise its nineteenth century predecessors, marks an important shift in the genre's contemporary incarnation. Whereas Stowe and Alcott were instrumental in creating and defining the domestic novel, and used its conventions to engage with and

to challenge patriarchal ideologies of power, Morrison challenges the terms of the genre itself.

Critics are increasingly interested in the intertextuality of *Beloved*; as Carl Malmgren explains, the novel is: "part ghost story, part historical novel, part slave narrative, part love story" (96). The multiplicity of sources from which the text draws has made its genre challenging to locate, rendering its narrative "unusually hybridized" (96). While I agree with Malmgren that "it is the institution of slavery that supplies the logic underwriting the novel," these seemingly disparate genres are less fragmented than they might initially seem (96). Reading *Beloved* within the tradition of the nineteenth century domestic novel, which frequently drew from other texts, including historical events, the lives of public figures, religious sermons, political pamphlets, sensational and melodramatic traditions, helps to explain the varied influences in the text. Using the true story of Margaret Garner as well as tropes of gothic fiction, the novel draws on the tradition in order to reconstruct the historical narrative of slavery, as related at the time by the white female voices of domestic novelists.

Structurally the text also fits the domestic novel genre: the centrality of its female characters and focus on the household; the spatial significance of the structure of the house; and the coming of age of a young girl. As a contemporary text, it deconstructs and refashions the narrative, so the coming of age story is refracted into three central strands that work concurrently: the present day story of Denver's growth to womanhood, the remembered story of Sethe's journey into adulthood, and that of the ghostly figure of Beloved. In the tradition of the genre, Morrison's text unites the search to find a home with a journey to adulthood that addresses a significant moral

issue: the three women of the text must attempt the journey to female maturity in a land marked by slavery. The affective and didactic elements of *Beloved* are central both to the growth of the characters and the reader, making this a moral text, concerned with exposing the deep wrongs of slavery. It confronts these wrongs as committed by white masters and mistresses, but it also addresses African-American guilt over complicity in the violent system of slavery, what Malmgren refers to as "the ethical heart of the novel" (101). This is seen in the way the text confronts the act of infanticide committed by Sethe, in the witnessing of acts of cruelty inflicted on others, and in the wider community's failure to protect Sethe's family from the arrival of schoolteacher. Like the domestic novels of the nineteenth century, Morrison's text follows the spiritual development of both its central heroine(s) and, by implication, the reader.

As Jane Smiley observes, in *Beloved*, Morrison is the "heir" to abolitionist writers in her unflinching representation of the horrors of slavery, while she simultaneously works to retell that story and: "to separate her own telling from that of earlier writers, especially Harriet Beecher Stowe" (2; 22). *Beloved* extends the abolitionist thought central to Stowe's work, but also critiques and rewrites that narrative. Morrison thus reconstructs the tradition of women's writing, which, as seen both in Stowe's work and the pro-slavery responses that followed its publication, was one of the most widespread literary sources for framing both the warped logic of slavery and the context for its abolition. Written in 1987, *Beloved* was created in a period of increasing African American intellectual concern with understanding and rediscovering the past, particularly in the context of slavery.¹⁴ Emerging from this context, the novel

¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr, for example, rediscovered and republished *Our Nig* in 1983. (Foreman xxvii).

can be read as a text concerned with locating a nineteenth century African American narrative voice, as Morrison reconstructs the black female voices that were central, and yet silenced, in the creation of the American home in the mid-nineteenth century.

Beloved is thus what Henry Louis Gates Jr terms "double-voiced," in that it draws from both the white and black traditions in order to repeat and revise the narrative of slavery, a process of wider importance to black artistic form in challenging the white construction of black history (Gates xxiii, xxiv).

Morrison sets the present and forward action of the novel in 1873, just over half way through the period of Reconstruction, which lies at the centre of the novel, both as historical period, and also as the psychological process of reimagining the traumatic past of slavery in order to reconstruct a place of belonging for African Americans in late twentieth century America. Kristin Jacobson, one of the few critics to read the text as a domestic novel, suggests *Beloved* as a text of restructure, a "remodelling" in which the spatial renovations within the text simultaneously represent a symbolic restructuring of the American family (78). Her reading of *Paradise* is helpful to my reading here but I extend this: to "remodel" is to change the form or structure of something, whereas to "reconstruct" is not simply to organise differently, but to rebuild, especially "following damage or destruction" and thus also suggests the narrative process of rebuilding that which hasn't been witnessed first hand (*OED*). My reading returns to the foundations of the domestic novel: the nineteenth century novel as source, and also moves to consider the African American home in the broader context of the landscape. In this chapter, I argue for Morrison's novel to be read as a novel of multilayered reconstruction following the damage of slavery: of domesticity, of Romanticism, and of the historical

period of Reconstruction, in order to reimagine an African American home based on an alternative relationship to the natural world.

Home Sweet Home: Reconstruction and the White Domestic Ideal

Morrison's critique of the white domestic ideal is seen most clearly in *Beloved* in her representation of the slave estate of Sweet Home, which is a direct reference to the white family home at the centre of the plantation novel, as well as the middle class home found more widely in the domestic novel. Morrison's representation of Sweet Home engages with both the anti and pro-slavery domestic novel depictions of the plantation house in order to interrogate the white concept of home and to lay the foundations for her exploration of an African American home during Reconstruction.

The estate's name immediately refers to the domestic ideal that was central to white nineteenth century popular culture, drawing on the well-known phrase "Home Sweet Home." This comes from a popular song written by the American, John Howard Payne as part of an opera, *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*, in 1823; the song was originally generally known as "Sweet Home" (Coulter 334). In the opera, Clari comes to the court from the country, promised marriage by the Duke, but is instead confined there. The song's lyrics explore the concept of home:

'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere.
Home! Home, sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home! There's no place like home! (Payne 13).

The song contrasts the grandeur and comfort of the palace with the simple pleasure of a humble life with family. Court life for Clari is hollow and empty because she is not

free; this seemingly privileged existence cannot compare to a life in the security and comfort of her family home with her mother and father. As Bridget Bennett explains, "Home Sweet Home," although the most famous, was typical of a number of "home songs" popular in the period; in particular, "home songs were important within the racial melodramas staged in the mid-nineteenth century and many of those songs are voiced by sorrowing slaves" (175). Bennett gives the example of "My Old Kentucky Home," which appeared in productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and was sung by Tom, but songs of a simple, "happy" home also appear in the domestic novel, such as Lisette's song in *Dred* (175; 94).¹⁵ Lisette contrasts the home life of the corrupt white master with her simple life as a slave: "He sleep all day, he wake all night;/He full of care, his heart no light. . . . Me work all day, me sleep all night;/Me have no care, me heart is light" (94). Although Stowe proceeds to expose the fragility of Lisette's happiness while she is subject to the ownership of an unstable master, she draws on a similar ideal of home as in "Home Sweet Home": of a space of simplicity and virtue against a space of corruption. Morrison's reference to the "Home Sweet Home" song, through the use of its title, draws on and simultaneously complicates this traditional juxtaposition. *Beloved* extends the idea of a false freedom set against the promise of a simple family home, while simultaneously challenging the idea of a stable family home for African Americans within the system of slavery and its legacy.

In *Beloved*, Sweet Home represents the captivity of the palace through the idealised depiction of the grand house of the slave owner that was central to the domestic novels set in the South. Pro-slavery domestic novels, such as *Aunt Phillis's*

¹⁵ "What are the Joys of White Man?: Lisette's Song" was also set to music as a popular song, again showing the shifting translation of ideals of home between different popular cultural forms (Lancelott).

Cabin by Mary Eastman, *The Lofty and the Lowly* by Maria McIntosh, and *The Planter's Northern Bride* by Caroline Lee Hentz, typically adopted a stance of paternalism, arguing for slavery as necessary in order to protect and educate a race that was presented as child-like. Thus in *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, Uncle Bacchus needs the oversight of his benevolent master, Mr Weston, to ensure his alcoholism is kept in check, and Aunt Peggy is not expected to undertake any slave duties because of her age. Domesticity played a key part in this argument, with the household situated as a critical site in the production of methods of child-rearing and moral education, which were transferred to the slaves of the estate. Just as Nina teaches Tiff to read in *Dred*, Alice teaches Cato to read in *The Lofty and the Lowly* and he pays attention with "the docility of a little child" (McIntosh 208). In her preface to *The Planters Northern Bride*, Hentz claims firsthand knowledge of the supposedly content plantation home for slaves: "we have almost invariably been delighted and affected by their humble devotion to their master's family, their child-like affectionate reliance on their care and protection, and above all, with their general cheerfulness" (vi-vii). The plantation, Hentz suggests, provides a "home," in which slaves can be happy and secure, and so to free slaves is therefore both irresponsible and a neglect of duty. Her use of the term "almost" here obscures the actual abuse of black people and their repeated efforts to escape slavery, and is a qualifying term Morrison will reference later.

Jewell Parker Rhodes suggests that, in *Beloved*, the Garners attempt to establish Sweet Home as a utopian society (77), but the image of the paternalistic, "happy" slave plantation was used in both pro and anti slavery domestic novels to represent a typical, rather than idealistic, representation of a successful plantation. Just as the pro-slavery writers used the paternalistic, happy home to demonstrate the supposed domestic

success of the institution of slavery, anti-slavery writers, such as Stowe, used the same image to argue for abolition. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the little boy, Harry "has a certain comic air of assurance. . . , [which] showed that he had not been unused to being petted and noticed by his master," and Mr Shelby is presented as "a humane man," but Stowe shows that this still does not prevent the sale of this child away from his mother (44, 46). Thus the most well-cared for slaves, in "good homes," are shown to be at the mercy of their masters' fortunes. Just as in the song Clari longs to return to her parents, Stowe emphasises the importance of family as the centre of the home: the need for people who are enslaved, such as George, Eliza and Harry, to establish their own families and a domestic life apart from the master's household. Through her depiction of Sweet Home, therefore, Morrison can be seen to challenge the idealistic Southern home of the pro-slavery novel, but she does so using a technique that also extends the logic of the anti-slavery domestic novel.

In *Beloved*, at Sweet Home, Mrs Garner represents the middle class, white domestic angel, kind and motherly, presiding over the household. She adopts the maternal role central to the pro- and anti-slavery narratives of domesticity, in which motherhood is a metaphor for a benign and civilising power. She presides over a "family" of domesticated and well-behaved slaves, much like Mrs Weston and Cousin Janet in *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*,: "instructing the young female servants in knitting and sewing, and in such household duties as would make them useful in that state of life in which it had pleased God to place them" (Eastman 28). Like Mrs Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who "would as soon have one of my own children sold" than see Harry sold away from Eliza, it is Mrs Garner's maternal understanding that allows her to sympathise with the families torn apart by the system of slavery, and to identify this is

as uncivilised. However, as Rhodes points out, in *Beloved*, Mrs Garner's "nurturing, motherly role is false" for she is complicit in Sethe's enslavement (86). Sethe recalls seeing Mrs Garner shortly before she escapes from Sweet Home: "She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears" (16-17). The cancerous lump in Mrs Garner's throat symbolises her silent role in the household dependent on slavery, as well as the impotence of her empathy; she cries for Sethe but takes no practical action to help her, and is also silenced by schoolteacher. Through the character of Mrs Garner, Morrison exposes the pro-slavery novel's false representation of a benevolent maternalism, which worked to obscure the horrors of slavery while both supporting and reinscribing its structure. However, the character simultaneously attacks the benevolent, white, middle-class mother at the centre of the anti-slavery novel, acknowledging her lack of power, but also critiquing her for an abolitionism that did not go far enough to free enslaved African-Americans, and for failing to take practical action against slavery.

At the heart of the domestic plantation novel are white Southern ideals of both femininity and masculinity, and Morrison's text critiques and exposes these codified gender roles. Just as she deconstructs the shared model of motherhood central to both pro- and anti-slavery novels, she also strips away the façade of the "Southern gentleman." In both the pro-and anti-slavery domestic novel, white masculinity is presented as a biologically inherent, 'natural' ability to lead, and black masculinity is used as a foil to highlight this. In Hentz's novel, Albert professes he will refuse the opportunity to "set up for a gentleman" in the North in order to remain loyal to his master, Mr Moreland (15). He thus demonstrates the ideal of pro-slavery black masculinity: the deference of black manliness to white, and, as Sarah N. Roth explains,

his continued submission to his master's needs "emphasiz[es] the supposedly natural superiority of whites over even the most masculine of black men" (153). In this representation of black and white masculinity, she suggests: "anti-Tom authors once again took a cue from Stowe, crafting dark-skinned male characters who existed primarily to highlight the superior status of genteel whites" (153). In Stowe's novels, white masculinity similarly marks an innate ability to take command. In *Dred*, Harry, a mixed-race slave and Nina's half brother, is shown as superior to the degenerate Tom Gordon, her white brother. However, Harry's masculinity also emphasises Clayton's nobility: it is Clayton who has the money and power to offer to buy Harry's wife Lisette's freedom. The model of masculinity remains almost identical in the heroes of these anti- and pro-slavery novels, marked out by their white superiority, emphasised through a subservient black masculinity.

In *Beloved*, Garner, like his wife, is shown to adopt a carefully constructed gender position; he presents himself as a refined, well-educated and thoughtful 'gentleman.' Furthermore, he extends this masculine identity to his male slaves, known throughout the region as "Sweet Home Men." Garner's paternalism is built on both pro- and anti-slavery domestic novel conventions. His plantation is established to fulfil the ideal of the 'happy slave' household, guided under the tutelage of a seemingly superior, refined gentleman, who inducts his slaves into the codified world of masculinity that is epitomised by his own example. This is a supposedly paternalistic and refined masculinity that acts as a civilising model to quell violent revolt through self-discipline. In this model there is a fundamental paradox, for the definition of a man is to be in control, and yet it is Garner who controls and defines what it means to be a man for the black slaves at *Sweet Home*. Jewell Parker Rhodes explains: "Even within the context of

Garner's slave state, there was never truly a Sweet Home man. There was no black home to protect, no black wife that was not subject of the legal right of Garner to violate her, nor was there ever a guarantee that a Sweet Home man could provide his children with any sustenance beyond what Garner would allow" (89). The domestic sphere in which these gender roles are defined does not exist for the slaves of Sweet Home. Paul D is referred to as a Sweet Home "man," but his masculinity is revealed as a form of role play; his actual power in the household is non-existent and he is rendered a possession, an extension of the house, itself.

In *Beloved*, the refinement of the southern gentleman is said to be epitomised in schoolteacher and his nephews, who are praised for their "pretty manners." However, Morrison undercuts the idea of their cultured masculinity by revealing the violent reality of their treatment of the slaves of Sweet Home. In schoolteacher, who shows the refinement of a good education, she shows a cold desire to measure and categorise black people that lacks all sense of humanity, and the "pretty manners" of schoolteacher's nephews thinly mask a barbarism and violence that undermines the conception of their refinement. The Garners' ownership, domination, and exploitation of their slaves is obscured by a facade of domestic idealism. The codified gender roles of the house are adopted by all, from the slaves learning to be "men," to the southern gentlemanly "pretty manners" of schoolteacher's nephews, and Mrs Garner's screen of sentimentality concealing her complicity in the trading of human lives. As in the "Home Sweet Home" song, in which the "splendor" of the palace turns out to "dazzle in vain," it becomes increasingly obvious that the Garner's estate is a place without freedom. Sweet Home is thus an ironic play on the well-known sentimental image of domesticity because Sethe

and Paul D's memories contradict its named designation as a place of refuge and belonging: they remember that "It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (14).

Set against the palace in the song is the home of the cottage for which Clari longs, and in *Beloved*, the house at 124 stands as the search for an African American "Home Sweet Home" in Reconstruction, following departure from the false "Sweet Home" of the slave estate. 124 is located in Ohio, which was not a confederate state that had to be readmitted to the union. However, in situating the house in a liminal position on the border of the South, Morrison emphasises that this history cannot be neatly divided in geographic terms, instead revealing the fluidity of the boundaries of home for African Americans during this period. Freed and escaped slaves moved across state lines and back, from the country to the city, and also returned to slave estates in the search to locate their divided families and find economic stability (O'Donovan 161). Setting the Reconstruction era house of the narrative outside the confederacy suggests an environment in which this black family has an opportunity to create a home free from the conditions of slavery, thus emphasising further the extent of the challenge to do so.

The struggle of Sethe and her family to make a home is representative of a much wider concern of African Americans during the period of Reconstruction. In *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*, Susan O'Donovan notes that in an early petition in 1865, a group of freed slaves from the South Carolina sea islands asserted their primary goal: "we want Homesteads" (4). As Stewart observes: "Property was not simply wealth, but represented a measure of security and something that was their own" (Stewart 14). This desire to own one's own land in order to make a home and self-sufficient life was shared by many freed slaves, and was a high priority in the transition from a system that had

taught a fundamental connection between self-possession and the ownership of land (Smith 19; O'Donovan 6). Moreover, there were increasing numbers of homeless black people in the period of Reconstruction as freed slaves left estates or were deprived of opportunities for work to support themselves. O'Donovan notes that black women were disproportionately affected in the change in labour systems during the period as estate and plantation owners increasingly "privileged the fit over the fertile," favouring male labour rather than the female reproductive labour that had been used by slave owners to increase their property; women were thus increasingly forced to leave their cabins on slave estates (O'Donovan 161). Ironically, then, as both the necessity and desire for one's own home increased following emancipation, conversely the possibilities of doing so remained severely limited. In their house at 124, Sethe and Baby Suggs represent the black desire during Reconstruction for property and, as women of the time, they are particularly fortunate to inhabit this space. Critically, Halle has found the house for his mother, Baby Suggs, although this space is rented from white owners, the Bodwins. This has also come at the cost of Halle's life who, unable to purchase his own freedom, is murdered as he attempts to escape. Despite his loss, as with *Sweet Home*, Morrison examines 124 as an idealised domestic space: the black "Home Sweet Home" of the Reconstruction era.

124 represents a life after escape, a domestic space that should offer the family the security for which they have searched, but in the house is the "haint," the ghost of the past: Sethe's murder of her daughter to save her from slavery. The exorcism of the ghost at the start of the novel, however, and the apparent return of Beloved in human form, marks the possibility of the reconstruction of the family at the heart of the domestic ideal. Sethe withdraws into 124 with Beloved and Denver, announcing: "there

is no world outside my door" (184). In this withdrawal from the outside world, the women of 124 mirror the middle class, white domestic ideal for women within the private sphere of the single family house, and Sethe works hard to recreate this domestic model with her two daughters. In the tradition of the domestic novel, she expresses her guilt and repentance, earnest tears of regret are shed, she bakes and sews for her daughters, indulging them with treats and beautiful clothes. Here her attempts to establish a home with her daughters at 124 mirror the construction of the domestic ideal of Sweet Home, her emphasis on an exaggerated feminine ideal of pretty dresses, sweets, and decorative adornments belying the darker reality of their situation.

O'Donovan explains how the conditions of Reconstruction could not be separated from the conditions of slavery because for freed people: "what they managed to create was conditioned by what they had been, what they had done, and what they had endured in the past" (4). Morrison similarly shows the extension of the terms of domesticity from the period of slavery to the black Reconstruction home at 124: although in a far less oppressive and violent form, she depicts Sethe attempting to replicate the gendered and social roles of the Garner family of Sweet Home. Sethe tries to recreate the "domestic individualism" of the nineteenth century imagination, which Gillian Brown describes as "an always identifiable place and refuge for the individual...the private domain of individuality apart from the marketplace" (3). Sethe upholds a facade of domestic happiness with Beloved in an attempt to fulfil the perfect maternal role, but it is Denver who reveals the reality of the situation at 124: "She saw themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out" (243). The beautiful clothes Sethe has sewn hang from malnourished bodies, and Denver sees the dangers of living this single family, closed-in existence,

built on guilt about the past and a denial of the realities of the present. Morrison thus critiques the insular family unit, disconnected from history, politics, and community, emphasising the dangers of establishing this as a model for African Americans to emulate in the struggle to define and establish a concept of home.

This critique is aimed directly at the domestic novel genre, both in its role in reinforcing ideals of femininity and conformity, and also in its more radical form, in the construction of the home as a separate space of female power. Thus, just as Sethe's baking and sewing projects fail to obscure the family's actual socioeconomic disempowerment, Morrison calls into question the retreat to the interiority of the home as a move towards female autonomy: "When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds. Almost" (199). Like Ellen in her closet in *The Wide, Wide World*, or Jo and her sisters in *Little Women*, Sethe and her daughters seem to have found an interior domestic space in which they can be themselves, make their own decisions, and discover their independent voices. However, here Morrison returns to the qualifier Hentz uses to obscure the discontent and abuse of slaves: the final word, "Almost," reveals this portrayal of the sentimental domestic model as ironic, suggesting this as a world that is neither accessible for black women nor a space that exists beyond fiction.

Sethe, Denver and Beloved are only "almost" free in their newly created, interior domestic sphere because beyond their mingled voices remain "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199). These are the memories of the horrors of slavery that, as Morrison shows, cannot be so easily exorcised from the black home. 124 is haunted by the ghost of Beloved, in spirit and then human form, but Morrison shows us that Sethe's violent act is not a single, isolated incident within the home of escaped slaves. The men who

have come to recapture Sethe and her child recall the search for other slaves:

"sometimes, you could never tell, you'd find them folded up tight somewhere: beneath floorboards, in a pantry - once in a chimney" (148). The pursuit of escaped slaves, particularly with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act meant that the threat of white intrusion into the black home was constant, and this fear continues to haunt Sethe into the period of Reconstruction, as she sees Bodwin in front of her house at the end of the novel. The image of those hiding in the very fabric of the house to prevent recapture suggests, powerfully, both a model of domesticity built on the obscured foundations of black abuse, and also the intense vulnerability of the black home, which offered no space that was truly safe from white violation.

This image of the free black house is far from representing the security, privacy and comfort of the white "home." Thus 124, which seemed as if it would be the true "sweet home" of the text, actually also resembles the palace which confines Clari in the song, for this, too, is a space without freedom. The powerful and corrupt terms of captivity established in the palace of the song are shown to shape the conditions of the "sweet home" of the village. In her combined critique of both the nineteenth century song and the pro and anti-slavery domestic novel, Morrison suggests a culture of American domesticity that perpetuated the exclusion of African Americans as they entered the period of Reconstruction, which was to mark a critical stage in the establishment of the African American home. For Sethe and her daughters, the domestic sphere offers little real escape or security from the system of slavery that preceded emancipation because many of the conditions of that period persist. As O'Donovan observes:

The end of the Civil War must not be confused with the end of slavery. Nor should emancipation be understood as imbuing freedom with meaning....it would become abundantly clear to the South's former slaves that the freedoms they sought could not be untangled from the lives that lay behind them. (111).

The domestic experiences of slavery can thus be seen to extend into the period of Reconstruction and beyond for African Americans, continuing to shape and define the black Reconstruction era home. Morrison is highly critical of the single-family home as a separate sphere, revealing this as a white construct, and in *Beloved*, as I will show, she calls for an alternative black domesticity that will reimagine the relationship to the external world.

Reconstructing Romanticism and Transcendentalism

For former slaves, at the heart of the project to establish an African American home in the period of Reconstruction, as explained earlier, was the desire for property and this was intrinsically connected to the settlement of the land. As W.E.B. Du Bois observes, this hope also quickly turned to disillusionment: "The vision of 'forty acres and a mule' - the righteous and reasonable ambition to become a landholder, which the nation had all but categorically promised the freedmen - was destined in most cases to bitter disappointment" (56). Finding a relationship to the land based on free choice, rather than as forced labourer or fugitive, however, was critical in the transition to freedom. In *Beloved*, Morrison explores this question of how freed slaves sought to imagine the landscape when it had been shaped through enforced black labour, and stresses this as a critical stage in the creation of the African American home. As with the struggle to transform the relationship to indoor space, she exposes the way that forging a new

understanding of the natural environment continued to be shaped by the conditions of slavery.

Images of the landscape pervade *Beloved* and, like Sethe's tree-shaped scar, form a central motif alongside that of the haunted house. Critics such as Martin Bidney and Mark Sandy have read these representations of the landscape in the novel primarily in relation to the literary tradition of Romanticism. Bidney notes a pattern of recurring motifs from Keats, Blake, and particularly from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, while Sandy reads the influence of Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage." Both critics read an implicit dissatisfaction with a unified vision of the natural world in these Romantic texts, and particularly in Wordsworth's writing, which challenges a cohesive and unilateral reading of the landscape, and they see this as extended by Morrison in *Beloved*.

Both critics thus argue that Morrison reshapes British Romanticism (into an anti-pastoral vision for Sandy, and a communitarian vision of the natural world for Bidney). While I will return to these theories of a competing discourse of landscape in Morrison's work, their root in Romanticism is problematic. These arguments rest on the idea that she extends and transforms an understanding of the landscape that is shared; thus, for Sandy: "Morrison's meditation on the ruins of house and home is part of Wordsworth's Romantic legacy" (40), while for Bidney, in one such example, Keats's vision of the Grecian urn is paralleled with Sethe's memories of Sweet Home. Despite revealing Morrison's challenge to a unified understanding of nature, this reading is problematic because it implicitly equates a white, European, and privileged subject position with the violently enforced limits of slavery, thus obscuring the conditions of Sethe's oppression. However similar in challenging the terms of the human relationship to the natural world, there is a vast difference between the leisurely reflection on the urn and the

traumatic flashbacks to the slave estate. Furthermore, this reading enfolds Morrison's writing, particularly about the instability of the home in relation to nature, into a primarily male literary tradition, ignoring Morrison's engagement with female domestic narratives.

In fact, Morrison's most explicit references to male literary conceptions of the landscape are to the writers of Transcendentalism which, while rooted in European Romanticism, mark the foundations of canonical American literary thought about the natural environment. Her explorations of Transcendentalism are seen most clearly in Paul D's memories of his flight from Sweet Home, and his engagement with the natural world beyond the estate. In Alfred, Georgia, he allows himself to love the tiniest creatures around him: "Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn't do" (162). Morrison here echoes some significant images of nature from American Transcendentalism: referencing Walt Whitman's opening observations of grass blades in "Song of Myself" and Henry David Thoreau's close description of ants in battle in *Walden*, as Alcott does in *Moods*.

When a child asks Whitman "What is the grass?" (99), his reflections lead him to contemplate a shared humanity, united by a universal experience of nature:

it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same,
I receive them the same.
And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves. (107-110).

All races, he suggests, are united by the shared and inevitable experience of human death, while nature, like the sprouting grass, continues to grow. In its perpetuity, the grass does not distinguish between the wealthy, spacious environment, a "broad zone," or a poor one. Watching the ants in battle, Thoreau similarly equates the large black

ants and the smaller red ants: unable to interpret their reasons for fighting, their colour and visual appearance become unimportant, while he becomes involved in observing them "as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference" (207). Equating the ants with humans emphasises the triviality of human war: fighting over differences that become meaningless in the broader scale of nature and span of history. Whitman and Thoreau thus use their descriptions of the close detail of nature to expound an argument, conversely, for its vastness: the blade the signifier for a sea of continually growing grass, just as the ants are individuals in a broader battle. Conversely, human experience shrinks in the context of nature's enormity, erasing difference in the face of a shared humanity and as only small components of a larger natural world.

However, Paul D's observations disrupt both the idea of the insignificance of human difference in the face of nature, and of a common experience of nature shared by all. Just as Sethe's memories of Sweet Home are far from a leisurely observation of a Grecian urn, his are not a Whitmanesque loafe, or a Thoreau-like retreat to the woods for a moment of relaxation, contemplation, and philosophical awe. The ants and grass blades, this tiny portion of nature, is all he dares to love, all he is allowed to love, in the underground prison from which he emerges each morning to physical and sexual abuse. Paul D's descriptions of the natural world stand as a reminder of the way his own freedom is denied, of the inhumanity of his own existence. He dreams: "to get to a place where you could love anything you chose - not to need permission for desire - well now, that was freedom" (163). Morrison thereby exposes the critical importance of subjectivity in landscape description, suggesting that the artistic construction of scale, of a natural world so broad as to embrace all and erase human difference, is only possible

within the conditions of freedom. For African Americans during slavery, the conditions marked by difference mattered enormously, meaning the very ability to roam in and observe the natural environment was severely and dangerously restricted.

Set against Paul D's snatched observations of nature, in which it takes all his courage to look at and love the smallest fragments of the natural world, is what Sethe describes as the "righteous Look" of white people: "Like a flag hoisted, this righteousness telegraphed and announced the faggot, the whip, the fist, the lie, long before it went public" (157). Reminiscent of the "magisterial gaze," this is a sweeping, piercing look of domination, which renders black people part of a landscape owned and controlled by white masters. Rather than the sign of a divinely sanctioned authority, as portrayed in landscape paintings of the nineteenth century, the "Look" has an opposing symbolism to the black community. This gaze does not signify a passive observation, such as the artist's detached rendering of the landscape in paint, but a construction of the American landscape that is intrinsically reliant on a violent inscription upon the black body ("the faggot, the whip, the fist"). Paul D recalls:

Listening to the doves in Alfred, Georgia, and having neither the right nor the permission to enjoy it because in that place of mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon - everything belonged to the men who had the guns.... And these 'men' who made even vixen laugh could, if you let them, stop you from hearing doves or loving moonlight. (162).

The "righteous Look," or "magisterial gaze," can thus be seen to extend from white subjectivity to an attempt to control the very experience of the landscape for black slaves. It is the white slaveowner who determines whether the sensual experience of nature, the sight of moonlight or sound of doves, will be pleasurable or terrifying for Paul D.

Paul D's memories of the natural world more closely echo Stowe's minutely observed nature drawings or Alcott's disruption of the sublime, in that they challenge the concept of the transcendental escape through nature and also represent Morrison's reimagining of the landscape on alternative terms. As Outka observes, the African-American experience of nature is "A far cry from the 'uncomplicated' union with the landscape that marks sublime experience, experience that, as a result, comes 'naturally' to signify whiteness" (150). Like Alcott and Stowe, Morrison describes the landscape in a detail that includes the realities of lived experience, the hardships of daily life, rather than subsuming this subjectivity into a transcendent moment. Thus, as Paul D endures his enslavement in Alfred, the detailed recall of the cooing of doves, a sound typically symbolic of romance, does not become a fleeting escape into a moment of mellifluous beauty. Instead Paul D remembers "smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves" and their cry becomes inextricably associated with his sexual abuse (108). The guards may have denied him the possibility of pleasure in the sound of the doves, but Morrison's act of naming this abuse, of rejecting the assumption that nature is experienced in the same way, resists the construction of landscape through the eyes of the white "righteous Look." These narrative descriptions challenge and rewrite white, male landscape representations, but this is not to conflate Morrison's work with white female iterations of the genre. In her graphic depiction of Paul D's abuse in Alfred, Georgia, Morrison makes clear the particular, and violent, racial boundaries of slavery that separate his experience.

Set against her critique of transcendentalist thought as a white construction of landscape, is a contrasting representation of the experience of the natural world for African Americans during and after slavery. Morrison both depicts how the horror of

Paul D's experiences impact his relationship to nature during his enslavement in Alfred, and she also extends this to consider the lasting consequences of such lived experiences in nature in the black remembrance and construction of landscape during Reconstruction. She reveals the black imagining of the natural environment to stand in contrast to white, transcendentalist thought, most particularly as it is marked by the damage and trauma of slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison exposes this difference, but also challenges the concept of damage as the defining characteristic of the black experience of nature, and instead underlines the critical importance of a reorientation to the American landscape.

The white representation of the landscape as a space of agricultural production or as a space of leisurely escape relies on the construction of an opposing black landscape. Morrison suggests this white imagining of the black landscape as a racial stereotype of the African jungle, a foreign space set in diametric contrast to the white construction of the American landscape: savage and animalistic rather than ordered and civilised. This is the "tangled jungle" against which the difference of white landscape is defined (198). However, she exposes this image as "the jungle whitefolks planted," a landscape of savagery constructed by the white, and not the black, imagination (198). Morrison thus exposes how the very creation of this landscape reveals, conversely, white barbarism and savagery: "The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own" (199). Furthermore, she inverts this image in *Beloved*: the wild and the savage in the African American construction of the landscape is located, not in blackness, but in whiteness.

In "'City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction,'" Morrison analyses James Baldwin's response to seeing Chartres cathedral,

which he experiences as terrifying rather than beautiful. She suggests that his reaction "brings up the question of how a dispossessed people, a disenfranchised people, a people without orthodox power, views the cities that it inhabits but does not have a claim to" (35). In *Beloved*, Morrison extends this question to the countryside. Whereas natural scenery, such as the woods, might represent a space of retreat and sanctuary for writers like Thoreau or Emerson, for the freed slaves of the novel these are the spaces filled with the inescapable signs of white savagery and memories of black abuse. As Mart A. Stewart observes: "This landscape was lifted from the forests and swamps literally on the backs of slaves" (10). For Sethe, trees hold the memory of the tortured and dead, and also stand as a symbol of her own helplessness. She recalls: "Passed right by those boys hanging in the trees. One had Paul A's shirt on but not his feet or head. I walked right on by" (198). For Sethe, the trees will continue to be marked by both the trauma of witnessing these murders and the feelings of guilt related to her powerlessness. Sethe's memories and fears further recall the horrific images of later lynchings of black people in the South, suggesting the extent to which the woods continue to be a space shaped by black abuse. As Paul Outka observes:

The endless images of mutilated black bodies dangling from trees inevitably mark the woods for countless African Americans subsequently. To be alone in the forest, to feel identified with the landscape, to be vulnerable and intimate with the natural world is to risk, at least, triggering a traumatic return to such images. (150).

In black thought post-emancipation, the woods frequently represent spaces of recalled horror and fear, and are also marked by the continuing threat of black abuse.

Morrison reveals the black construction of landscape as significantly shaped by the psychological impact of slavery, triggering memories that cannot be forgotten and continually threaten to be repeated. Her representation of the traumatic relationship to

the landscape in *Beloved* is also seen more broadly in black environmental thought, as Kimberly Smith explains: "A central theme in this tradition is the claim that denial of freedom to black Americans has distorted their relationship to the natural environment; indeed, it has scarred the land itself" (7-8). Morrison is similarly concerned with the impact of this legacy of damage, and in the novel, through her representation of Paul D and Sethe's struggles to reconcile their present day understanding of the landscape with the violent past of slavery, she exposes the post-emancipation experience as a key point in the intellectual conceptualisation of landscape for African Americans. Their individual experiences thus represent a broader African American struggle to understand a landscape scarred by the legacy of slavery.

However, Morrison also extends this thought to reveal the damage caused by the white march of Manifest Destiny across the American landscape to other disenfranchised peoples. As Paul D walks home from work, he finds himself in a cemetery in Cincinnati haunted by the ghosts of a dead Miami tribe of Native Americans. He imagines them disturbed in their resting places by the settlement of the land around them: "Over their heads walked a strange people; through their earth pillows roads were cut; wells and houses nudged them out of eternal rest" (155). These spectres haunt the present landscape, which is scarred by industrialisation rather than honoured as a space of nature the tribe had formerly held as "holy" (155). Paul D's job in the pig slaughtering industry, work that he desperately endures in order to make a living, contributes to the desecration of this landscape, his tolerance for the slaughter of the "crying" pigs implicitly linked to the conditioned brutality of the slave system (154). The fact Paul D observes the disturbed ghosts of the Miami, who "rode the wind above the pig yards" suggests that, much as Sethe recalls walking by the mutilated body of

Paul A, that his understanding of the landscape is shaped by guilt as well as by trauma (155). Morrison thus suggests Native American suffering at the white destruction of the landscape, in a parallel way to that of African Americans, but also African American powerlessness and enforced complicity in perpetuating such abuse of the land.

Paul D encounters another tribe of Native Americans as he flees slavery and meets the dying Cherokee, struck down by their exposure to white European disease. Rather than endure removal to a reservation, they have "removed themselves from those Cherokee who signed the treaty, in order to retire into the forest and await the end of the world" (111). In her representation of the disenfranchised, dying and already dead Native Americans, depicted in the woods, haunting the landscape, and buried within the earth itself, Morrison complicates the idea of the damage and trauma of the land as linked uniquely to African American experience. The white physical and ideological domination of the American landscape is revealed as extensively and continuously damaging.

Nevertheless, just as for the Cherokee the woods are both a symbol of disenfranchisement and simultaneously a space of their resistance, the text suggests a more nuanced African American relationship to the natural environment than that of damage alone. Paul D recalls the black people he has seen before, during and after the war:

Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who, like him, stole from pigs; who, like him, slept in trees in the day and walked by night.... Once he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. (66).

The woods are certainly a space of fear and desperation, of homelessness, starvation and the threat of recapture, but they simultaneously represent a space of refuge and escape.

Paul D also reads the trees quite differently to Sethe: "trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to.... His choice he called Brother, and he sat under it" (21). He has a comforting, fraternal relationship to the trees, and they represent a space of safety and escape rather than trauma. In *Beloved*, Morrison thus reveals the black relationship to the landscape as complex and contradictory: both as a site of painful memory and yet still sometimes of escape, resistance, or even beauty.

Sethe's memories of Sweet Home further encapsulate this conflicted relationship:

suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not want to make her scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. (6).

The landscape is a divisive space for Sethe: a contradictory pastoral scene that is both terrible and beautiful. Her imagining of the landscape is haunted by the memories of the abuse inflicted on her and on those she loved, but she simultaneously sees an aesthetic of natural beauty.

Kimberly Smith and Carolyn Merchant have both highlighted this conflicted relationship between the landscape as a space to escape from and as a place of refuge and beauty (Merchant "Foreword" 2006 xi; Smith 10). Smith explains that within black intellectual thought:

the slave system forced slaves into an intimacy with the natural environment but also tended to alienate them from it. This ambivalent legacy permeates black environmental thought; a central question in this tradition is how black Americans could overcome the negative effects of slavery and create a home for themselves in a land cursed by injustice. (10).

In her writing about the black relationship to the natural environment, Smith reinforces the idea of the intrinsic connection between the conceptualisation of landscape and the establishment of the black home. At the heart of this struggle, she suggests is

reconciling this tension between the intimate and positive relationships slaves formed with the surrounding environment, and their simultaneous experience of this as a space of abuse.

In *Beloved*, the effects of this conflicted relationship to the natural environment are demonstrated in a recurring sense of disorientation. Returning to Paul D's description of the black people he has seen in the woods during the last twenty years, he recalls primarily their continuous, shifting movement: "Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on" (66). This constant movement through the woods, and the continual shifting of the natural environment as both a space of fear and a space of refuge is ultimately bewildering. As Paul D recalls when he achieves his own escape: "you couldn't run if you didn't know how to go. You could be lost forever, if there wasn't nobody to show you the way" (135). Paul D's words reflect a literal inability to be oriented in the natural environment because during slavery access to the woods and fields beyond the estate or plantation was restricted and controlled, ensuring that slaves were trapped because they couldn't find a route to freedom.

Beyond this, though, Paul D suggests a broader psychological confusion for African Americans during and after slavery, unable to "know how to go" without a clear, black ideological and intellectual sense of orientation. Similarly, Baby Suggs recalls the emptiness she felt at Sweet Home, despite finding herself in the least overtly abusive environment she had resided in thus far: "sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home....[she had] never had the map to discover what she was like" (140). Without a "map", a sense of orientation through the physical and psychological landscape, she cannot find the sense of identity necessary for the self to be at "home." Morrison thus suggests that escape and survival

are alone not enough to form the basis for true freedom; rather, the orientation necessary to establish a home is impossible without an understanding of the landscape that is independent from white definition.

In Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery

1770-1860, Ian Frederick Finseth observes the pattern of geographic movement in the text of slave narratives, as the action transitions from place to place, much as Paul D observes in his reflections of other black fugitives in the woods. Finseth notes:

The consistent narrative and phenomenological dynamic...involves the remove to nature, and the possibility of a revitalised connection to the social world, and the essential questions have to do with where the individual will be able to find both bodily and mental freedom, both freedom and community, both familial rootedness and the opportunity for personal mobility. (253-4).

Just as Finseth observes within slave narratives, these tensions between freedom of movement and settlement, between individualism and community, and between natural environment and home are also depicted by Morrison in *Beloved* as fundamental to black experience following Reconstruction. Paul D's experience is marked by an inability to stay in one place: "walking off when he got ready was the only way he could convince himself that he would no longer have to sleep, pee, eat or swing a sledge hammer in chains" (40). Sethe asserts, on the other hand "I will never run from another thing on this earth" and is determined to build a family home at 124 (15). Only together can they begin to find the balance necessary for both reorientation to the natural environment and the chance to exorcise the house in order to make an emotional home. In her analysis of black environmental thought post-emancipation, Smith summarises this desire as: "both the ability to control a particular piece of land and the ability to move freely through the landscape - in other words, the right to make a home and the right to leave it" (28). The black construction of landscape, therefore, demands a

reorientation, a physical and psychological "map" of the natural environment as both a space of damage and refuge, in order to locate the stability of home.

Relearning the Landscape

Morrison explores this attempt to be reoriented to the landscape in *Beloved* through the characters of Sethe and Baby Suggs as they struggle to establish a home at 124. This process marks an attempt to move beyond the difficult experiences of life during and post-slavery, and to establish a renewed individual connection to the natural environment. Morrison uses these characters to explore the black imagining of the landscape post-Reconstruction, and to critique its construction as a space of individual empowerment, as seen in both transcendental thought and female domesticity. Sethe attempts to reconstruct the landscape to find a transcendent escape through the natural world, for herself and her daughters. Through the character of Baby Suggs, on the other hand, Morrison explores the idea of a female spiritual connection to the natural environment, establishing an alternative religious role that reflects the domestic authority advocated by nineteenth century female writers, and particularly by Stowe.

Sethe's retreat inside 124 with her two daughters to establish a family home also involves a search for a new way to comprehend the landscape. A reunion with Beloved thus means not only a chance to reconstruct the black family, but also to gain a reorientation to the natural environment denied to her during slavery:

Now I can look at things again because she's here to see them too. After the shed, I stopped. Now, in the morning, when I light the fire I mean to look out the window to see what the sun is doing to the day. Does it hit the pump handle first or the spigot? See if the grass is gray-green or brown or what....Because you mine and I have to show you these things, and teach you what a mother should. (201).

Domesticity, for Sethe, therefore centres on the construction of landscape: she will teach Beloved how to read the picture of the outside world she sees from the window. The tools to interpret the landscape represent the skills passed from one generation to another, a possibility denied by the separation of families during slavery. This is both a process of reconstructing the image of nature for herself, "look[ing] at things again," and of creating a way of reading the land that she can pass on to the future generation "I have to show you these things". It is Sethe's perspective that will replace the "righteous look," the magisterial gaze of white people, in the construction of landscape for her daughter.

Sethe's attempt to reconstruct her understanding of the natural world is further depicted in the ice-skating scene in the novel. Outside with her daughters, laughing together as they tumble across the ice, they seem to approach a harmony with the natural environment: "The live oak and soughing pine on the banks enclosed them and absorbed their laughter while they fought gravity for each other's hands" (174). The trees that have previously held such haunting, violent memories for Sethe are transformed in this image, embracing and protecting the family and providing a space of refuge and comfort. Lying on the ice to catch their breath, they look up at the stars, and Sethe feels this moment of unity with nature expand: "The sky above them was another country. Winter stars, close enough to lick, had come out before sunset. For a moment, looking up, Sethe entered the perfect peace they offered" (174). Sethe thus reconstructs the landscape as a space of refuge and escape for her family, a tranquil and nurturing environment that she tellingly refers to as "another country": a transcendence from the legacy of slavery that marks the American landscape.

However, this scene provides only a short moment of escape and, as they laugh at Denver's stumble across the ice, this feeling of transcendent happiness ebbs away: "when her laughter died, the tears did not" (175). Comparing the scene to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Martin Bidney suggests this moment contains: "an undertone of unexplained but powerful melancholy, due probably to the contrast between the shared joys of skating and the underlying sadness that never quite leaves either the sorely tried Sethe or the early orphaned Wordsworth" (292). However, this melancholy emphasises not simply "the realism of the liberating, spontaneous abandon" (293) of the scene, but Morrison instead highlights the instability and transience of this joyful moment. Despite her attempts to see nature anew, to escape from her haunted and traumatic memories, like Paul D, Sethe simply cannot repress the past. Other than for a brief moment, Morrison suggests, Sethe does not have the privilege of transcending the realities of her lived existence.

Sethe feels, finally, the futility of this attempt to construct the landscape as "another country," when her present life is firmly situated within the difficult political context of Reconstruction era America, and this contributes both to her sadness and her withdrawal to the interior of the house, as already discussed. Baby Suggs, on the other hand, establishes a different relationship to the natural environment as she makes a life for herself as a free woman at 124. As I have shown, in the nineteenth century domestic novel the encounter with the landscape is used, not as a moment of sublime transcendence but as a point of resistance, particularly to the discourses of dominant patriarchal institutions. These moments of refuge, typically in the countryside just beyond the home, allow the development of an alternative spirituality or religious understanding, which, in turn, provides an authoritative female challenge to the

ideology of established patriarchal religion. Morrison also depicts this process through Baby Suggs in "the Clearing - a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" (87). Just as in *Moods* Sylvia spends time in the woods and says she "found her soul" there, or as Stowe shows Dred hearing God through the "language of the leaves," Baby Suggs discovers both her spirituality and an alternative religious role in the Clearing as she becomes an "unchurched preacher" to the black community there (87).

As in the nineteenth century domestic novel, the scenes in the Clearing reference the evangelical revival meetings that were popular at the time, both implicitly critiquing these and suggesting the landscape as a space of alternative spiritual power. In *Dred*, Stowe uses the revival meeting to critique the hypocrisy of the white preachers who talk of morality while being simultaneously implicated in the slave trade. The revival meeting she depicts is filled with spectacle and entertainment, where sinners are swept up in showmanship (and alcohol) rather than genuine repentance and conversion. The alternative voice of Dred's preaching in this scene marks a stark contrast to those at the revival, highlighting their sins and positing a more powerful religious authority. In *Iola Leroy* (1892), the clearing in the woods is shown as a space where slaves can speak freely, away from masters and overseers. This is a space of religious conversion and in which the escape to freedom is plotted. Like these writers, Morrison draws on the clearing in the woods as a space in which to discover an alternative, African American religious authority. Baby Suggs becomes known as "Baby Suggs, holy" (87), refusing a religious prefix to her name, and is "Uncalled, unrobed, unannointed" (87), setting herself in contrast to the ceremony and hierarchies of the established church and also suggesting this as a space of particular importance to African American resistance.

As at an evangelical revival meeting, Baby Suggs preaches to a community of listeners, in a clearing in the woods, "calling" them to step forwards in a process of spiritual conversion. There is similarly a large audience, and an atmosphere of chaotic celebration and drama:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. (88).

Her preaching does not end with the hysterical laughter and tears, however, as in Stowe's depiction of the revival meeting. Her "calling" instead forms the basis of a deep spiritual discovery, as she teaches the black community to connect with and to love their own bodies: "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (88). This is "flesh" rewriting the physical relationship to the natural environment: no longer inscribed with the tree-shaped scar but feeling and celebrating the earth beneath their feet on their own terms. Morrison thus draws from the representation of the clearing in the woods as a space in which nineteenth century evangelism is rewritten into a truer, African American religious experience. However, this also diverges from writers like Stowe and Alcott because it is not a Christian religious conversion based on the idea of the purification of a sinful body: "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure" (88). In Stowe's images of black people as the elect of the earth, much as in Sylvia's apocalyptic dream in *Moods*, redemption and freedom are located in the afterlife, in Heaven. Instead Baby Suggs teaches, not a spiritual escape through the natural environment, the trees and woods, but an embodied, healing self-acceptance.

Morrison thus draws on the legacy of the conversion experience, both white and black, but rewrites it into a subversive and powerful acceptance of the black body. Moreover, in doing so, she suggests an exorcism of the abused bodies of black slaves haunting the American woods, instead constructing this landscape as a space of black physical reclamation and celebration.

Nevertheless, just as Sethe's transcendent experience on the ice is fleeting, the great power of Baby Suggs's Calling in the woods is also revealed as transient. The white men pursuing Sethe cross the boundary into their home and: "Her authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call...all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard" (177). Just as this is a violation of black domestic space, as discussed earlier, Morrison shows the concurrent desecration of the black construction of landscape. Baby Suggs's attempt to establish a space in nature for black affirmation, away from the daily difficulties of their lived experiences, is revealed as unsuccessful because she is not able to remove the continued threat of white violence and its consequences for black people.¹⁶ The failure of Baby Suggs's Calling to protect the community from white intrusion is further linked to an individualism, much like that of Sethe's within the home. As her power and influence increases, a resentment builds locally: "Too much, they thought....Why is she and hers always the center of things?...loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone" (137). Baby Suggs's effort to establish the woods as a space of female spiritual authority has resulted in her individual empowerment, much like that espoused by writers like Stowe, and in their resentment, the community does not alert the family to schoolteacher's arrival. This

¹⁶ As Sethe revisits the Clearing she discovers it has returned to a conventional space of religious conversion: "big-city revivals were held there regularly now, complete with food-laden tables, banjos and a tent" (89). This suggests, for those still attending, that Baby Sugg's Calling has been replaced by the empty showmanship criticised in other domestic novels.

vision of the landscape as a space of female authority is thus similarly presented as problematic in its replication of white hierarchical models of power, positing an individualism that is divisive and perpetuates the fracturing of the black community.

Morrison thus suggests both the difficulties of using a transcendental lens in the black imagining of the landscape, as seen in Sethe's attempts to reconnect to the natural environment, and also the dangers of replicating the white domestic construction of the landscape as a space of individual female power. Baby Sugg's consequent retreat to a single room within the house mirrors Sethe's withdrawal inside 124: "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be" (183). Enclosure into a single room, however, is once more shown to be far from a space of power: Baby Suggs dies in her bed, defeated and exhausted. As with her critique of Sethe's replication of the white domestic ideal within the home, Morrison thereby suggests the impossibility of creating a black imagining of the landscape separate from the continuing experience of repeated discrimination and abuse. For both the white home and the landscape continue to be constructed as spaces of freedom through black exploitation and its silencing. Reconstruction built upon this ideological framework is therefore highly problematic, Morrison suggests, because it risks repeating the same abusive practices.

Beloved reveals this internalisation of white ideology through Sethe's act of infanticide, which as critics such as Malmgren, Rhodes and Elliott have argued, reveals the reproduction of white violence. However, as I have shown, this is similarly seen in Sethe and Baby Suggs's gradual domestic separation from the wider community.

Reflecting on her own writing, Morrison explains:

I knew from the very beginning that I could not, would not, reproduce the master's voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father. Nor would I substitute his voice with that of his fawning mistress or his worthy opponent, for both of these positions (mistress or opponent) seemed to confine me to his terrain, in his arena, accepting the house rules ("Home" 4).

She highlights both the dangers of internalising the voice of the "master" of the slave estate, which within the text is seen in the acts of overt violence learnt from schoolteacher and others like him, but also that of the "mistress," the voice of domestic power. Her image of confinement in this passage, of being trapped like the escaped slaves within the walls of the white home, recall the positions of both Sethe and Baby Suggs, "accepting the house rules," and trapped in a home separated from the black community.

To truly escape from the master's house in order to build a black home, therefore, also demands a removal from "his terrain," calling for a new relationship to the landscape, not founded in individualism. In her final representations of Denver and Sethe, Morrison depicts the rejection of both the isolated and separated black household and the individual encounter with nature. To escape from the house haunted by the violent acts of her mother, Denver initially withdraws into the space between the boxwood bushes, which she calls the "tree room" (76). Replicating the withdrawal of Sethe and Baby Suggs, this act again mirrors both the transcendental retreat to nature and is also described as "a little girl's houseplay," reflecting the search for the white domestic ideal (28). However, Denver is the first to realise that, in order to survive as a family, rather than withdrawing she must face and engage with broader society. Denver hears the voice of Baby Suggs telling her there is no defence against white people, but that she should "Know it, and go on out the yard" (244). Denver, representing a

younger generation of black women, finds the strength that Baby Suggs cannot and is able to leave both her tree room and the family home to seek help from the community.

Sethe is also rescued from her confinement to a house haunted by the memories of slavery through the help of the community. The ghost of Beloved is exorcised from the house by the gathering of women outside who "call" to Sethe, in the tradition of Baby Suggs. She hears a sound so strong it seems to disrupt the tranquil image of the landscape:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all of its heat and simmering leaves....it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261).

In this "Calling," the women of the community repeat Baby Suggs's powerful assertion of the felt experience of the black body, but they do so through a shared, spiritual voice that literally voices the landscape anew. The community Calling recalls an image of the trees but it allows Sethe to hear and feel, rather than to see, them, replacing the visual domination of the landscape - the "righteous Look" or "magisterial gaze" - with a felt experience through sound. Alice Walker similarly imagines this newly heard voice as "The song behind the world" as she addresses her chickens:

behind the world, always, there is a song...., which is the song of the feminine. Without this song there is no movement, no progress. It is this song that keeps it all going, though we may hear it infrequently or only by accident.... It is the same with you and with the other animals of the planet. You are the song behind the world human animals inhabit. (Walker 99-100).

Walker's imagining of the song that connects women and the non-human natural environment suggests a model of feminine power similar to that found in *Dred*. While this "song behind the world" is reflected in *Beloved*, Morrison emphasises the female, more than the feminine, in these "singing women"; her emphasis is on a feminist voice

that contrasts with a patriarchal gaze, and reconstructs the landscape through a shared, communal experience.

Whereas Bidney and Sandy suggest this as a communitarian ending that remakes Romanticism, this emphasis on a communal understanding of the landscape can be read more clearly within the African American environmental tradition. Smith notes that most early black progressives rejected the Romantic concept of nature: "For them, the land is best conceived in its social aspect as common ground, the thing a social group holds in common" (9). Stepping outside the single family home and reconnecting with the natural world as a community, allows both Sethe and Denver a more hopeful future. As Paul D revisits Sethe, she has returned to the house but her thought that "This little place by a window is what I want" suggests a tentative interaction with the world outside (272). However, the novel posits the most potential for change with Denver, whose age places her in the position of domestic novel heroine at the end of the novel. As she connects with the community in her meeting with Mrs Jones, she reaches the narrative point that "inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (248). This recognition of the importance of community in the construction of both home and the landscape is thus the point at which her coming of age, so central to the domestic novel, is completed.

In *Beloved*, Morrison critiques the white domestic ideal and its obfuscation of the abuses of slavery, both by pro and anti-slavery writers. The novel recognises the African American desire for home during the period of Reconstruction, but criticises the replication of white domesticity, particularly as seen in the single family home as a separate space. This is presented as highly problematic in the face of continuing white intrusion into the black home. The text further challenges the experience of the

landscape as a universally experienced space of freedom for all, as presented in Romantic, but more specifically American transcendentalist, thought. For African Americans, the natural world is marked by relationships of both damage and resistance formed during slavery, resulting in the need for a physical and psychological reorientation to the landscape in order to establish a home. As models for this alternate relationship, Morrison revisits both the transcendentalist escape through nature and the model of an alternative female power located in the natural world. However, she reveals their shared ideology of individualism, which further divides an African American community already fractured by slavery.

Instead, *Beloved* posits an alternative construction of landscape as experienced and shared by the community. This reconstructs both landscape and domesticity, rewriting the white domestic ideal of an enclosed separate sphere, and Romantic and Transcendental portrayals of the natural world as a space apart. In contrast, Morrison blurs the boundaries of interior and outdoor space, emphasising home and landscape as intimately connected, both individual and community space. This is a vision of "home" as Morrison defines it in her essay of the same name:

I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent; a place 'already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed, a view slanted for light and bright autumn leaves but not rain.' ("Home" 9).

Morrison here quotes from her novel, *Jazz*, which describes the home of Wild, a black woman who has fled to the woods and made a "home in the rock" in order to live a life apart from restrictive domestic roles required of her (221). She thus suggests that to discover a home beyond the legacy of slavery demands a radical reconstruction of home as a space apart, to find a "doorway never needing to be closed" that is connected to

both external community and landscape but providing previously denied shelter and security. The "view" through the doorway, like Sethe's view from her window and Liz's view from the kitchen window in *Good Will*, recurs in the ecodomestic novel and suggests a representation of the landscape in which the domestic, the lived daily experience, is made transparent. The inclusion of the frame in this landscape representation, as doorway or window frame, emphasises this as a view of human construction that is, much as seen in Alcott's *Moods*, always shaped by the realities of domestic life.

Chapter 4 analyses further this blurred boundary between interior domestic space and exterior natural world, as well as the tension between an individual and a communal response to the landscape. I consider further the ecodomestic novel's exploration of an alternative relationship to the landscape, and the tension between an independent relationship to the natural world and the need to return to an ethic-of-care for others. For Robinson, as for Morrison and Stowe, the spiritual connection to the landscape holds a place of broader, national significance.

Chapter 4: "Being Beholden was the One Thing She Could Not Stand": the Female Orphan and an Ecofeminist Ethic-of-Care in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Lila*

In President Barack Obama's conversation with Marilynne Robinson in September 2015, he emphasises the importance of her work at a time of financial crisis, globalisation and political gridlock, suggesting her writing represents "homespun virtues" in contrast to "big systems where everything is all about flash" (*NYRB* 2-5). He reads a morality in her work that is set against the materialism of the public sphere, and is instead established at home, noting that these values "sounded really familiar to me when I think about my grandparents who grew up in Kansas" (4). In referencing his maternal grandparents, rather than either his Kenyan family or Hawaiian upbringing, Obama draws on the white domestic ideal as a model for the nation. However, he does so by obscuring his racial identity and creating a problematically gendered reading of Robinson's work, referring to the model of domesticity which Morrison critiques in *Beloved*. Robinson also seemingly reinforces the idea of these "homespun virtues" as she describes her readers as the "sustainers of a good society," noting: "how deeply committed they are to sustaining people they feel close to or responsible for" (*NYRB* 29). The model she presents is similarly rooted in classic domestic values of nurture and care, suggesting a nation-as-family.

However, the interview simultaneously challenges the domestic ideal of the white home and nation as a separate sphere, as Robinson explains: "we have created this incredibly inappropriate sort of in-group mentality when we really are from every end of the earth, just dealing with each other in good faith" (*NYRB* 3). Similarly, and like

Morrison's emphasis on the importance of community, Obama argues for a "more expansive" sense of community within the American nation (*NYRB* 3). Consequently, they both draw on an ethic-of-care at the heart of American domesticity but use it to expand its boundaries, calling for a greater inclusivity. Obama's reference to the domesticity of Robinson's work, its "homespun virtues," positions it in relation to the traditions of the nineteenth century novel and the national influence of writers like Stowe. However, their interview also raises a significant question about how to extend the values of care from the domestic tradition to a contemporary context, without reproducing the gendered and racial terms of which Morrison is so critical. This chapter considers the reuse of the ethic-of-care, which was so central to the nineteenth century domestic novel, within the context of Robinson's fiction. I explore the concept of care in her novels *Housekeeping* and *Lila* through her representation of the orphan, a pivotal figure in the nineteenth century domestic novel.

The struggle to escape the restrictions of domesticity while drawing on the ethic-of-care has represented a challenge to feminists more broadly. In *In a Different Voice* (1982), the psychologist, Carol Gilligan, observed a different way of thinking about morality, one based on care, connection and responsibility, which emerged from her interviews with women. Her mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg, had established a theory of moral reasoning that emphasised the importance of a voice of justice, considering "a mature self to be autonomous and capable of abstract reasoning" (Larrabee 5). Gilligan noticed a "different voice" in the women she interviewed, however: presented with a hypothetical moral dilemma, she observed their emphasis on "conflicting responsibilities rather than competing rights" (Gilligan 19). This "different voice" revealed an ethic-of-care within moral reasoning that prioritised a responsibility for

others.

Gilligan did not claim the "different voice" was gendered and was, in fact, careful to note that this voice was found in men as well as women. However, because her study was primarily with women and her findings exposed a gendered dismissal of female development, her work is often read in this way (Gilligan 2, Tronto 82). As Mary Jean Larrabee explains: "Feminist critics, in particular, have worried about the undesirable implications concerning her focus on the 'womanly virtues' that have traditionally been used to keep women in the 'private' sphere" (Larrabee 5). The valuing of a "different voice," founded in a principle of caring for others, risked associating women primarily with maternal values and devaluing their ability to reason, as Mary Brabeck observes: "When a woman is portrayed as man's moral superior it is usually at the expense of her intellectual ability" (Brabeck 33).¹⁷

Nevertheless, as Joan Tronto explains, feminists are revisiting the ethic-of-care as a model for moral reasoning. While the concepts of 'caring about' and 'taking care of,' to use her definition of the ethic-of-care, have been problematically limiting in their historic association with female confinement to caring roles, they also contain an agency that has marked the point of their reclamation (Tronto 106). More problematic in the ethic-of-care is the concept of 'being cared for,' and it has been disability studies theorists who have challenged the idea of this as a position of disempowerment. As Nirmala Erevelles finds, in much feminist writing about care "the portrayal of the caring relationship is such that the preservation of the autonomy for the female caregiver necessarily negates the possibility of ever applying a similar conceptualization to their

¹⁷ Obama's reference to the "homespun virtues" of Robinson's work becomes further problematised in this context, when considering the definition of homespun as plain or unsophisticated.

disabled care recipients" (Erevelles 177). The concept of dependence has come to symbolise weakness, the idea of being dependent on others, rather than as reliance, trust and confidence as part of a mutual relationship. The dependency of 'being cared for' thus remains the most challenging concept for feminists within the reevaluation of the ethic-of-care.

While the struggle to position the female relationship to the ethic-of-care and, more specifically to dependency, is a continuing question for feminists today, it was also a concern for women in the nineteenth century. The concept of care at the heart of the domestic novel was often embodied in the figure of the female orphan, who represented both the need to be cared for and to care for others. In *Victorian Heroines*, Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble explain her appeal:

it is precisely the orphan's dependence which attracted women writers and readers; not so much because it exaggerated their own dependency and the constraints it imposed, but because the orphan's dependence differed from that of most women in that it was frequently construed as both *necessary and legitimate* for the orphan to try to become independent (27).

The orphan offered a permissible opportunity to explore female autonomy but she was, simultaneously, a figure of dependence: vulnerable and reliant on the care of others.

This translated to a significant dilemma at the heart of the domestic novel, as the orphan embodied a tension between self-reliance and the desire to care for those in need. In this chapter, I suggest Robinson's use of the orphan trope has a similar purpose: to explore the tension between self-reliance and an ethic-of-care that remains central to feminist thinking. I argue that, as seen in her conversation with Obama, Robinson extends the concept of care away from the home, and repositions the concept of dependence in order to explore the human relationship to the natural environment.

The orphan and the nineteenth century novel

Although initially understood to refer to a child with two deceased parents, the term orphan is more complex than it may first appear. The dictionary defines an orphan as: "A person, esp. a child, both of whose parents are dead (or, rarely, one of whose parents have died). In extended use: an abandoned or neglected child" (*OED*). There are three central differences from the received idea of orphanhood here: firstly that the orphan is not always a child, secondly that one or both parents might, in fact, be alive, and, finally, the central importance of abandonment. Whereas the received idea of the orphan might be as an isolated and disconnected child, without any parents, in actuality the orphan grows from childhood to adulthood, while he or she experiences biological, foster, state or adoptive parenting. Similarly, the orphan as "abandoned or neglected child" suggests the significant role of human agency rather than fate. Instead of exceptional and separate, then, the orphan is intimately connected to and reflective of the society he or she inhabits. It is this complexity, both as the symbol of individualism and as the reflection of his or her societal environment, that has made the orphan such an appealing trope to writers.

The figure of the orphan was a common feature of the nineteenth century English novel, from Dickens to Eliot to Thackeray to the Brontes (Auerbach, Gilead, Mills 227, Peters, Reynolds and Humble 24).¹⁸ However, although mortality rates were high and a significant number of children were without parents, the orphan figure was not simply a reflection of the times but was a useful literary device (Reynolds and Humble 24-5). Just as the term "orphan" refers to both child and adult, the figure

¹⁸ Nina Auerbach goes as far as to describe the nineteenth century as an era of "orphan worship" in the English novel (Auerbach 411).

appears in both nineteenth century children's literature and the adult novel, and often blurs the boundary between these genres (Tropp Trenskey 390).¹⁹ The figure of the orphan was appealing across ages because it explored the idea of the innate character of the child as well as the adult the child will become, as he or she is shaped by outside influences. This is demonstrated further in the number of novels featuring orphans that are Bildungsromans, depicting the moral or psychological growth of the protagonist. In the Latin translation of the term, an "orphan" is "deprived of protection, advantages," rendering him or her devoid of support or connections (*OED*). The orphan was thus "the primary metaphor for the dispossessed, detached self," but also "an emblem of human transformative potentiality": a representation of an independent selfhood, simultaneously containing the potential for growth and change (Auerbach 395; Gilead 86).

While undoubtedly influenced by writers across the Atlantic, the concept of the orphan as separate, detached and full of the potential to transform society made the trope especially appealing to nineteenth century American writers. In what Carol J. Singley calls a "golden age" of American adoption literature, there was a proliferation of fictional orphans (Singley 81, see also Irr 385). From *Huckleberry Finn* to Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, the orphan was representative of a separation from the history and traditions of the European father/mother land, and marked the exploration of a particularly American individualism. The story of a child without connections, finding the way to success through hard work and a show of morality, was immensely popular because it reflected the American Dream of social progression despite humble origins:

¹⁹ Tropp Trenskey also observes that some writers and editors wanted to end the distinction made between children's and adult literature altogether. The purity of the child was believed to hold key lessons to adult morality that it was suggested would be beneficial to the improvement of society generally.

"In portraying families that were made, not born, writers retold the American story of upward mobility and limitless opportunity, helping to define the terms upon which the nation's development would continue" (Singley 81).²⁰ Although the orphan's story helped to shape national needs, however, the emphasis had shifted to the individual's potential to create change. In these American texts: "it is the divinely protected child who will save society, not society which will save the child, as in Dickens' novels" (Tropp Trensky 397). In American literature, the orphan as a reflection of his or her social environment, and therefore as a trope enabling social critique, became secondary to the orphan as a symbol of the transformative potential of the detached self.

Female writers of the American domestic novel were similarly influenced by the orphans so central to English novels of the period, and, in particular, by *Jane Eyre* (Baym 30, Showalter *Jury* 88-89, Tropp Trensky 408). Jane's position as an orphan, deprived of advantages, and her subsequent self-development inspired the possibility of an American dream similar to that of male writers. Jane's statement that "I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" spoke to an American female desire that combined financial and personal independence (Bronte 527).²¹ As Reynolds and Humble explain, the orphan offered a socially sanctioned path to independence; they "could be shown making decisions, negotiating the world, and exploring paths

²⁰ Nina Auerbach argues there was a similar affinity to the orphan in the English national consciousness, explaining how industrialism, scientific innovation and religious scepticism had effectively "orphaned" Britain from a sense of its own past (Auerbach 410). She explains this in terms of the orphan as lost and bereft rather than the more positive, future-facing representation I read in American nineteenth century literature, however.

²¹ Nina Baym suggests the American domestic novel goes further than *Jane Eyre*: "Jane's goal in the Bronte novel is dominance while the goal of all the American heroines is independence" (30). Baym does not elaborate, but presumably her reference to dominance refers to the fact that Jane will only marry Rochester when he is blind and infirm. The American domestic novel pushed beyond this because, not only was independence highly valued, but it often did not culminate in marriage.

traditionally barred to middle-class girls" (Reynolds and Humble 27). The trope also moulded itself well to a concept of self-reliance that was fundamental to American culture more broadly, and allowed women writers to imagine a very American form of female emancipation. Pursuing an education, the development of practical skills rather than feminine frivolity, earning a living in order to support the family rather than relying on wealthy or aristocratic connections: all of these traits fulfilled the remit of being part of the national character, while simultaneously providing a model for female autonomy.

The female orphan became a central feature of the nineteenth century American domestic novel, from Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World*; Gerty in *The Lamplighter*; to Sylvia in *Moods*; and Nina in *Dred*. However, in many ways, the idea of the orphan's moral development as a route to female autonomy rooted women more firmly within the private sphere of the home: "The orphan child represents pure possibility, freedom from family ties that chafe and bind. Yet almost every orphan novel in the end is about the search for a family" (Mills 228). For the American female orphan, this conflict was even more pronounced, as in order to be rewarded with independence she was expected to develop moral values closely related to home, family, and femininity. Claudia Nelson suggests, for example, that a Horatio Alger hero was much more likely to find work than a female protagonist, whereas a female orphan's journey centred on finding a family (Nelson 56). Singley similarly suggests that the female protagonist's placement in adoptive families prepared women for marriage and motherhood, whereas male orphans were encouraged away from family integration to separation and independence.

Furthermore, the nineteenth century American domestic novel shows an overwhelming longing for a deceased, lost or unknown mother, and if only one parent is dead or absent in the genre, it is undoubtedly she (see McGuire). She represents a lost

moral and spiritual guide; so for Sylvia in *Moods*: "A wise and tender mother would have divined her nameless needs...and through the medium of the most omnipotent affection given to humanity, have made her what she might have been" (84). Motherly love is translated by Alcott into an essential form of guidance in the maturation of the young woman. While this seemingly represents a longing for the domestic ideal of the angel in the house, and to remove any genuine model of independent womanhood from these texts, as Barbara J. McGuire suggests, it also more radically asserts that "the best mother seems to be a dead mother" (McGuire 172). The removal of the mother was also a way for the next generation to explore new possibilities for women (McGuire 172).

The orphan's abandonment or neglect is frequently shown to have come about, not only from loss of the mother, but due to financial misconduct on the part of the father. In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen, for example, is left in a precarious situation due to her father's financial mismanagement, just as, in *Dred*, Nina's situation is thrown into jeopardy by the gambling of her dissolute brother. The orphan was a figure in need of greater care and support by society at large, but it was suggested she was put at risk by being made wholly reliant upon an individual, male protector. She develops a morality rooted in the care of others that stands in opposition to this model, just as Obama reads Robinson's "homespun virtues" in contrast to the flashiness of the public financial markets. The transformative force of the orphan thus worked not only on self-improvement, but played a significant role in the moral and spiritual regeneration of the adults around her (Nelson, Sutliff Sanders). The orphan girl used her state of vulnerability (sometimes emphasised with illness, financial deprivation, etc) to encourage a network of sympathy, as Joe Sutliff Sanders explains: "such a network

contains a certain power to the girl around whom the network is arrayed: the girl attains a moral position from which she can instruct and improve the people around her" (Sutliff Sanders 44). While this provided another route to a limited power, this was also a character-type that demonstrated, as Nina Baym suggests, that "acts of sympathy, generosity, and benevolence by individuals who are not kin form the integument of a strong society," like the "sustainers of a good society" that Robinson describes. The orphan was used to call for stronger community ties and a better developed societal infrastructure of care, modelled on the interdependent relationships that were a part of most women's domestic lives.

These traits from the nineteenth century novel continue to make the orphan figure an appealing and contradictory trope for contemporary women writers: the exploration of the possibilities of the detached self; the freedom to examine radically different models of female independence; and, simultaneously, the call for a stronger community through an ethic-of-care.²² This chapter focuses on an analysis of Robinson's work to highlight the use of the orphan trope in the contemporary domestic novel both because of her recurring and centralised use of the figure, and because of the broader concern of her work with ethical themes. Her writing is heavily influenced by nineteenth century literature; as Martha Ravits explains, Robinson adapts "American literary romanticism and nineteenth century prototypes to twentieth century womanhood" (Interview 239; Ravits 645). However, while critics have explored the way Robinson rewrites a male American myth of individualism, she has not been read

²² Examples in the contemporary domestic novel are many but include Ava in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*; Esch in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*; and Sethe, Denver and Beloved from *Beloved*, who have been separated from one or both parents due to the system of slavery.

more broadly within the female tradition of the nineteenth century domestic novel.²³

Robinson's interest, in particular, in the place of religion in contemporary culture, connects her work firmly to the work of her female predecessors, such as Stowe, Alcott and Warner, who used the orphan to explore a space of moral and spiritual loss.

Robinson's two novels that centre primarily upon female protagonists, *Housekeeping* and *Lila*, contain multiple examples of the orphan figure, and also foreground the mother-child relationship. *Housekeeping* is a narrative of recurring orphanhood, as Ruth and Lucille are repeatedly left by the mother and mother figures who care for them. Their mother, Helen, kills herself and leaves them in the care of their grandmother, Sylvia (their father has left them). Their grandmother then dies, effectively orphaning them again. They are then left to the care of their great aunts, who also leave them, finally, in the care of their aunt, Sylvie, who is transient, a drifter who rides the freight trains. Sylvie represents the figure of the nineteenth century aunt in the domestic novel who, as Claudia Nelson observes, was typically reluctant to accept an orphan into her life, often accepting the child initially out of duty rather than love (Nelson 60-61). *Lila* is similarly the story of an orphan taken in by a substitute mother: Lila is a neglected child, left with uncaring relations who leave her to sleep under a table and cast her out into the night before Doll assumes care of her. Whereas Sylvie assumes her care of the girls reluctantly, Doll represents the nineteenth century care-giver won over by love for the helpless child, and the novel opens with her being both rescued and stolen from her family by Doll. While the novels explore the concept of 'being cared for' through their central protagonists, Ruth and Lila, they thus also

²³ See Ravits for an exploration of Robinson's relationship to nineteenth century male writers, and Schaub for the influence of Emerson (Schaub 240).

explore shifting concepts of 'caring for' through Sylvie and Doll.

Despite being separate works, over thirty years apart in composition, *Housekeeping* and *Lila* call for a comparative reading both because of their central female protagonists and also because of their shared thematic concern with female transience. These are texts that explore the thin line between female independence and isolation, and *Lila* resumes, symbolically, where *Housekeeping* ends. *Housekeeping* concludes with Ruth's departure with Sylvie, crossing the railway bridge out of town and onto the train that will take them into a future of transient drifting. *Lila's* present day takes place in the town of Gilead, seen from alternative character perspectives in *Gilead* and *Home*. It centres on Lila's gradual settlement into domestic life with the Reverend Ames, whom she marries. Thus there is a circular progression when the books are read together: from domestic security, to homelessness, and to drifting in *Housekeeping*; and from drifting, to temporary and unstable housing, to making a family home in *Lila*. While both books stand alone, there is an undeniable thematic connection between their interrogation of domesticity, and in *Lila*, Robinson returns to the questions that *Housekeeping* leaves unanswered. The novel considers the life of the orphan after exile from the community, asking what a transient life would mean for a child, and how it would shape her as an adult. Beyond this, the text asks how the orphan figure, symbol of female self-reliance and independence, might rejoin and participate in the community, and whether this is possible or even desirable.

As for her nineteenth century predecessors, for Robinson this use of the orphan trope is an exploration, not only of broader feminist questions of autonomy, but of searching for an American model of female independence. Influenced by the transcendentalists, Robinson, like Alcott, has a particular concern with understanding

the connection between self and the American landscape. In both *Housekeeping* and *Lila* there is a strong link between the orphan's isolation and the natural world: in order to become independent, she must learn both to survive in and to embrace the vast and frightening natural environment beyond the domestic space of the home. In this way, Robinson's work explores an Emersonian model of self-reliance, of finding an individual, non-conformist connection to the American landscape, much as Alcott and Stowe did before her. However, as for those two female writers, the question of domesticity is not so easily dismissed. Instead, as I will show, Robinson's writing explores the blurred connection between the American home and landscape and, through her use of the orphan figure, asks whether it is possible to reconcile the two: for women to embrace the domestic world of family, community and dependence, and maintain a solitary, autonomous, and spiritual understanding of the natural world.

Orphanhood and the Landscape in *Housekeeping*

Just as the nineteenth century domestic novel has a tendency to "disarticulate domestic spaces," in *Housekeeping* Robinson questions the security of the house, especially as it is established against the dangers of the landscape (Hendler 685). Ruth's grandfather has moved West, symbolic of the broader American settlement of the land, leaving "a house dug out of the ground" to build his own home, suggesting a movement away from an integration with and dependence on, the natural world (3). Edmund has "the good judgement to set it on a hill" moving his new house above ground level, and building it to withstand the elements (74). In this way the family home in Fingerbone represents the attempted separation of the domestic space of the house from the natural

environment, and the assertion of a self-reliance founded in the human dominance over an untamed landscape. Despite the association of women with the house, as Paula Geyh and Sarah Hartshorne note it is also a symbol of patriarchal power: Edmund is "the Creator, Noah, Adam, the American frontiersman, the American Adam, and primitive man" (Geyh 106-7; Hartshorne 50). Although Hartshorne suggests Robinson sends these patriarchal traditions to the bottom of the lake along with Edmund, the house nevertheless remains as a symbol of his self-reliance (50). As her death approaches, their grandmother advises Ruth and Lucille: "keep the house. So long as you look after your health, and own the roof above your head, you're as safe as anyone can be" (27). Their grandfather's house, separated from the natural world, is also indicative of an independence from the wider community, and thus the girls are taught: "That we were self-sufficient, our house reminded us always" (74). However, the images of the house pervading the text contradict this ideal of domestic space as a sign of separation, security, and self-sufficiency: lake water permeates the edges of the house and laps at its foundations, while the solidity of the family unit disintegrates. The very name of the family, "Foster," signals its fragility and instability, as the girls' parental figures die and leave. Robinson's text thus challenges the stability of the house, and also undermines the association of domesticity with emotional security and independence.

If Ruth and Lucille are taught to see the house as a space of security and a symbol of the family's self-sufficiency, the landscape, conversely, represents extreme danger and instability to them. The natural world is threatening, constantly breaking the boundaries of the home, and this intrusion escalates as the girls become increasingly alone in their orphanhood. This fear is embodied most clearly in Ruth and Lucille's response to the surrounding woodland: as Ruth explains, "the woods at night terrified

us" (114). Hartshorne suggests that Robinson "plays on the haunting ballad which is mentioned so often in nineteenth century American literature: the 'Babes in the Woods'" (Hartshorne 54). The fear of being alone in the woods draws on this mythic fairy tale, as well as others such as "Hansel and Gretel," in which the most frightening outcome for orphans is to be lost there at night. Moreover, their grandmother prevents them from wandering off by the shores of the lake by telling them: "hoboes made a practice of whisking children under their coats and carrying them off" (95-6), much as Hansel and Gretel are captured by the witch. In these myths, which were popular morality tales in the nineteenth century household, the woodland outside the home stands in binary opposition to the security of the house.²⁴ The woods are a space of danger, where a child might be stolen by an unstable adult, and the orphan is on the brink of isolation, vulnerability, and loneliness. However, in referencing the fairy tale Robinson also suggests the domestic ideal and contrasting image of the threatening landscape as an enduring myth, one both passed on through generations, and one that is fictional.

Initially, Ruth and Lucille's greatest fear is of the woods at night, and the image of darkness is used repeatedly to represent the ultimate vulnerability and isolation of orphanhood. The girls spend time looking at the passing trains in the dark winter afternoon. The interiors are lighted and they imagine the passengers looking out: "they would have seen their own depthless images on the black glass, if they had looked, and not the black trees and the black houses, or the slender black bridge and the dim blue expanse of the lake" (54). Ruth and Lucille are separated from the illuminated carriage,

²⁴ Virginia A. Walter explains that Randolph Caldecott's picture book of *Babes in the Woods* in 1879 was particularly popular.

and the young woman within who is reminiscent of their mother. Instead they occupy an unseen space in the dark landscape, in amongst the trees, just as in their fears of being lost at night in the woods. Blackness thus comes to represent an extreme state of orphanhood in the text, and imagines the orphan not simply as outsider but as racial Other, forced to remain beyond the sphere of white domesticity. Their grandmother tells them that their great-grandmother:

knew a woman who, when she looked out her window at night, often saw the ghosts of children crying by the road. These children, who were sky black and stark naked and who danced with the cold and wiped their tears with the backs of their hands and the heels of their hands, furious with hunger, consumed much of the woman's substance and most of her thoughts (25-6).

This myth of orphanhood, passed on through the generations, like the "Babes in the Woods" tale, here suggests a more concrete foundation of racial economic inequality. The ghostly, black orphans imagined are without clothes and food, in contrast to the comfortable position of privilege of the great-grandmother's friend. Just as the ghosts are "furious," the woman is haunted with guilt by their spectral presence. She puts food and blankets out for them but these are the token gestures of Tronto's 'caring for': care not taken far enough to make a difference (Tronto 106). Far from helping, this minimalist action makes no difference, so the ghostly figures "grew more numerous and came more often" (26). Orphanhood comes to represent the guilt of inequality, and of a society that does not care enough to provide and care for its most vulnerable. The consequence of self-reliance is thus revealed as the constant, haunting presence of the victims of injustice.

These black, spectral orphans similarly haunt Ruth and Lucille, as their own vulnerability as children without secure care increases. Upon hearing the story, Ruth observes: "Sometimes it seemed to me my grandmother saw our black souls dancing in

the moonless cold" (26). The blackness she associates with isolation is now no longer an external presence, and Ruth thus begins to internalise the state of orphanhood. As she faces the state intervention that threatens to take her away from Sylvie, she hides in the trees in the garden and imagines a fairy story about herself:

Once there was a young girl strolling at night in an orchard. She came to a house she had never seen before....she walked inside....Her hair, which was as black as the sky and so long that it swept after her, a wind in the grass...Her fingers, which were sky black and so fine and slender that they were only cold.... She would be transformed by the gross light into a mortal child. And when she stood at the bright window, she would find that the world was gone (203-4).

Ruth seems, finally, to enter the cautionary "Babes in the Woods" fairy tale of her grandmother, as she finds herself in a "melancholy story" lost and alone (203). In this myth, Ruth finally becomes the orphan of darkness that she has imagined, and she transforms into a racial Other with "sky black" fingers (203). In amongst the dark trees she is set apart from the security of the domestic space of the house; upon entering, however, the light indoors will transform her back into a "mortal child." However, as she enters the house this image is inverted: she finds she is alone, and the figures of maternal security, her mother, grandmother, and aunts are part of the external world that she cannot access. As Mattessich explains, the interiority of domestic space disintegrates in the text: "This 'outside' is where its protagonists always are" (Mattessich 60). Ruth finally understands that the security of the home is illusory, and the dark isolation of the landscape becomes symbolic of the isolation of existence itself.

Like the nineteenth century orphan, in order to face isolation and a precarious dependence upon the care of others, both girls learn to develop self-reliance. Drifting away from the house, which no longer offers them security, Ruth and Lucille are faced with the exact state of orphanhood that the threat of the landscape has represented: they

are surrounded by the woods, stranded and alone in the dark (113). They attempt to reestablish a sense of security and safety by reverting to the domestic model that has been taught to them. Thus they build a roof over their heads by putting together a makeshift hut, and Lucille writes her name before the door, marking her ownership of the dwelling. This both mirrors their grandfather's building project and, as Ravits suggests, references the philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau: "the settler's cabin in the wilderness has long represented the idealized dream of solitary refuge and American self-reliance" (Ravits 655). As complete darkness falls, they hear the sounds of animals drawing near. Lucille stays awake, attempting to defend their hut, while Ruth lets the darkness wash over her. This night in the woods marks the point of division between Ruth and Lucille, and the moment their attitudes towards self-reliance diverge. Lucille doggedly persists in maintaining their domestic space, despite its obvious instability and fragility. Ruth explains: "she sat down beside me in our ruined stronghold, never still, never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun" (115). In contrast, Ruth understands the instability of human domestic space, that this is "a ruin that cannot be restored" (Ravits 656). Thus, while Lucille fights to keep the fears of the night at bay, Ruth feels the darkness that surrounds them gradually permeating her own body. Despite the human attempt to visualise the landscape as a separate space, Ruth comes to understand the human position as inherently connected to the broader natural world.

Following their night in the woods, Lucille returns to the domestic model of self-reliance, as seen in the female orphans of the nineteenth century. She declares that "We have to *improve* ourselves!" (123) and she sets about self-educating through reading, learning to sew, and reconnecting with the community. Lucille learns the skills of the domestic ideal in order to adopt the model of self-reliance modelled by her

mother and grandmother. She finds an alternative maternal role model, in the person of her Home Economics teacher, Miss Royce, who resembles the Faith Dane figure of guidance in *Moods*. Ruth explains: "she adopted her, and I had no sister after that night" (140). Lucille's journey to adulthood involves following a traditional path to domestic womanhood: she focuses on dressing correctly, goes to the prom, and learns to integrate with the other girls at school. Lucille is thus "adopted" into a new social family and symbolically rejoins a framework of patriarchy. As Geyh observes: "the father-house does not require the actual presence of a father figure; women can maintain their places within patriarchal systems even in his absence" (Geyh 108). In order to pursue this route to social acceptance Lucille must reject her remaining biological family, Sylvie and Ruth, who remain in their states of female orphanhood.²⁵

Unlike Lucille, however, Ruth has learned how quickly this domestic security can dissolve, and this undermines the stability of Lucille's project of self-improvement. Ruth finds herself unwilling to learn the skills necessary for domestic conformity: "indifferent to my clothes and comfortable in my skin, unimproved and without the prospect of improvement" (123). However, although Ruth rejects the domestic model of self-reliance, through Sylvie she finds an alternative independence, located in the landscape. Sylvie's name marks her close relationship to the "sylvan" woods, while it also recalls that of Sylvia in *Moods*, and she marks a similar use of the orphan to explore an Emersonian tradition of self-reliance. She embodies the Emersonian idea that "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," rejecting domesticity (Geyh 114; Emerson "Self-Reliance" 178). She celebrates a house permeated by nature: "She

²⁵ Robinson does not entirely critique Lucille's desire to return to domestic life and resume an ordinary girlhood, though. She manages to reconnect with the wider community, and still aims to escape from Fingerbone to attend college, just as Ruth will leave.

preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic. Lucille and I stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night" (99). For Sylvie there is no such thing as a separate domestic space providing protection from the landscape. As Wilson suggests: "One of the ways Sylvie subverts expectations about housekeeping is by redefining it into something that maintains permeable boundaries" (Wilson, C 304). The house regresses metaphorically to the model Ruth's grandfather originally inhabited, dug into the ground, in an even closer, more primitive relationship to nature. In doing so Sylvie develops, like the transcendentalists before her, a close, individual relationship to the landscape that refuses to conform to the domesticity of the town. As Ravits suggests, the novel thus "demonstrate[s] that the empowering attitude of self-reliance can be claimed by female as well as male protagonists" (654).

Sylvie teaches Ruth about self-reliance through a process of abandonment, forcing her to occupy a space of complete orphanhood, immersed in the natural environment. She takes her to a ruined house in the woods, and retells the orphan myth: "now and then I'm sure there are children around me. I can practically hear them....I tried to catch one once....Not, you know, trap it, but lure it out with marshmallows" (148). But it is Ruth who becomes the abandoned child: Sylvie feeds her the marshmallows and she "leaves the girl alone to come to terms with her loneliness and thereby achieve the influx of will that brings self-reliance" (Ravits 654). At first, Ruth imagines building a snow mother figure as a symbol of care for the "wild and orphan things" (153). Gradually, she abandons this idea in a symbolic rejection of filial dependence and progression to self-reliance. Considering the mythical orphans once more, she thinks:

I knew there were no children trapped in this meagre ruin. They were light and spare and thoroughly used to the cold, and it was almost a joke to them to be cast out into the woods, even if their eyes were gone and their feet were broken. It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. (159).

In this version of the myth, the orphans have escaped from the ruins of domesticity and the woods represent their freedom. They are not dancing with cold and wiping their tears, as in the story of her grandmother's friend, but have adapted to the harsh environment as a place of belonging instead of the house. While this marks a positive move to locate freedom in the landscape and a self-reliance that is not dependent on the home, their racial identity has also become "light," hinting at a model similarly rooted in the traditional terms of white ideology.

Psychoanalysts, Kenneth H. Gordon and Paul C. Sherr suggest that the trope of orphanhood is used to explore the separation-individuation stage of development at adolescence: "The adolescent who undergoes a psychic loss of his parents is not unlike the bereaved orphan in a novel....Eventually he may resume contact with his family on an entirely different level, on a person-to-person rather than parent-to-child level" (539). Ravits suggests that the scene at the shack forms a rite of passage that allows Ruth to form a "kinship" (663) with Sylvie, who will then claim her as her foster mother as they depart into a transient life together. However, Ruth's move towards individuation, is the start of a "person-to-person" relationship with Sylvie, rather than one of care, nurturance and dependence. Ruth instead develops the "incapacity to feel" that Kirk Curnutt identifies as typical of twentieth century coming-of-age novels (Curnutt 96). Like the imagined orphans in the woods, she becomes "thoroughly used to the cold" as she learns to "have nothing" in this model of complete autonomy. Her new model of self-reliance is grounded in a complete rejection of materiality, as both the shelter of the

house and as a rejection of material existence: "I thought, Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone, and I would rather be with them" (159). Her body is now the "house," the symbol of domesticity that must be torn down, freeing her spirit into the natural environment with the other orphans. Ruth's thoughts are therefore as troubling as Sylvia's in *Moods*, suggesting a true freedom from the dependence of familial relationships is found, not only through a rejection of a traditional model of domesticity, but through death itself.

Lila and the dangers of self-reliance

Lila's story begins as a parallel orphan myth to the fairy tales told in *Housekeeping*. Doll, whose blood-stained facial scar recalls the ugliness of the "Hansel and Gretel" witch, steals Lila and takes her into the dark woods at night. Like Ruth, Lila is separated from the domestic space of the house and escapes into a life of transience in the landscape. However, Robinson again challenges the myth's separation of safe family home set against a lost orphanhood, preyed upon by dangerous strangers in the woods. It is Lila's family home that is unstable, insecure and threatening: she has no discernible parents, she has been severely neglected, and cast out into the night alone. Doll's appearance inverts the idea of the single woman as witch, because it is she who rescues Lila from her dangerous family; she wraps her in a shawl, feeds and saves her, adopting a role as an alternative mother figure.

In interview in *The Nation*, Robinson suggests a strong parallel between the two adoptive mother figures in these novels: "It's clearly true that Sylvie and Doll are sisters" (*The Nation* 30). As in the nineteenth century orphan novel, the trope allows the

exploration of a radically different model of female independence, and Doll teaches Lila, just as Sylvie teaches Ruth, the importance of a self-reliance rooted in female transience. Doll, like Sylvie, instructs Lila to reject the materialism of the home: "Don't want what you don't need and you'll be fine" (92). Unlike Ruth, Lila has never known a stable domesticity in a family home, so she does not endure the same process of learning to live without the secure four walls of the family house. However, Doll's emphasis on separating want from need extends to the emotional support of family, as she explains: "You got to look after your *own* self" (51). Doll aims to teach Lila what she herself has come to learn: that need can be reduced, and that emotional dependence on others is limiting.

Lila is forced to face her dependence and to become self-reliant as she is abandoned by Doll, just as Ruth must face her orphanhood as Sylvie leaves her in the woods. Doll and Lila have been travelling with Doane and his fellow itinerant workers but as the work dries up and times get hard, Doll leaves to look for other income. When Doll hasn't returned after four days, Doane and the others take Lila to a nearby town and leave her on the church steps. Lila remembers: "that's where you ended up if you were an orphan" (52). Despite knowing Doll has taken her from her parents, Doll represents the security of motherhood to Lila. Left behind both by Doane's broader group of family figures, and by Doll herself, Lila sits outside the church and faces her own orphanhood for the first time. This is the moment that Lila learns complete self-reliance: "after that she couldn't love Doll like she did all those years....One way or another, it comes out the same. Can't trust nobody" (69). As for Ruth, this is a separation-individuation process for Lila, and transforms her relationship with Doll to person-to-person, in much the same way as Ruth's feelings for Sylvie shift. Tronto

explains: "Because neediness is conceived as a threat to autonomy, those who have more needs than us appear to be less autonomous, and hence less powerful and less capable. The result is that one way in which we socially construct those who need care is to think of them as pitiful because they require help" (Tronto 120). In order to reject her construction as a pitiful orphan on the church steps, Lila reduces her need to a bare minimum, learning not only not to have excess wants, but to shrink her love and emotional connections to others.

Lila's orphanhood, like Ruth's, involves a deeper connection to the natural world. As she is carried away by Doll, it feels "as if she were carried along in the wind," and this sense of a transience embedded in the natural world grows as she becomes less dependent on the human world (5). As she travels alone and stays on the outskirts of Gilead, she is drawn repeatedly to the river: "She sat on the bank, damp and chilly, smelling the river and barely hearing the sound of it, hidden in the dark, not because she thought anyone would be there, but because she always liked the feeling that no one could see her even when she knew she was alone" (20). Here Lila learns a complete isolation from others in the natural world that again recalls an Emersonian ideal of self-reliance: "a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of things. Where he is, there is nature" (Emerson "Self-Reliance" 185). Rather than being afraid of the darkness, Lila, like Ruth, learns to find comfort and belonging in the landscape at night. This is a space of complete isolation, freedom and independence and it comes to stand in contrast to the domestic world and the fragility of both the house and family.

However, this shift towards transience in the landscape is also shown as a conflicted and problematic response by Robinson; as Toles explains, it seems "Robinson

is genuinely of two minds about dispossession" (Toles 147). The ending of *Housekeeping* has left critics with much debate as to whether Ruth's exile from her home town and community of Fingerbone to a life of transience was a freeing and positive move, or a transition to loneliness and isolation. As Paula Geyh notes, *Housekeeping's* conclusion is: "paradoxical and ambiguous" (Geyh 119). This can also be framed as a conflict between the security of home and family, and the freedom of a transient life in nature. In *Housekeeping*, returning from her abandonment amongst the spectral orphans, Ruth floats in a leaking boat with Sylvie, late at night under the railway bridge. Ruth acknowledges the beauty of the night and the water, and is no longer afraid. She imagines herself as a "seed in a husk" (162) and this marks the moment of her rebirth into her new life of transience. Not long after this, and mirroring a pattern typical of the nineteenth century orphan novel, where the house as symbol of the past is purged by fire, she and Sylvie burn down the house and separate from domesticity altogether (Auerbach 411).²⁶ In interview, Robinson emphasises Ruth's renunciation of the world, and acknowledges the spirituality of the act as part of "the monastic tradition" of freeing the self from material ties (Interview 243).

Nevertheless, as Toles observes, "In *Housekeeping* the freedom to flee involves nothing less than a complete dying to self, with no assurance that a rebirth will bring reality any closer. The transient enters a darkness that is disturbingly impersonal and akin to death" (Toles 147). Ruth's optimism at her new life is stunted: "why should I hope for more from the second [birth]? The only true birth would be a final one, which would free us from watery darkness" (162). Ruth's vision of a rebirth into death at this point is worrying. Despite her transcendental connection to the natural environment

²⁶ Auerbach cites *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* as examples.

surrounding her at night, she is alone with Sylvie, an unstable adult, and they are barely afloat in the dangerous boat.²⁷ Ruth imagines a birth into death as the ultimate escape from the fear of darkness, and thus from orphanhood, itself. However, the threat of death is close and real, and it is far from a promise of independence and autonomy.

Whereas Sylvie and Ruth are left roaming in their life of transience as the novel ends, in *Lila*, Doll represents this life taken to its conclusion. Doll embodies this model of self-reliance; free from material and emotional need, finding independence in the landscape. Just as Doll teaches Lila: "Don't go wanting things" (135), which is noticeably reminiscent of Ruth's "it is better to have nothing," she also lives by this motto of self-sufficiency. This denial of need, of dependence on others, extends to her own relationship with Lila. As times get very tough, and Doll ages and is less able to undertake laborious tasks, she becomes more reliant on Lila. It is this sense of her own dependence on Lila that finally prompts Doll to separate from her. When she sends Lila to an old man to see if he will marry her, he tells Lila: "She said she couldn't take care of you anymore" (115). But Lila observes: "By then she was helping Doll, not being taken care of by her, and that was one of the reasons Doll wanted to be rid of her" (115). Thus, although she appears to try to hand over the care of Lila, she actually separates herself from Lila in the face of her clear need of her. Doll's understanding of "neediness" here meets Tronto's definition as a threat to her autonomy, just as Lila learns on the steps of the church, so Doll attempts to separate from their mother-daughter relationship.

²⁷ Klaver goes as far as to suggest the possibility of mental illness and OCD in Sylvie, as seen in her hoarding, although Klaver emphasises the complexity of this as both positive and negative (Klaver 37). Sylvie's instability also recalls the nervous disorders common amongst nineteenth century women, which were either the result of, or offered an escape from, the restrictions of domesticity (see McGuire 173).

However, Doll's self-reliance is shown as an integral part of her own downfall, as her refusal to acknowledge her emotional dependence, or to allow herself to be cared for culminates in her probable death. She separates from Lila, telling her to go and live on her own, and although she has followed Lila, she neither attempts to live with her nor asks her for financial help (202). During an altercation with Lila's biological family, who have been pursuing them, Doll stabs and kills a man, who might be Lila's father, cousin, or uncle. Doll claims to have done this to protect Lila, and yet she can't bring herself to tell Lila any details about her biological family, even as little as their family name. When Lila asks, she answers: "I'm the only ma you ever had" (173). Rather than emphasising Lila's need of Doll as mother, however, this reveals her own emotional dependence on Lila, frightened at the prospect of losing her to her original family. Instead of acknowledging this need to Lila, this encounter hardens Doll into believing Lila will be safest and better off alone. When Lila comes to see her at the jail, Doll denies their connection, saying: "I don't know you" (181). Although she claims this is in order to protect Lila from the members of her biological family, this denial of Lila marks Doll's final separation from her. Doll, herself, is without family, and thus she enters her own point of complete orphanhood: self-reliant, and without familial support of any kind.

As soon as the chance comes, Doll escapes, and all Lila knows is that Doll "lost herself in the woods or in the cornfields" (138). Doll thus severs herself from her emotional dependence on Lila and simultaneously frees Lila from all her family ties, meaning they both assume the appearance of full independence and self-sufficiency. This is not a transition back to a romantic itinerancy for Doll, however, as she struggles to manage alone in her old age. Despite the fact she searches for her, Lila realises it is

unlikely that Doll has survived. In the Emersonian model of American self-reliance, there is no space in the natural environment for dependence: "Power is, in nature, the essential measure of right. Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself" (Emerson "Self-Reliance" 191). The landscape into which Doll escapes is not depicted as beautiful, but is instead harsh and empty. Lila searches for her in the cornfields and finds herself: "thrashing around, scared to death, the stalks so close and so high over head that she couldn't tell where she was" and then there is snow, "hours of it" (155). Here nature is cruel, disorienting rather than comforting, offering little stability or consolation, only the very real threat of death.

Tronto explains the process of othering that takes place in the self-reliance/dependence dualism: "because we expect to be autonomous, any form of dependency is treated as a great weakness. Those 'others' who need care are reduced to an object" (Tronto 123). Following their separation, Lila can only dream of Doll's dead body lying in a field: "Maybe critters been at it. You wouldn't dare touch it, it would fall to pieces" (139). Rather than assuming a position of power, Doll's departure has resulted, conversely, in a state of complete vulnerability: she has become "it," an objectified body. Finding a connection with the natural world comes only through the gradual disintegration of the dead human body. This is the loss of self imagined in the fairy tale, in the woods or cornfields at night, buried under the snow. Doll has chosen to pursue complete self-reliance, despite her actual dependence; entirely apart from the daughter figure who would love and care for her, and she faces only an isolated death.

For Robinson, entering the darkness of isolation represented by the landscape at night has a further, spiritual meaning, symbolising a loss of the light of God. This positions Robinson's text in line with the domestic novel's traditional interest in

religious salvation: "throughout most of the nineteenth century adoption also carries the symbolic meaning of rescue or salvation, replicating a Christian doctrine in which taking in a destitute or parentless child mirrors God's salvation of humankind" (Singley 82). Doll, however, has had no one to take in and care for her, and Lila becomes troubled by the question of Doll's salvation. She imagines telling Doll that Ames is praying for her soul, as he has promised to do:

And what would Doll say then? Child, why'd you want to do a thing like that! Best He forget all about me. Lying there with her cheek in the mud, stubborn as ever. Lila would say, Ain't much else I can do, is there. You never let me find you. And Doll would say, I'm hiding real good here. That Almighty of yours can't even find me. She'd be sort of laughing. (139).

In Lila's imagination, Doll is an orphan from God, not because she is lost, but because she is hiding. Her sheer will to be alone and self-reliant means she has turned her back on spiritual help as well as Lila's own practical help. It is Doll's insistent self-reliance that has separated her, not only from the care of her daughter but, Lila imagines, from religious salvation, meaning she may be "orphaned" from both God and Lila in the afterlife. Conversely, it is only in acknowledging her human dependence on God that she could be saved and find a home as a part of God's family. Robinson thus suggests that salvation rests not on an individualistic spiritual self-reliance, but an acknowledgement of spiritual dependence on God's mercy. Through Doll, Robinson emphasises that both in human and spiritual terms, as Taylor suggests: "Care and needing care are sites that rather than trying to avoid, we need to be radically attentive to" (Taylor 124).

Dependence and the search for a new domesticity

Paula Geyh notes that the return home is typical of the male quest narrative (Geyh 118), and that *Housekeeping* only imagines this return, as Ruth and Sylvie can only think of Lucille and can not actually seem to be reunited with her. For Geyh, the imaginings of reunions with Lucille mark repeated moments of disruption to a male myth. However, there is also something unsatisfactory and lonely about Ruth's inability to reconnect with the sister to whom she was so close. Read in parallel to *Lila*, however, Robinson does depict a return to domesticity. Unlike *Housekeeping*, *Lila* is not only the coming of age story of a young girl, but it considers the adulthood of that girl, as she faces the domestic roles of wife and mother. The novel asks how an orphan who has learnt self-reliance can form adult familial relationships and, on a broader level, how women can embrace both the interdependence demanded of traditional domestic roles and maintain an independent sense of selfhood.

Just as Ruth discovers the instability of the house in the face of nature, Lila sees human buildings as spaces of orphanhood. As she is left on the church steps, she does not think of the church as a space of help and support: "It was Doane who always told them not to trust preachers. This is how you got turned into an orphan. Then they put you in a place with other orphans and you can never leave. High walls around it" (53). Whether church, orphanage, or family home, indoor space becomes threatening, dangerous and a space of entrapment. These are the spaces in which a girl is "turned into" an orphan because her need becomes visible, rendering her dependent. This is seen most clearly as Lila joins the whorehouse in St Louis, where Mrs., the mother figure in charge of the house, renders the young girls in her care both financially and emotionally dependent on her. The girls are in constant debt to her and trapped in the house like a prison, where "they never opened the shades or stepped out the door" (189).

This is not the darkness of a landscape of isolation, but rather one of suffocation, where "The twilight of the parlour made her feel as if she had stepped into deep water with her eyes open" (188). The image of the house flooded by water recalls the recurring motif of the boundaries of the house permeated by nature in *Housekeeping*, a symbol of unstable domesticity. The girls are blinded and shut away from the outside world through both their physical dependence on Mrs. but also through her manipulation of their emotional needs. She locks their most treasured possessions in the credenza, allowing them to see and touch them only when they behave as she demands. This house is a space of complete metaphorical (and, in many cases, literal) orphanhood, just as Lila has imagined on the church steps, where the girls are completely dependent and unable to escape. Their dependence is not responded to with loving care but, rather, they are orphans truly "deprived of protection" as they are sexually exploited for financial gain (*OED*).

However, despite her eventual departure from the St Louis house, and despite Doll's warning, "Don't go wanting things" (135), Lila remains drawn to the domestic. Following Doll's death she resumes a transient life, but she finds herself living in the shack on the outskirts of Gilead and begins to settle into what looks like a domestic life. She reflects: "She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out" (68). Her move to the shack marks the point at which Lila finds her own domestic space. However, it is only the "likeness" of a house: the shack is derelict and the boundary between outside and inside space is blurred, much as it is in Sylvie's housekeeping. She rediscovers her love of nature: "Those first few days, clearing out the shack and washing at the river, finding dandelion greens and ferns still coming up and wild carrot, finding a rabbit burrow...it all felt like something she had

died for the want of" (218). Lila's domesticity may thus be seen as a need to inhabit both the man-made shelter of the house, and the surrounding natural environment. This is the home of Alcott's imagining, in Faith Dane's house, and of Morrison, as she describes in *Jazz*, a home "both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed" (Morrison 221). Lila needs the self-reliance she learned in her transient life, which is an independence rooted in survival in the natural environment, but she also searches for the stability of a house. In "Surrendering Wilderness," in which Robinson argues that imagining the landscape as untouched is futile, she explains her own relationship with the natural environment: "My bond with my native landscape was an unnameable yearning, to be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all" (60). Robinson suggests that establishing a home in nature demands humility, and a recognition of human dependence on rather than power over nature. Like Robinson, Lila searches for a domesticity that can engage with the natural world, rather than separate from it.

Lila's yearning to establish a new domesticity relates not only to the physical space of the house but also to the household. Although she is reasonably content at the shack, there is the sense of a noticeable lack; she notes it is only the "likeness" of a house, rather than a home, and observes, more broadly, that "She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it" (68). Lila's words imply that she considers a "real" life to contain other, significant people and so, despite her protests that "being beholden was the one thing she could not stand," she searches for the sense of dependence on others that suggests a loving relationship (40). In St Louis, Lila wants to feel this need as she hands over her one treasured possession, Doll's knife, to Mrs. to lock in the

credenza.²⁸ She thinks: "Well, she's got me now. And what sense did that make. But she felt that way, and it gave her a kind of ease" (191-2). Although Mrs. uses emotional need to manipulate the girls in her care, Lila longs for any kind of emotional dependence in order to feel loved and wanted. This is represented as a search for a new mother figure, as she looks to Mrs. to replace Doll. It seems that Doll, who has modelled independence and emphasised the centrality of self-reliance, has, through this very act of care, taught her the opposite: "Ugly old Doll. Who had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she were a child someone could want" (47). Doll's lessons in survival, in learning self-care, have, conversely, taught Lila the value of dependence and love. As Sunara Taylor explains: "Dependency is real...we all exist along its spectrum. The challenge is to understand dependency not simply as negative and certainly not as unnatural, but rather as an integral part of being alive" (Taylor 113). This is the transition that Lila must make: to understand 'being cared for,' not as powerlessness, but as an integral part of her existence.

Lila's story completes the narrative established in *Housekeeping* as she relearns trust, care and dependence. In her love of John Ames, she must face her preconceptions about the figure of the preacher as someone who cannot be trusted, the person who will shut away and make orphans of the vulnerable. His religious position pushes her to find faith, both religious and human: "Can't trust nobody. That's what I'm thinking all the time. If I'm ever going to try it, it might as well be now, when I can leave if I have to

²⁸ The fetishised object as the symbol of the lost mother, as the knife becomes, is also a feature of the nineteenth century domestic novel (see Barbara J. McGuire re. the lock of the mother's hair). Such objects were often imbued with a power that would resolve narrative dilemmas and convey the true character of the orphan to others, much as the knife reveals Lila's love of Doll to Ames.

and I'm still young enough to get by for a while" (78-9). Slowly and cautiously, Lila learns to trust in Ames, and to depend on another person. Joan Tronto explains that care is most frequently defined as a relationship between a mother and a child, and that morality has thus become associated with women. She calls for these moral and political boundaries to be questioned: "we need to stop talking about 'woman's morality' and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women" (103; 3). In *Lila*, while Robinson explores the concept of care through Lila and Doll, it is significant that she also does so through Ames, challenging this association of care solely with women. His religious role is not an authoritative position of power, used to enact control but, instead Ames is as lonely as Lila is, having lost his first wife and child and lived many years alone and independent. For Lila, his loneliness is the "one thing she understood about him.", and it is this vulnerability that equalises their positions because their need of each other is shown to be interdependent (18).

The ethic-of-care is extended further in the text from a dyadic to a communal relationship, again extending the nineteenth century novel's use of the orphan trope to call for a stronger community. When Lila disappears, the stability of their relationship is challenged, but rather than assuming the worst of her, based on her past, Ames listens to her explanation. Lila has tried to help an orphaned boy she found living at the shack, to offer him the shelter and support she understands he needs. In this way a chain of trust develops: the orphaned boy grudgingly accepts help from Lila, Lila trusts Ames with the truth about her actions, and Ames believes Lila's explanation. When he hears of her help, he replies: "I *did* know you. I *do* know you" (168). This acknowledgment stands in contrast to Doll's "I don't know you" as Ames embraces and accepts rather

than separates from Lila, and this chain of dependence is shown to have strengthened their relationship. Gordon and Sherr suggest that the process of individuation is not one of complete separation but in fact involves a return to family and community: for the adolescent the idea of being isolated is a "fantasy of being a 'special case'", and maturation marks the point of this realisation, following which he or she "is able to become a grown-up member of the human community" (Gordon and Sherr 539). This marks a symbolic, if late, coming-of-age for Lila as she rejects the concept of her separation and learns both to "care for" and to be a care-receiver; furthermore, her emotional growth also reveals an ethic-of-care based on a much broader web of need and support.

Lila's gradual transition into human interdependence is reflected in the expansion of her alternative domesticity, finding even greater harmony with the natural world. Ames baptises Lila at the back of the shack, by the river, and they confirm their betrothal immediately afterwards. During these two central moments in the narrative they are surrounded by a bounteous, pastoral landscape: "the two of them walked across the meadow, through the daisies and the sunflowers, through an ash grove and into another fallow field. There were brambles along the farther side, weighed down with berries" (88). The descriptions of the landscape here push beyond a pathetic fallacy that reflects their happiness. Using the river water for the baptism, picking the sunflowers as a token of love, and picking and eating the berries, represents their complete immersion into and spiritual connection to the landscape. Ecofeminists argue that the ethic-of-care must be extended beyond an understanding of care simply in human terms. Dependency is key to this conceptualisation because "an ecofeminist ethic of care is about the mutual interdependence of all life on Earth" (Swanson 96). Just as all humans

are dependent on each other, we are also dependent on a wider ecosystem for survival. Sunaura Taylor explains that dependence expands beyond the androcentric: "As human beings our dependence on each other is actually a miniscule amount of our overall dependence. We are massively dependent on other animals and of course on our environments in ways that are impossible for us to really even fathom" (113). Lila and Ames's riverside baptism and betrothal marks the point at which human love, religious faith, and harmony with the natural world combine, a moment of complete interdependence.

Lila's discovery of a home and family marks a positive ending to the orphan's plight, and also mirrors the narrative of the nineteenth century domestic novel's didactic ending, in which self-reliance and spiritual faith are rewarded with love and security. However, Robinson does not leave this as a neat and secure solution to the challenges of orphanhood. While more hopeful than *Housekeeping*, which left Ruth and Sylvie as an incomplete family, separated from Lucille, and drifting in an insecure and uncertain future, Robinson shows the ongoing challenges for Lila. Lila explains how fragile this sense of security is, when her age difference from Ames means that she knows it is likely she will have to face his loss: "She couldn't lean her whole weight on any of this when she knew she would have to live on after it" (255). Lila's newly discovered dependence is thus not about complete absorption into another human, but she has to maintain a sense of her own self-reliance to prepare for an uncertain future. Taylor suggests that "Vulnerability and dependence can be unsettling as they are states that require intimacy, empathy, and self-reflection, but they also hold the potential for new ways of being, supporting and communicating" (Taylor 124). Robinson similarly shows the fear and risk involved in being open to dependence and love: Lila's future does not

come with a guarantee of emotional security, but it has opened her to a more fulfilling present.

Neither is this feeling of insecurity unique to her relationship to Ames, but rather it is shown to reflect the fragility of human love more broadly, where the threat of loss is constant. As she looks at her son, we are told: "That is how it is. Lila had borne a child into a world where a wind could rise that would take him from her arms as if there were no strength in them at all. Pity us, yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear" (261). Interdependence is revealed as a fragile web, which can be torn at any moment: humans can die or leave, just as the natural environment can ravage and destroy, rather than shelter. However, it is self-reliance that allows humans the ability to survive the severing of these connections, marked by a wildness that humans share with the broader natural world. Lila thus understands her son's individuality alongside his dependence, and she frames this in terms of orphanhood: "That orphan he was first he always would be, no matter how they loved him. He'd be no child of hers, otherwise" (256). Her son therefore is born as dependent and loved by both his parents, but he is also an orphan, marked by his individualism, and does not belong to her. Thus, for Robinson, dependence and self-reliance ultimately sit side by side: the fragility and the bravery.

When read together *Housekeeping* and *Lila* use the trope of the female orphan, as in the nineteenth century, to examine an alternative model of independence for women. As for Alcott and Stowe, this is an exploration of freedom rooted in a young woman's experience in the American landscape. However, as in the other novels examined thus far, in *Lila* Robinson ultimately rejects a full separation from the domestic. Like Morrison, she dismisses the traditional domestic ideal as modelled by

Lucille and the other women of Fingerbone, which demands restriction and separation within the domestic sphere of the house. However, while she separates from the "homespun virtues" of domesticity in their traditional, limiting context, she struggles to escape from their racial terms. Although she exposes a white domestic ideal founded on the exclusion of a racial other, both novels avoid an explicit engagement with the reintegration of this figure, much as Obama selectively draws on his own racial identity in their interview.

Nevertheless, in *Lila* particularly, Robinson extricates from the "homespun virtues" of domesticity the "different voice" rooted in the ethic-of-care, from which the nineteenth century orphan created her network of sympathy. As in her conversation with Obama, she extends this to suggest the importance of interdependence, and this contains the seeds of a greater inclusivity. *Lila* examines and repositions the concept of dependence, emphasising the importance of human reliance on each other, as well as within the broader context of the natural world. For Robinson the ethic-of-care begins, as Obama also suggests, with an expanded sense of the human community. In "Surrendering Wilderness," she explains the importance of establishing a human ethic-of-care in order to be able to extend this to the natural world: "Every environmental problem is a human problem. Civilization is the ecology being lost. We can do nothing that matters if we cannot encourage its rehabilitation" ("Surrendering Wilderness" 64). To care about the environment, she suggests, is inseparable from caring about the action of humans, and a moral ethic-of-care is thus central to family, nation and to the preservation of our broader ecosystem.

In Chapter 5 I examine further this ecodomestic interest in affect, considering its expansion to a more overtly didactic message. As in the nineteenth century, and as seen

in Robinson's novels, this draws on affective concerns to posit a voice of alternative spiritual authority. In Kingsolver's novel, however, the questioning of established institutions of power does not result primarily in internal reflection, as seen in Alcott and Robinson's writing, but as in Stowe's work, in a political call for societal change. I continue to analyse the exclusion of the racial other from the white domestic ideal and the association of blackness with the wild landscape, and explore how Kingsolver, like Morrison, addresses this more directly in her novel.

Chapter 5: "Conquering and Taming the Wild": American Domesticity and an Ecofeminist Ethic of "Engaged Empathy" in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver relocates the American family home to colonialism's "heart of darkness": the African jungle that stands as a central literary image of non-Western savagery and wildness. In doing so, she forces a re-examination of home as a civilised, separate space set against an untamed, foreign landscape; an image that underpins American imperialism. In her essay on the nineteenth century domestic novel, "Manifest Domesticity," Amy Kaplan explains that the construction of the American home relies on a continuous separation from the foreign: "The border between the domestic and foreign... deconstructs when we think of domesticity not as a static condition but as the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien" (582). Kaplan argues that in creating and maintaining an image of home, the domestic novel is continually engaged with overcoming and subduing the foreign and, therefore, the foreign is a critical presence in these texts. Although she does not explore domesticity's connection to the landscape, her argument implicitly underscores its significance to the construction of the foreign. The home in the nineteenth century is imagined in opposition to a foreign space constructed as "wild" and "natural," an otherness framed in terms of an untamed environment. To extend Kaplan's reading of domesticity, therefore, is to understand that the American home is not only intrinsically connected to the foreign, but to a conceptualisation of the foreign founded on a construction of the exterior landscape as uncontrolled and in need of subjugation.

In this chapter, I analyse *The Poisonwood Bible* as an example of a contemporary text that exposes this process of "taming the wild" at the centre of domesticity, and I explore the space of learning this engenders in relation to home, nation and natural world. In reading this as an ecodomestic text, which calls for the development of an environmental awareness in relation to domesticity, I also address the broader question in this thesis of how the religious and moral didacticism of the nineteenth century domestic novel is extended in the contemporary version of the genre.

The Poisonwood Bible is a highly intertextual book, referencing texts from *The King James Bible*, to Conrad, to Achebe; critics are only beginning to explore its literary connections, and yet its place within the domestic novel genre remains understudied.²⁹ Kristin Jacobson reads *The Poisonwood Bible* most explicitly as a revision of the nineteenth century domestic novel in its focus on the house, home, and domestic ideology, explaining that while "conventional domestic fiction orders, normalizes, and sustains the household," Kingsolver's text is a "neodomestic novel" that "destabilizes the model home and the roles defined by it" (Jacobson 105-6). While Jacobson's critique is helpful in thinking about Kingsolver's revisionist approach, particularly to domestic space, her analysis also creates an unproblematic separation of nineteenth century domesticity as traditionalist, and the contemporary novel as revisionary.

She acknowledges, in particular, Kingsolver's debt to Louisa May Alcott in the parallels between *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Little Women*, and suggests that Kingsolver's text resists the reproduction of a stable home seen in Alcott's novel (Jacobson 107). However, this reading somewhat simplifies Alcott's exploration of

²⁹ See William F. Purcell for the text's relationship to the story of St Francis of Assisi and Pamela H. Demory for an exploration of the influence of *Heart of Darkness*.

female resistance to domestic conformity, seen especially in the character of Jo March.³⁰ Conversely, it is Jo's independence as a writer that seems to have attracted Kingsolver to the text. In her essay explaining the fiction that has inspired her writing, Kingsolver states: "I, personally, am Jo March, and if her author Louisa May Alcott had a whole new life to live for the sole pursuit of talking me out of it, she could not" ("In Case You Ever Want to Go Home Again" 44). It is Jo's position as a writer and a figure of resistance to expected gender norms of the time, which has led to her influence on a broad range of intellectual women.³¹ Like these women, Kingsolver appears to have been drawn to Jo's nonconformism.

My interest, then, is less in how *The Poisonwood Bible* reacts against the conservative values of the nineteenth century genre, but in how the text extends the radicalism of writers like Alcott and Stowe. In interview, Kingsolver directly addresses the difference from Alcott's text: "Certainly I considered that other famous family as I was writing this. It was one of the most beloved books of my childhood. But the parallels don't go too far. Louisa May Alcott didn't put any snakes in her book, that I recall" ("About *The Poisonwood Bible*"). Kingsolver's inclusion of the snake emphasises, most obviously, the relocation of this American family to the Congo as the novel "highlights domestic ideology's hidden connections to an Africanist, or foreign, presence" (Jacobson 109). Kingsolver places her family of women and their household directly in Africa, where they must face the assumptions about blackness that proscribe the life they live at home in segregated 1950s Georgia. As Jacobson suggests, this is a

³⁰ The pressures of the publishing industry at the time also meant that Alcott was asked to marry off Jo against her wishes.

³¹ Elaine Showalter outlines some examples, including Joyce Carol Oates, Gertrude Stein, and Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote: "I identified myself passionately with Jo, the intellectual...she was more tomboyish and daring than I was" (Showalter *Little Women* vii)

revision to Alcott's novel, and other nineteenth century domestic novels that shared this obfuscation of the centrality of black labour and exploitation to the white home.

However, Kingsolver's direct exploration of domesticity, wildness and blackness may also be read as an extension of the work of writers such as Stowe, who were directly engaged with the moral question of slavery.

While I return to Kingsolver's use of the shifting symbol of the snake, tracing its winding path through the text, this chapter follows the novel's didactic logic from an analysis of the process of "conquering and taming the wild" in the home, nation and as a colonial power, to the educational growth of the central female characters, as they redefine their relationship both to domesticity and to the natural world. I argue, like Jane Tompkins, that the aim of the nineteenth century domestic novel was "anything but domestic, in the sense of being limited to purely personal concerns" (Tompkins 146). Its objectives were "global," and it is this concern that Kingsolver extends in her novel, particularly in relation to the construction of the landscape (Tompkins 146).

1950s Domesticity and the Eradication of the Wild

The term "wild" has two primary areas of meaning: firstly it refers to the physical environment, that is to animals, plants, and geographic space; and, secondly, it is used to describe uncontrolled human behaviour. The meaning of the word 'wild' when used to describe one of these referents, either physical environment or human attribute, is defined in relation to its opposite, as a lack: "not tame," "not cultivated," "not domesticated" (*OED*). Domesticity, as it seeks to separate itself from wildness can thus be seen to rely on it, through the process of elimination, of taming and cultivating, in

order to attempt to create and maintain this opposition. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver exposes the way that this attempt to remove the wild from the domestic sphere functions at the two levels outlined above: both from the American family within the house and from the surrounding physical environment. The first two thirds of the novel take place in the Congo between 1959 and 1961, but they reflect back on the family's earlier life in Georgia in the post-war period, and suggest this as a key moment in the shaping of American domesticity.

At the centre of the domestic sphere is the figure of the mother, and it is Orleanna, the mother of the Price family in *The Poisonwood Bible*, in whom Kingsolver reveals this elimination of the wild most clearly. Orleanna recounts strong memories of her childhood love of nature but, like Sylvia in *Moods*, she has to learn to erase this connection to the wildness of the landscape as she becomes an adult. She recalls her explorations of nature as a child:

On the outskirts of Pearl lay a wilderness. There we discovered pitcher-plant bogs where we'd hike up our dresses, sink on our knees in the rich black muck and stare carnivory right in the lips, feeding spiders to the pitcher plants. This is what I worshipped and adored as a child: miracles of a passionate nature. (220).

Orleanna's memory is of an area of wildness at the edge of the civilised space of the town, and the bog is established in opposition to the restrictions of femininity at home. Her response to the wild noticeably combines the spiritual and sensual, discovering her own "miracles" through a "passionate" physical response to the land. It is this same sensuality that attracts her to Nathan's preaching as a young woman: "Oh, I wanted those green pastures. I could taste the pale green sweetness of the blade of wheat, stripped and sucked between my teeth" (221). Orleanna's attraction to the natural world, to a religious conversion, and to the voice of male authority that mediates the

construction of the landscape through his preaching, is thus very similar to that of Sylvia in *Moods*. She is drawn by an understanding of the wild landscape as a space of physical and spiritual freedom.

However, Orleanna's religious conversion and her marriage to Nathan stand in stark opposition to this. After her marriage, as Nathan watches her completing her household tasks, her physical response to the natural environment has become a source for his, and by extension God's, disapproval: "The eyes of God were watching, he gave me to know. If I stood still for a moment in the backyard between hanging up sheets to notice the damp grass tingling under my bare feet, His eyes observed my idleness" (227). Her marriage does not expand her exploration of the landscape and, instead, Nathan insists on conformity to a tightly controlled domestic sphere. This demands her increasing separation from the physical environment and confinement to the house, and she must also hide and repress her female body. As their marriage progresses, Nathan "regaled her with words and worse, for curtains unclosed or slips showing - the sins of womanhood," demanding she conceal any exposure of her body to the eyes of others (78). Whereas Orleanna's "passionate" response to the bog and her attraction to Nathan, suggests the landscape as a space allowing exploration of her developing sexuality, Nathan's reads this as a "wildness," a sin to be eradicated.

In Nathan's construction of landscape, Orleanna's association with the wild stands as a broader reminder of the biblical sin of Eve's temptation, the "sins of womanhood" leading to the fall of man. Eve is similarly drawn to the pleasures of the natural world: tempted by the serpent, she eats from the tree of knowledge, seeing that "it was pleasant to the eyes and a tree to be desired" (Gen. 3.6). For Nathan, the containment of Orleanna to the domestic sphere thus becomes supported by a religious

justification, which provides a further rationale for his physical abuse. Consequently, Orleanna's imagining of the landscape is gradually suppressed by Nathan: "If there was still some part of a beautiful heathen girl in me...and if her heart still pounded on Georgia nights when the peeper frogs called out from roadside ditches, she was too dumbfounded to speak up for herself" (228). While her description reveals she has internalised Nathan's designation of her as sinful, her recognition of the "beautiful heathen" inside suggests she has sublimated rather than eradicated this wild self. Moreover, the novel allows Orleanna's inner voice to be heard through her narration, via which she reveals Nathan's own sins of physical and psychological abuse and critiques his patriarchal interpretation of Christianity.

Kingsolver shows the formation of Orleanna's domestic identity as a young woman, through flashback, but also depicts her full transformation as the wife and mother at the centre of the 1950s household. Through the present day narrative, particularly, the novel extends the concerns of the nineteenth century domestic novel to the 1950s. As Demory notes: "The ideal of the American Eisenhower-era homemaker represented in *The Poisonwood Bible* has marked similarities to the Victorian Angel in the House" (Demory 184). However, the novel's representation of the domestic ideal serves to critique it, much as seen in *Moods*, in Sylvia's dissatisfaction with the offered models of feminine womanhood. Clearly influenced by Betty Friedan, whose importance Kingsolver acknowledges in interview, the novel reveals the post-war return of women to the domestic sphere and the development of this ideology of domestic femininity, or what Friedan terms "the feminine mystique" ("Interview" *Appalachian Journal* 311; Friedan 38). Friedan suggests this ideal "makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence...into a religion, a pattern by which all women

must now live or deny their femininity" (Friedan 38). Kingsolver similarly suggests that this ideology expands beyond Nathan's individual religious perspective, and is reinforced through a wider, national belief system.

In its focus on girlhood, like its nineteenth century counterparts, *The Poisonwood Bible*, examines the model of womanhood offered to its protagonists. The novel exposes and critiques the widespread reinforcement of domestic ideology to young women of the 1950s. Rachel, the eldest daughter, who is in adolescence when they arrive in Africa, is obsessively concerned about her femininity: "a girl whose only hopes for the year were a sweet-sixteen party and a pink mohair twin set" (33). Already, like Orleanna, she is learning to erase the signs of dirt and police her own body into compliant feminine behaviour: longing for white gloves and "five-day deodorant pads," and incessantly "scrubbing the deep-seated impurities of the Congo out of my skin" (50; 26; 203). Friedan outlines young womanhood as a key moment in the establishment of this ideology of femininity in the period:

The real crime, no matter how profitable for the American economy, is the callous and growing acceptance of the manipulator's advice 'to get them young' - the television commercials that children sing or recite even before they learn to read...the magazines deliberately designed to turn teenage girls into housewife buyers of things before they grow up to be women (203).

Like Friedan, the novel implicates advertising as playing a central role in creating acquiescence to this feminine ideal. Rachel recites advertisements verbatim for deodorants, hair products and Carnation instant milk, revealing adolescence as a key stage in the formation of a compliant womanhood (167).

The significant influence of advertisements extends into womanhood, as is shown in Orleanna, who displays a similar attachment to them, putting up pictures from magazines around the house of "housewives, children, and handsome men from

cigarette ads" (129). The formation of this feminine ideal, shaped in girlhood and enforced as an adult, is thus revealed as fundamentally connected to broader American economic interests. Friedan outlines the significant participation of American corporations in the creation and maintenance of this:

The manipulators and their clients in American business can hardly be accused of creating the feminine mystique. But they are the most powerful of its perpetuators; it is their millions which blanket the land with persuasive images, flattering the American housewife, diverting her guilt and disguising her growing sense of emptiness. (Friedan 200-1).

Friedan highlights the role of businesses in creating and selling products that support an increasingly complex ideal for women within the home. Rachel and Orleanna interpret these advertisements as entertaining and attractive but their own family, subjugated by Nathan's abuse, bears little resemblance to these idealised images of domesticity. Kingsolver thus extends Nathan's control of Orleanna to a wider commercial sphere, implicating American corporate practice in the creation of this feminine ideal, and presenting its attractive, rather than abusive face.

Just as the advertisements for the period reinforce the eradication of the wild from the female body, as seen in Rachel's preoccupation with expunging dirt from her body, this project is extended to encompass the space of the home. As well saving her pictures of the ideal American family, Orleanna also brings with her a memory of: "the image of a popular advertising campaign from home that pictured teams of very soiled children under the bold invocation: CLOROX NEEDED HERE!" (104). In contrast to her joyful celebration of the muck of the swamp, Orleanna becomes engaged in a battle against the invasion of dirt, insects, and other traces of external wildness within the home. Amongst her magazine pictures, she pins up a picture of Eisenhower: "A beacon from home, reminding me of our purpose" (365; 130). Orleanna's preoccupation with

Clorox bleach, read within the framework of the "purpose" she shares with Eisenhower, becomes a potent symbol of the broader 1950s American project of "whiteness": the domestic political project of segregation.³²

Kingsolver explains how her own time in the Congo as a child reframed her understanding of American race relations: "To come home from that world to the world of Carlisle, Kentucky, in 1963, which was segregated, absolutely segregated, gives you a whole new way of looking at your home" ("Interview" *Appalachian Journal* 309). Similarly, in *The Poisonwood Bible*, she uses both the family's relocation to the Congo, and the standpoint of a young girl, to illuminate the prejudices of 1950s Georgia. The racist ideology and practices of segregation are revealed through the naive voice of Ruth May, the youngest narrator (Demory 187). The innocent young child exposing adult corruption is also a narrative device common to the nineteenth century novel, seen most famously in Stowe's *Little Eva*. However, rather than voicing an angelic purity, Ruth May "unknowingly repeats intolerant or offensive phrases she has heard [and] exposes adult prejudices" (Chandler 335). In her initial encounter with the Congolese people, she notes:

Noah cursed all Ham's children to be slaves for ever and ever. That's how come them to turn out dark. Back home in Georgia they have their own school....

³² David A. Nichols and Jim Newton, in fact, argue convincingly that Eisenhower's legacy in relation to civil rights has been historically underestimated (Newton 356; Nichols 278). Responsible for the desegregation of the District of Columbia and the armed forces, and the appointment of several progressive Supreme Court justices, he also took steps to enforce the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision, most notably through military interaction at Little Rock (Nichols 1). Nevertheless, as I explain, Kingsolver's direct experience of the segregated south informs her strong critique of Eisenhower's presidency.

The man in church said they're different from us and needs ought to keep to their own. Jimmy Crow says that, and he makes the laws. (23).

As Elaine Ognibene demonstrates, Ruth May's voice underlines the dangerous naivety and ignorance of both colonial racism and Christian rhetoric (Ognibene 29). While she appears to confuse the blackness of the people of Kilanga, the segregation of Georgia, and the institution of slavery, her conflation of these racial prejudices in fact reveal their interconnection.

The story of Ham and the ensuing curse of Canaan by Noah was widely used as a religious explanation for black skin in nineteenth century America (Stowe also engages with this debate in *Dred*). David M. Goldenberg explains: "This biblical story has been the single greatest justification for black slavery for more than a thousand years. It is a strange justification indeed, for there is no reference in it to Blacks at all" (1). By informing his brothers when he finds his father drunk and naked, Ham does not conform to the Christian requirement to 'honour thy father,' and when Noah awakens, he punishes Ham by making his son, Canaan, a slave to his brothers (Gen. 9.21-5). Noah, like Nathan, uses the transgression of domestic authority as a justification for his abuse. Much as Eve's sin comes to stand for Orleanna's, Ham's sin is projected onto an entire race; the novel thus again exposes dangerous and inaccurate biblical interpretation and suggests a shared construction of people who were black and those who resisted feminine conformity as "undomesticated" or "wild." Moreover, Ruth May's confusion consequently suggests how this unstable religious justification for slavery was expanded to inform the Jim Crow laws of segregation. Christopher Douglas further suggests the 1950s policies of segregation extend as far as the contemporary environment of right-wing Christianity in which Kingsolver was writing:

"Christian segregationism was the political and cultural ancestor of the conservative Christian resurgence" (144). Ruth May's repetition of the teachings of the church through the story of Ham suggest an even longer, complex legacy of racism rooted in religious rhetoric.

Just as Orleanna's housecleaning may be read as a reinscription of the national project to separate the homeland of America from an imagined wild Other, Nathan's own domestic project in the garden represents an extension of American colonialism. Leah observes of their gardening: "The grace of our good intentions made me feel wise, blessed, and safe from snakes" (42). Extending the domestication project outside of their white American home and into the taming and cultivation of a garden foregrounds the removal of the "snake," the symbol of wildness Kingsolver has placed at the centre of the text. This gardening project is thus a key image in the novel, used by Kingsolver to reveal the critical role of the imagined representation of landscape in the construction of the domestic/wild dualism. Nathan establishes an opposition of the land as a space of cultivation against the vision of an untamed wilderness, in a project of manifest destiny that mirrors the rhetoric of American expansionism.

The garden marks a liminal space between the domesticity of the house and the wildness of the natural environment, and is a significant point at which the process of domestication takes place. In Nathan's determination to sow his seed(s), as with the "Big Boy" tomatoes that he has chosen to plant, Kingsolver signals his domestic project as a patriarchal one, founded in domination of the land (41). His planting recalls that of Bob in *Good Will*, as well as Thoreau's bean-fields, and even Eisenhower's time spent working in the family vegetable garden, further suggesting a male tradition of self-sufficiency (*Walden* 140; Newton 10). With these seeds he plans a "demonstration

garden", believing he will teach the local Congolese how to cultivate nature (41). Leah explains: "He beat down a square of tall grass and wild pink flowers, all without ever once looking at me. Then he bent over and began to rip out long handfuls of grass with quick energetic jerks as though tearing out the hair of the world" (42). His domination of the African jungle is described with the imagery of violent abuse, beating, ripping, tearing, that mirrors his abuse of Orleanna, as he extends the domestic process from within to outside the house. Kingsolver thus suggests the domestic project much as Robinson does, not primarily defined by its association with the feminine but rather as an assertion of masculine power. This is a radical challenge to the construction of domesticity as a space of empowerment for women, based on their association with feminine skills and particularly those associated with motherhood, as presented by Stowe and Alcott. Instead, like Morrison and Robinson, Kingsolver challenges the concept of female domestic power, exposing a strong connection between domesticity and patriarchal domination, and suggests this as a space of powerlessness and abuse for both the Price women and the land itself.

This is an ideology which, Kingsolver therefore suggests, is not unique to Nathan but that has its roots in a longer lineage of American patriarchy. "I've been tending soil ever since I could walk behind my father," he boasts to Mama Tataba, the housekeeper, dismissing her knowledge (47). Nathan's vision of the garden as a space of cultivation and control can hence be read within a broader, national ideology of the homestead. This is outlined most clearly in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), in which he attempts to define the American national character to his English correspondent: "We are a people of cultivators....We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works

for himself" (40). Crèvecoeur advocates the individualism of the single family household, headed by a patriarch, and working the land to support themselves. This concept of cultivation is tied to the history of white European settlement of the land. As he considers joining a Native American community later in the text, at the onset of the war, he explains: "As long as we keep ourselves busy in tilling the earth, there is no fear of any of us becoming wild" (222). He thus connects cultivation with domestication: a process that serves both to hold at bay the "wildness" of the native natural environment and its people, and also marks the point at which the identity of the American family is formed. Nathan's gardening is a similar project of domestic cultivation, working the land in part to provide food for the family, but also in order to assert his identity against the perceived 'wildness' of Africa.

Furthermore, Nathan's project to domesticate the land is shown not only as an extension of a national and patriarchal ideology, but one rooted in Christian doctrine. As Susan Strehle argues, the novel is a critique of American exceptionalism, of Americans as divinely chosen to create the promised land. But this American exceptionalism is also inseparable from the concept of cultivation: this land will literally be made, shaped by American hands to fulfil its promise. As a missionary, Nathan believes his aim to domesticate both the land and its people is supported by the religious authority of God. Leah observes: "my father needs permission only from the Saviour, who obviously is all in favour of subduing the untamed wilderness for a garden" (42). He envisions a "a big balanced scale," in which the harder the work put into cultivating the land, the greater the reward from God for his labour (43). Nathan's belief that "it's God's own will to cultivate the soil" closely resembles Thomas Jefferson's statement in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people

of God" (47; 157). Also influenced by Crèvecoeur, Jefferson both presented the cultivation of the land as fundamental to the American character and depicted this domestication and settlement of the land as divinely sanctioned. Through these parallels Kingsolver reveals how this ideology has been employed to justify American expansionism: from the European settlement of America and the founding of the republic, directly through to the US imperialist involvement in the contemporary context of the Congolese struggle for independence.

Kingsolver, however, is highly critical of this domestic ideology as is seen in the complete failure of Nathan's garden. Ignoring Mama Tataba's advice, and insisting on his own, divinely approved knowledge, Nathan creates a flat seed bed that is subsequently washed away in a heavy rainfall (73). Nathan interprets this as a divine lesson, a test of his commitment to the project, and vows to replant. When he does so, he uses the mounds that Mama Tataba has suggested to protect the seeds from the rain, but he gives her no credit for the idea, and Adah notes "he might never admit in this lifetime that it was not his idea in the first place" (73). Following the replanting, Nathan's garden flourishes but it produces no vegetables: "In exchange for our honest sweat we'd so far earned flowers and leaves, but nothing we could actually have for supper" (89-90). Kingsolver thus uses the garden as a metaphor to critique the arrogance of American expansionism: Nathan's insistence on the superiority of his perspective and his failure to embrace the wildness of the land has resulted, not in his divine dominance, but rather in the failure of his own domestic ideal. Even if the US domestic project appears to produce fruitful rewards at home, she suggests the inadequacy of transplanting American ideology overseas with no respect or cultural understanding. Faced with starvation, and struggling to survive, Kingsolver reveals

through Nathan the patriarchal project of American colonialism as a process that, in fact, threatens the survival of the American family.

1950s American Imperialism and the Heart of Darkness

While, in Leah's eyes, Nathan's project to cultivate the land marks an attempt to keep the "snake" at bay, removing the African 'wildness' from the domestic space of their home, Kingsolver extends this metaphor to US political relations with Africa.

Imagining the meeting between the Belgians and the Americans, plotting the future of the Congo, Kingsolver describes the room:

The panelling of this office once breathed the humid air of a Congolese forest, gave shelter to life, felt the scales of snake belly on its branches. Now the planks hold their breath, with their backs to the wall....they are now mute spies in the house built by foreigners. (361-2).

This snake has had its habitat destroyed, as the wild, Congolese jungle has been tamed to form the office walls. The imagery of the breathing forest intertwines the human and nonhuman experience in the Congo, suggesting a project of American colonialism that has destroyed both jungle and Congolese people. Both have been forced into silence to serve US domestic interests, as the men in the room plot the assassination of Lumumba and threaten to destroy Congolese independence in order to control the country's resources, such as the cobalt and diamond mines (506). While the political climate of 1950s America created an association of domesticity with white Americans, set against a segregated black underclass, Kingsolver suggests American politics overseas extended this dichotomy to establish an American "homeland" against "foreign" countries presented as wild, savage and chaotic. Kingsolver's novel challenges the idea of domestic political policy as a separate sphere; rather the ideology of domesticity

connects home, nation, and beyond America to its imperialist intervention in international affairs.

Once again, Kingsolver highlights the imagery of wildness as critical in the process of domestication, of reaffirming the policies of the American homeland in an international context. She imagines the actual meeting that took place between the National Security Council and President Eisenhower, at which Lumumba was declared a danger to the world and considers his response:

Imagine if he could have heard those words...from a roomful of white men who held in their manicured hands the disposition of armies and atomic bombs, the power to extinguish every life on earth. Would Lumumba have screamed like a cheetah? Or merely taken off his glasses, wiped them with his handkerchief, shaken his head, and smiled? (363-4).

The image of Lumumba as thoughtful and intellectual contrasts with the image of wildness portrayed by the cheetah baring its teeth, and underscores the irony of powerful and corrupt leaders imagining him as the danger. Kingsolver's imagined construction of Lumumba's association with the wild is reflected in Eisenhower's actual wish that he would "fall into a river of crocodiles" (qtd. in Newton 327). It is these white men who have hunted, captured, and subdued the wildness of the Congo and its people, and who come to plot against Lumumba himself. In contrast, when Leah hears Lumumba speak at his inauguration as Prime Minister, she notes: "I have seen preachers at revival meetings speak like that, with voices rising in such a way that heaven and anger get mingled together" (208). Like Stowe and Morrison, Kingsolver uses the image of an alternative revival meeting to suggest a different spiritual and moral authority to that of Nathan's in the pulpit.

The image of Lumumba's supposed wildness is echoed in the Price daughters' received understanding of the Congolese people, unconsciously repeated by them

throughout the early sections of the text. This is seen most crudely from Ruth May's Sunday School classmate who, uncorrected by their teacher, tells her "the cannibal natives would boil us in a pot and eat us up" (24). This image, like that of Lumumba as a dangerous cheetah, is a racial stereotype of the Congolese as savage and animalistic, defined by their wildness in contrast to an implied idea of American civility. This racist image is shown to extend to a broader national context, as Adah explains: "Bongo Bango Bingo. That is the story of Congo they are telling now in America: a tale of cannibals" (200). The vision of the savage is critical in combining the image of blackness and wildness as a trope of foreignness, set in binary opposition to the civilised white American family.

The threat of the wild reaches its exposition in the dramatic climax of the novel, as Ruth May, the youngest daughter, is bitten and killed by a snake. In including this scene, Kingsolver draws on a central device of the nineteenth century domestic novel: the "sentimental" scene depicting the death of a child. As Jacobson points out, this is a moment in the novel that references the death of Beth in *Little Women*, but it also draws on such scenes more widely across the genre and seen, perhaps most famously, in the death of Little Eva in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Jacobson 52). These scenes are used to reinforce the moral message of the text: in her dying state, the child is close to heaven and therefore acts as a divine messenger. Thus Beth's death highlights the message of self-sacrifice the March girls must learn to support their family, and Eva's death underlines the humanity of Uncle Tom. Chandler suggests "It is ironic that the mamba, one metaphor in this novel for the natural world and for Africa, is what kills the innocent," and certainly Ruth May's death appears to fulfil the threat of the exoticised African wild in contrast to the secure American home (Chandler 336). If the Price

family had not come to Africa, if they had returned sooner to the safety of their home in America, Ruth May might not have died. She is also killed both by the bite of the snake itself, the symbol of the dangerous African wild, and because it has been placed in their chicken house by the *nganga* Kuvudundu, the village witch doctor (413). The wildness of both the Congolese jungle and the supposed savagery of its people thus appears confirmed in this breach of the security of the white American home, resulting in the death of the most vulnerable: the female child.

However, in the nineteenth century novel, the death of the child marks a complex moment in which the conventions of domesticity are reproduced, emphasising family ties and feminine fragility, but are also challenged. Thus Beth's death prompts Jo's artistic rebirth, and Eva's death the call to abolish slavery. The moral message of this text is thus deliberately less stable than it might initially appear. This is a "Poisonwood" Bible, which by its very name challenges Nathan's American evangelical and patriarchal interpretation of a religious parable. Called after a native plant and related by the voices of women, this is a text that highlights nuanced interpretation and that listens to unheard voices. In Kikongo, the word for poisonwood is *bangala*, which refers to the tree and means "something precious and dear," but Nathan misunderstands and misuses the term, and in his pronunciation he unintentionally and repeatedly uses it to describe Jesus as "most insufferable" (312; 571). Nathan's misunderstanding of the word further suggests his misinterpretation of the biblical text: because he does not pay attention to either the local culture or the voices of his daughters, Kingsolver suggests the broader failure of his moral message. Within the novel, the metaphor of the snake similarly has a shifting interpretation; understood as the threat of the wild, this meaning is continually challenged through its changing referents.

The chapter containing Ruth May's death is entitled *Bel and the Serpent*, and the scene refers to two episodes from the Bible: that of the temptation of Eve and the Fall of Man in Genesis, and *Bel and the Dragon*, which is found in the Apocrypha, in the extended Book of Daniel. In the story of *Bel*, Daniel exposes the corrupt priests who consume and collect the offerings left for *Bel*, an idol believed to be living by the King (*Bel and Dr.*). In the accompanying narrative, the Dragon is worshipped by the people of Babylon and slain by Daniel. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the Dragon is replaced by a serpent, standing both as a symbol of sin, as in Genesis, and of false worship, as in the Apocrypha. Nathan preaches from the latter, suggesting the Congolese worship false idols. However, as with his failure to grasp the cultural subtleties of the term *bangala*, his understanding of Congolese idolatry and sin is revealed as a fundamental cultural and moral misreading. The sin at the heart of this alternative, poisonwood/*bangala* Bible is, Kingsolver reveals, in fact his own.

DeMarr suggests: "The African snake, put in place by an African chieftain trying to maintain his power over his people and force out an alien intruder, is the direct cause of her death, but it is in truth both the land and the people of Africa who kill her" (DeMarr 131). However, this ignores Nathan's culpability in the events prior to Ruth May's death. As Jeanna Fuston White suggests: "Like Adam and Eve before the Fall, the villagers of Killanga are untainted by the sin of the White world, until Nathan ushers it in" (141). It is Nathan's insistence on the maintenance of the family's American domestic life, his refusal to listen to other voices, which both fails to protect and brings the threat of the wild to their door. Kuvudundu, the witch doctor, places the snake in their domestic space not through his own savagery, but as a warning because he has been angered by the burden of the family to the village during the drought. Similarly,

the dangerous worship of false idols in this village is revealed, conversely, to take place in Nathan's church, as his intervention into Congolese culture threatens their way of life. His desire to baptise the children in the crocodile-filled river risks their lives, and the drought is interpreted by the villagers as a divine punishment for his behaviour. Ruth May's death thus comes as a direct result of Nathan's attempt as a missionary to dominate and control the local villagers.

The Price family journey from 'civilised' America to the wildness of the Congo clearly also alludes to Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899). As Demory suggests, Orleanna "has followed her own 'Kurtz' into the heart of Africa, has confronted death and horror in the jungle, and has returned - without him - to ponder her complicity in what happened there" (Demory 187). However, it is not the African jungle but her marriage to Nathan that she describes in these terms: "I was lodged in the heart of darkness, so thoroughly bent to the shape of my marriage I could hardly see any other way to stand" (228). The centre of wild savagery for Orleanna, then, is not the Congo or its people, but her own home life. Just as Nathan's treatment of the Congolese people reveals his own sin, it is through his domestic abuse that he reveals his own savage nature: the wild 'heart of darkness' upon which their home is constructed. As the girls reunite in later years, Leah explains that, as she heard news of her father, who remained in the Congo: "The tales got wilder and wilder" (554). Following the departure of the family, Nathan becomes homeless and unkempt, and the local people believe he turns himself into a crocodile to attack local children (551). As Demory suggests Nathan is like Kurtz but "the rites [he] insists on practicing are Christian: it is his insane zealous goal of baptising all the children of Africa (in crocodile infested rivers) that is the mark of his madness" (Demory 189; DeMarr 122). The vision of the

Congolese as wild cannibals is therefore finally inverted, as Nathan gradually becomes the savage he tries to erase. Rachel reflects "he was mean as a snake" (551). The snake in the text, the symbol of savagery and heart of darkness at the centre of this domestic novel, is thus revealed, not as the Africanist presence of the Congo or its people, but as the patriarch of the family and figurehead of the church.

The girls' experience of the local tribal leaders means they also gradually form a different understanding of the Congo, in contrast to their received lessons of African wildness and savagery. Adah sees Kuvudundu leaving chicken bones outside their door but recognises "a kindness" in his eyes: "he means to protect us, really. Protect us from angry gods, and our own stupidity, by sending us away" (199-200). Adah sees that this witch doctor is not attempting to harm them with voodoo but is, in fact, trying to protect them from the danger they have caused to themselves. Similarly, Leah watches the chief, Tata Ndu, using Nathan's logic against him by organising a vote as to whether Jesus should be the personal god of the village. Tata Ndu uses this process to teach Nathan a lesson about the faults of a democratic system in which the majority wins, and which does not work to reach a mutual agreement (380). Leah listens and notes: "His glasses and tall hat did not seem ridiculous. They seemed like the clothes of a chief" (380). The imagery of the native savage is thus undercut by the revelation of the wisdom of these men in the face of Western ignorance.

This vision of inverted wildness is further extended to the representation of American imperialism in the text. As discussed, Nathan's ideological perspective is shown to be representative not of a separate domestic sphere of the family home, but also of the broader domestic policy of the United States in relation to foreign politics

with the Congo. Jim Newton explains the central place of covert intervention in the project of US imperialism during the 1950s:

In Iran - and later, Guatemala, Indonesia, and the Congo, among other places - covert action offered a way to check Communism while avoiding a frontal confrontation with the Soviets or Chinese. . . . But it substituted one version of colonialism with another, more subtle variant, relying as it did on the notion the U.S. reserved the right to chart the courses of smaller nations. (118).

There was an underlying paternalism expressed in the justification for such action, a belief that the US knew what was best and that the desire to prevent Soviet expansion came above the local interests of the nations involved. At the heart of US intervention in the Congo was a dark secret, revealed later in secret service files and of great interest to Kingsolver, who draws on this in the novel: US involvement in the assassination of Lumumba, ordered at the highest levels. Lumumba's priority was to secure full independence for the Congo from Belgian rule and he demanded the full withdrawal of Belgian troops; when the UN did not act, he called in Soviet help (Newton 326). It was this action that prompted a meeting of the US National Security Council on 18th August 1960:

What Eisenhower said - or did not say - next has been the object of inquiry by historians and investigators ever since. According to Robert Johnson, who kept the minutes of that meeting, Eisenhower indicated with words Johnson could not recall but that 'came across to me as an order for the assassination of Lumumba.' (Newton 327).

Whether or not he stated this, the action was certainly sanctioned as, a few days later, the CIA took action to depose Lumumba by whatever means were necessary, and he was captured, beaten, shot and killed (Newton 327; 347).

As Adah comes to understand the American involvement in the plot to kill Lumumba, she reattributes the image of the savage: "What sort of man would wish to murder the president of another land? None but a barbarian. A man with a bone in his

hair" (338). The barbarian, the personification of wildness is represented, not by the Congolese, but instead by the American President, and she thus reimagines Eisenhower: "the smiling bald man with the grandfather face has another face. It can speak through snakes and order that a president far away..., this president Lumumba shall be killed" (338). Like Nathan, Eisenhower becomes linked with the image of the serpent. The "other face" to the President's domestic policy is his foreign policy, which displays the conceptualisation of Congolese savagery upon which the "homeland" of America depends. This snake, this man with a bone in his hair, closely resembles the white savagery revealed by the system of slavery, as described by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*: "The screaming baboon lived under their own skin; the red gums were their own" (*Beloved* 199). Kingsolver similarly suggests that this wildness is sited, not in the Congo, but in the heart of darkness of America itself.

"Where is the place I can go home to?": Redefining domesticity

The deconstruction of the domestic/wild dualism results in a shattering of the ideal of American domesticity as they know it for Orleanna and her daughters, and also calls for them to find an alternative way to imagine the American landscape. Thus, as Jacobs suggests, the novel "also presents the 're-translation' of Orleanna and her surviving daughters, *out of* the Congo: Orleanna and Adah back *into* America" (Jacobs 109). As Robinson also explores, the destabilisation of domesticity results initially in homelessness, followed by the search for an alternative way to be at home, to belong in the world. As seen in *Lila* and also in Morrison's *Beloved*, this involves a rejection of individualism and a recognition of their reliance on the broader community and natural

environment. Thus, like these two other novels, the central female characters face, understand and accept the concept of dependence, not as a weakness but as an interdependence that is both humbling and empowering.

Set against the Jeffersonian concept of cultivation as divinely sanctioned work, supporting the creation of an individually contained, single family homestead, is the sin of dependence: "Dependence begets subservience and veniality, suffocates the germ of virtue" (Jefferson 157). The Price family constantly reassert their supposed self-sufficiency against an implicit reading of the Kilanga community as dependent and thus inferior. However, as Susan Strehle and Krista Ratcliffe suggest, the novel is: "an education story or Bildungsroman in which the narrators learn crucial lessons from their experience" (Strehle 423; Ratcliffe 909). Adah notices that, unlike their house, the rest of the village houses have "no door to knock on" (87) and: "No one here stays under a roof. It is in the front yards...where tired women in every thinkable state of dress and disrepair poke sticks into their little fires and cook" (36). The housework of the village women contrasts with that of Orleanna; instead of occupying a separate space indoors, these women are outside, and focused on working together to gather and make the food needed for survival. It is only after Nathan refuses Mama Tataba's help and she leaves, that Orleanna gains some insight into the challenges of managing the housework alone: "Every small effort at hygiene was magnified by hours of labour spent procuring the simplest elements: water, heat, anything that might pass for disinfectant" (105). Not only is it impossible for Orleanna to maintain the Clorox bleaching routine she has established at home, she struggles simply to gather the water and food necessary for the family, and she comes to recognise Mama Tataba as "she on whom our lives depended" (103). It thus gradually becomes evident that the dependence of the local

community on each other is a strength rather than a sign of subservience or inferiority: their shared labour both saves time and ensures their survival.

In a similar process of dawning cultural understanding, it is not until Leah faces her own direct encounter with the wildness of nature that she comes to see, not the strength of their domestic ideology, but its weakness. In a biblical reference to the story of Noah, a flood sweeps through the village and into their house, forcing the family to flee into boats. The flood itself consists, not of water, but of a plague of ants, moving like a black river. Reversing the concept of the domestication of the wild, this flood literally consumes their domestic space, eating everything in its path. Faced with the power of nature, the narrative of American expansionism, of founding fathers taming the wild and settling the land, is revealed for its mythology. Moreover, it is not Nathan, the Noah-like figure, who is the family's rescuer, but the Congolese community. Anatole takes Leah and Ruth May in his boat and onto the water to escape the ants, and he explains how the community has extended itself to help them: "Tata Boanda is carrying your mother and sister in his boat. Tata Leku is rowing his boat with leaves stuffed in his ears while your father lectures him....Did you know, Mama Mwanza sometimes puts eggs from her own chickens under your hens when you aren't looking?" (354). Forced to leave the house in the ant flood, Leah, like Morrison's Denver and Robinson's Lila, comes to understand the importance of the support of the local community, and must face her family's dependence upon them.

This recognition of their dependence, and the interdependence of the local villagers with each other, causes a radical shift in Leah's understanding of domesticity. Floating in the boat on the river while the ants consume her house, Leah asks "Where is the place I can go home to?" This is not only a reference to their ravaged house, but also

to her identity as an American: "Where is the land of ice-cream cones and new Keds sneakers and *We Like Ike*, the country where I thought I knew the rules" (353). Nathan's concept of God's "big balanced scale," through which he will reap the bountiful reward for his labour in the garden, has taught Leah to interpret the material goods and excess food in America, similarly, as a sign of abundant reward for the nation's superiority. However, the materialism of American domesticity is exposed as a useless tool for survival in the face of the ant flood and during the drought, exposing its inadequacy. Leah's experience of the African community and their support for her family during this disaster contradicts what she has been taught about their supposed racial inferiority, and this destabilises her understanding of the domesticity of both the American home and nation.

American domestic practices and policy based on an insular individualism not only become exposed as damaging to the American family, but hold wider reaching consequences. As Adah tries to explain the products in a supermarket to her nephew, Pascal, she is also forced into questioning routine domestic practices: "Why must some of us deliberate between brands of toothpaste, while others deliberate between damp dirt and bone dust to quiet the fire of an empty stomach lining" (498). She begins to connect the vast inequalities of first and third worlds, implying that the seemingly innocuous domestic practices of America rely on a materialism that demands the continual impoverishment of Africa. As Strehle suggests, the women of the novel are fundamentally changed by Africa, and come to view the world from a different perspective. Adah and Leah both learn, in particular, from Anatole who "sees it all clearly in an instant," "where poverty comes from, and where it goes" (498-9). It is Anatole who suggests the cause of the ant flood "No rain, not enough for the ants to eat"

(351). Connecting Anatole's analysis and Adah's observations is the suggestion that the destructive domestic practices of the American nation, the mass agricultural farming of the land and the pollution from the production of the material goods of the home, are implicated in the environmental damage of the African land.

Ruth May and Lumumba die on the same day, their parallel fates suggesting both the interconnection of these two nations and the dangerous consequences of this ideology for future generations. These events are the catalyst for the education of the women of the novel, and they depart from the home, suggesting a rejection of this domestic ideology and a refusal to participate any longer in its reproduction.

Domesticity is destabilised in the novel and, as Strehle observes, none of the women settle in an owner-occupied, permanent, single-family home (423). As Orleanna leaves the house, she takes all their possessions outside and gives them to the women of the village: "Such a bewildering excess of things we had for one single family, and how useless it all seemed now....This stuff cluttered my way. What relief, to place it in the hands of women who could carry off my burden" (435). In this act, she rejects the materialism of the American home, redistributing their excess belongings, while she symbolically embraces the community. She shares the family's possessions to support them as they have supported her family, and she unburdens her grief with the women of the village who have also lost children. The act acknowledges a dependence on the community that mirrors that of the Kilanga villagers in the yards outside of their houses. This marks a final rejection of American domesticity and a shift towards a model of interdependence founded in communitarianism, much as seen in *Beloved* and *Lila*.

Ruth May is the only daughter who remains at home, symbolically buried in the garden that Nathan has dug. As Strehle suggests, she is a victim of Nathan's patriarchal

ideology: "The dead Ruth May represents an even more perfect symbol for the silent acceptance Nathan cultivates in his children. Her wrapped body, planted in his 'Great Plains' garden, is the ironic fruit of his laboratory in the Congo" (422). However, her burial within the garden marks not only the point at which the remaining women of the family reject the domestic ideology of American imperialism (of home and nation): this action further stands as their rejection of the American agrarian conceptualisation of the landscape. The cultivation of the land, this burial suggests, has borne only the death of his daughter: Ruth May is the Price paid. Orleanna reflects on Nathan's failure that "his kind will always lose in the end....Whether it's wife or nation they occupy" because of an inability to understand the dynamism of this territory: "Even before the flagpole begins to peel and splinter, the ground underneath arches and slides forward into its own new destiny" (436-7). In this image of the colonial flagpole, claiming a stake to ownership and domination, the ground beneath is used to refer both metaphorically, to human change and resistance, but also literally, to a continually evolving natural world. This is the fast-growing jungle, a wildness that those like Nathan continue to underestimate. Just before Ruth May is buried, Leah explains that the former garden plot is no longer even visible and is covered in vines (321). As the women revisit the Congo, they ask a woman speaking the local language about Kilanga but she insists the village does not exist and "there is only a very thick jungle there" (613). In the agrarian ideology of American expansionism, the land exists solely to be cultivated, to be tamed and dominated by humans. However, the women of the novel come to learn quite the opposite: that it is the wild jungle that is far more powerful, or as Leah observes: "In Congo, it seems the land owns the people" (321).

Kingsolver reveals not only the futility of fighting this wildness, but the importance of respecting both its power and its intrinsic value. In her essay, "Infernal Paradise," in which she describes hiking through the landscape of a dormant volcano, she observes: "To love life, really, must mean caring not only for the garden plot but also the wilderness beyond the fence, beauty and mystery for their own sake, because how meagre a world would be without them" (205). This call to value the beauty of the natural environment is also seen in *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Orleanna, in particular, learns to love the wild following her time in the Congo. She rediscovers both "the beautiful heathen girl" inside herself, embracing her own freedom as she leaves Nathan, and she also develops a love of nature for its own sake, growing flowers in her garden. Adah explains: "Mother's shack is the mere peak of a roof surrounded by a blaze of pinks, blues, oranges" (464). Although her garden still represents cultivated land, and is located at the border of the domestic space of the house, this shows a very different domestic landscape. The flowers are riotous in their colour and size, dominating the house, and exist for their own beauty rather than for the value of their produce. Domesticity, the novel suggests, demands not a process of human conquering and domination, but a harmony with wildness.

The women of the novel learn, finally, to recognise the power of the wild. Even Rachel, who maintains a colonial lifestyle, acknowledges this: "You can't just sashay into the jungle aiming to change it all over to the Christian style, without expecting the jungle to change you right back" (584). Jeffrey Myers defines an ecocentric perspective as one which: "decenters humanity and repositions us as interconnected and on an equal plane with other beings in the natural world" (9). Although each woman responds differently to her experience in the Congo, the combined retelling of their stories reveals

an ecocentric ideology, which questions the concept of man in a hierarchical relation of power, both over human others and the natural world. In the novel this is seen particularly clearly in the Congolese language, Kikongo, which Leah and Adah learn. As Chandler observes, "many words in the Kilangese language ally humans with nature," revealing more complex relationships of existence (338). *Muntu* is the Kikongo word for human, both living and dead, and also for tree, and all other things are *kintu* (238). These words share the root of the word, "ntu," which is used to describe "All that is being here": the spirit shared in all things, which becomes alive when it is named (238). In Congolese, therefore, human and non-human nature are not separated, but are all imbued with the potential for life. Adah's understanding and then explanation of *muntu* or, more broadly, *ntu*, suggests an ecocentric approach to the relationship between humans and the environment, acknowledging that which is shared.

Nathan Kilpatrick suggests that "Each woman constructs a revised spirituality that results from her identification with the Congolese experience" (Kilpatrick 90). While Kilpatrick does not include Ruth May in this analysis, her perspective is central to the understanding of this spirituality in the text. While Orleanna learns to value the powerful growth of the flowers in her garden, Rachel grudgingly acknowledges the jungle's power, and Leah and Adah learn the shared existence of human and non-human nature through language, it is Ruth May who comes to symbolise the fullness of this connection to nature. Following her death, she becomes the green mamba snake that bit her, and her spirit finds a home in this symbol of savagery: "The glide of belly on branch. The mouth thrown open, sky blue. I am all that is here" (607). DeMarr suggests: "As the youngest child and the least formed, she is most open to achieving a nonverbal, nonintellectual union with the land" (DeMarr 132). Her merging with the

snake suggests the Congolese belief in a shared spirit of existence, *muntu* or *ntu*, that is shared between human and animal, while it also rewrites the symbol of wildness at the heart of the text. The snake is no longer only a sign of threat or sin because, while it stands as a symbol for Ruth May's death, it now also contains her spirit. In Ruth May as the snake, human and non-human nature merge, and the wild becomes, not something separate or distant, but an intrinsic, essential part of being.

Through the concept of an existence that is shared between the human and non-human in the natural world, Kingsolver thus posits a spirituality and relationship to the landscape in contrast to Nathan's evangelical christianity. Elaine Ognibene suggests that Leah's telling of the story of the garden is an alternative biblical tale to Nathan's: "Her garden story becomes a parable of the minister's inability to harvest either seeds or souls" (25). Leah's narrative reveals the actual failure of Nathan's project, her written thoughts in contrast to his own preaching of God's word. Extending Ognibene's reading, Kingsolver's rewriting of Noah's story in the ant flood, of Bel and the Dragon, and of her Poisonwood version of the Bible as a whole, marks a broader project to create a feminist spiritual narrative that contrasts with established patriarchal interpretations of Christianity. The text, therefore, fulfils an important function of the domestic novel genre: just as Stowe leads the reader to question the authority of the church in its interpretation of the Bible, or as Alcott reframes *The Pilgrim's Progress* in *Little Women*, Kingsolver posits a female moral counter-narrative. This is both a critique of Nathan's religious doctrine, as Ognibene suggests, but also the assertion of an alternative spirituality.

The question of how far this is a spirituality rooted in Christianity has recurred both in interview and in the novel's critical reception. In interview on BBC Radio 4's

Book Club, when asked if the book is anti-Christian, Kingsolver replies: "Absolutely not, and to make sure that my feelings on that were clear I invented the character of Brother Fowles who, in my opinion, is the very best kind of Christian." Brother Fowles visits the family and shares his alternative theological perspective as Nathan doggedly pursues his project of cultivation outside: "When I want to take God at his word exactly, I take a peep out the window at His Creation. Because *that*, darling, He makes fresh for us every day, without a lot of dubious middle managers" (279). As suggested by the window framing device, Brother Fowles's vision posits both an alternative reading of the text, and of the landscape, much as Kingsolver herself does, emphasising the challenges of translation and interpretation when reading the Bible. William Purcell suggests this perspective: "makes it difficult to call him a Christian in any discernible sense.... Fowles's Christianity is not a religious faith, but an ethical code" (9). However, Fowles's vision is pantheistic, identifying the universe as a manifestation of God, and thus while he affords respect to the natural world, he remains committed to the idea of God as a powerful, male Creator. Although Kingsolver admires Fowles, his is noticeably not the voice that narrates the story and his Christian vision is not the same as the concept of the shared spirit, "All that is here." Like Stowe, therefore, Kingsolver uses the domestic novel to challenge established religious institutions and also to suggest an alternative spirituality, based on the lived experience of women.

At the heart of the concept of "all that is here," is both the idea of that which is shared with the natural world, and also that which humans have in common with each other. The didacticism of this domestic novel focuses both on the guilt and complicity over the legacy of American imperialism, but the text extends beyond this, to advocate a human existence grounded in empathy. In her essay, "Jabberwocky," Kingsolver

describes the influence of Toni Morrison to her writing, having particularly admired *Beloved*: "Morrison carved the tragedy of those sixty million...into something small and dense and real enough to fit through the door, get in my heart, and explode" (232). The use of empathy that she identifies in Morrison's novel, and from the genre more broadly, can clearly be seen to be extended in *The Poisonwood Bible*. At the end of the book, as Ruth May speaks from the body of the green mamba snake, she says: "I am *muntu* Africa, *muntu* one child and a million all lost on the same day" (607). Her spirit is shared, she suggests, not only with the green mamba snake, from whose eyes she looks out, but with the many African children also lost. She has become not only at one with the wild, but with those associated with and designated as wild by American domestic ideology. She thus calls for the powerful emotive response to her death to be felt also for the children of Africa killed by wars and famine, deaths in which American domesticity is implicated. Following her death, the women of the village sing "a strange mourning song" and "the spiritual moment is given voice, not by the Price women, but the African women" (422; Kilpatrick 94). This is the female "song behind the world" described by Walker and seen in Morrison's *Beloved*, which reimagines the human relationship to the landscape and to each other.

Empathy in *The Poisonwood Bible* is used not simply as catharsis but to invoke political action, and in this way it returns the genre more closely to the aims of a nineteenth century writer like Stowe: as a prompt to social action. Ruth May's death causes the women of the novel to become politicised to varying degrees: Orleanna marches for civil rights; Leah supports her husband Anatole's activities in the Congolese resistance movement; Adah becomes an expert in tropical epidemiology. Adah describes each of their new lives as "a religion" replacing the dogmatism of their father,

and it is only Rachel who does not find this purpose (although Adah notes "She is, herself, her own brand of goddess") (499). Kingsolver has described the novel as a "political allegory" making direct reference to its intended moral and social message, and critics have struggled to reconcile this with the novel's aesthetics. Demory finds its faults lie "in sentimentalising traditional family values" while Purcell states that the novel contains "stereotyped caricatures reduced to mere mouthpieces for rather worn and predictable political positions - all to the artistic detriment of the novel as a whole" (192; 109). However, reading the text as a domestic novel enables a fuller appreciation of Kingsolver's literary technique. As Tompkins describes of the nineteenth century genre, she uses her characters as "integers in an equation" prompting a didactic message. Chandler similarly observes of "four functions of humor" in the novel, that they "create empathy and work as political acts for Kingsolver's environmentalist agenda" (Chandler 330). The "sentimental" scene of Ruth's death works, likewise, to prompt both empathy and social change in the reader. Leah explains how the Western reader is as much implicated in the story of Africa as the women of the novel: "Each of us got our heart buried in six feet of African dirt; we are all co-conspirators here. I mean all of us, not just my family" (537). Read in this way, Kingsolver's are not "stereotyped caricatures" but models for social change, just as seen in the didactic endings of the nineteenth century novel. They suggest real world possibilities, of protest, education, and cultural understanding, for the reader. Or as Kingsolver says in interview: "I want people to be hopeful, to think they can change the world" ("Interview" *Appalachian Journal* 306).

The difficulty of using empathy as a literary tool to prompt political change, is both that it is artistically unfashionable, as seen in Purcell's comments, and that it is

open to the critique of essentialism. Suggesting that which is shared across different human groups risks equating experiences and ignoring lived inequalities. Lori Gruen's term "engaged empathy" provides a useful way to read the empathy of *The Poisonwood Bible*. She suggests this term as a way to recognise that which humans share, while still acknowledging and attempting to understand difference. Gruen explains that empathy may be understood as distinct from sympathy because sympathy involves understanding distress, but not from the other's perspective. In contrast, "Empathy involves a transfer of affect, and eventually, a cognitive engagement with the perspective of the 'object' of empathy. When an individual is emotionally and cognitively empathising with another they are practising what I will call 'engaged empathy'" (30). Gruen's definition of "engaged empathy" is useful when thinking about *The Poisonwood Bible* because it refuses a dualistic reading of affect and reason. This balanced combination is critical to an understanding of the text in its careful use of emotion in order to enact reasoned social and political change. For Kingsolver, using empathy in writing is ultimately worth the risk of criticism because in valuing reason at the expense of affect, the stakes are high: "Our defense is to pretend there's no thread of event that connects us.... It's a practical strategy to some ends, but the loss of empathy is also the loss of humanity, and that's no small tradeoff" (*Tucson* 232).

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver exposes the project of "conquering and taming the wild" in American domesticity, from the women of the household to the house itself, and the cultivation of the garden. Moreover, she extends this to expose a national domestic project of eradicating wildness from the landscape and through the process of segregation, and finally to the international context of imperialism. The novel deconstructs the domestic/wild dualism to expose the wild as a projection of

America's own savagery, and she reveals the wildness, the heart of darkness, in American domesticity itself. However, the text moves beyond this deconstruction and uses the coming-of-age device so central to the domestic novel to reveal the protagonists' process of education. They learn their interdependence with both the wider community and the natural world, as seen in Robinson's and Morrison's novels, and they learn to reposition both the wild and those associated with it. Through a recognition of the spirit shared in all things, as for Stowe, Morrison and Robinson, the novel asserts an alternative spirituality. For Kingsolver, this can be read as an ecofeminist concept of "engaged empathy" for both human and non-human others, which demands both affective understanding and cognitive reasoning, combining care with a call to practical social action.

Gruen suggests "engaged empathy" as a model of an ethical existence that applies to both human and non-human interactions, and this seems to fit Kingsolver's final vision in *The Poisonwood Bible* as she reimagines American domesticity. The novel reveals the destructive consequences of the ideology of the American home to both humans and the environment but, simultaneously, it calls for a new domesticity, one that does not involve the rhetoric of colonialism, of conquering and subduing the land. Rather, Kingsolver explains the importance of "knowing our place": to find a way to co-exist as part of a wider habitat in which all humans and non-human nature are interconnected (*Small Wonder* 31). This is a contrasting definition of home: "People *need* wild places....To be surrounded by a singing, mating, howling commotion of other species, all of which love their lives as much as we do....Wildness puts us in our place. It reminds us that our plans are small and somewhat absurd" (*Small Wonder* 40). This understanding of home is founded on empathy for the existence of others, both human

and nonhuman, through the creation of a domesticity that, rather than subjugating, seeks to embrace the wild.

Conclusion

"Oh, I would like to live in an empty house,

With vines for walls, and a carpet of grass.

No planks, no plastic, no fiberglass."

Mary Oliver "Why I wake Early"

This thesis posed the question of why and how domestic novelists have imagined the landscape of America. In answer to this question, I have suggested five key stages in the development of the ecodomestic novel, moving from the challenge to male representations of landscape, to the development of a more overtly political environmental awareness in the contemporary domestic novel; and from the personal, outwards, to national and international contexts. These findings, while organised in this linear progression, do not suggest a neat movement from a regressive nineteenth century perspective to an evolved contemporary standpoint, but instead suggest various iterations of these stages of ecodomesticity throughout the genre. I have argued that an ecodomestic novel is one that situates home as a pivotal point in the construction of the human relationship to the landscape. These texts call for a reevaluation of that connection because they identify a fundamental parallel between their heroine's restrictions within a tightly bounded domesticity and the subjugation of the external, physical environment. The ecodomestic novel works to dissolve the boundaries between home and natural world, suggesting, instead, a representation of landscape that makes transparent and celebrates their interdependence.

Firstly, this thesis has considered how domestic novelists of the mid-nineteenth century challenged male representations of landscape. In chapters 1 and 2, I have

identified a resistance to predominant artistic representations of the landscape in novels by Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both the sublime encounter and the magisterial gaze focus on a principle of the human encounter with the landscape as a process of domination and conquest. While drawn to the power offered by this encounter with the landscape, both these writers ultimately reject this construction of the human/non-human relationship. Primarily this is because these novels identify the similar denial of power to their heroines and depict their consequent association with the natural world in this human/non-human dualism. As a result of this rejection of a patriarchal construction of the landscape, both Stowe and Alcott notice that which is repressed from view in the construction of landscape, the space in which "all manner of wild things live undisturbed" (Alcott) or the "force of organic growth" (Stowe). While Alcott identifies this space, it is Stowe who begins its reclamation, reading in the agency of the natural world a powerful example for locating the human power of those who have been similarly disenfranchised.

This study then asked how the concern for social justice and, particularly, abolition, influenced the nineteenth century reimagining of the landscape and suggested this as the second stage in the development of the ecodomestic novel. In its position as a revised novel, thus spanning both the ante and postbellum periods, *Moods* is significantly quiet on the subject of race, especially given Alcott's concern with the topic in her other writing. This remains one of the significant silences of the text, an undisturbed space that she perhaps felt unready to explore in the public arena of the domestic novel, although she did so from within her short, pseudonymous fiction. Stowe, on the other hand, tackled the issue of abolition directly. In her writing, however, it is not the concern for abolition that leads her to consider the position of the

natural world, but rather the reverse. Whereas the women's clubs of the nineteenth century extended their social protest from the arena of domestic issues to women's rights and then to the environment, in *Dred* it is her alternative understanding of the natural world that leads her to envision a reconfigured American political landscape. In her recognition of this untamed force in the natural world, she identifies a powerful model for African American resistance to slavery. In Stowe's writing, however, remains the problem of what Plumwood terms "uncritical reversal," of reversing the terms of the human/non-human binary construction of landscape, so the subjectivities of female, black or wild become dominant, particularly through a close alignment to divine power. While liberating, this nevertheless is limiting on the terms of gender, race and species, as it fails to recognise these as humanly constructed terms.

Although approached in Alcott's challenge to the sublime encounter and in Stowe's rejection of landscape composition, the concept of landscape as a construct, dependent on human subjectivity, is exposed most clearly in the contemporary novel. Extending the genre's concern with race, this study asked how the African American relationship with the landscape is further explored in the contemporary domestic novel. The third feature in the development of the ecodomestic novel is this exposure of a racialised American landscape. This is particularly visible in Morrison's *Beloved*, which challenges the idea of the natural world as universally experienced and understood, revealing the construction of the American landscape as critically reliant on the system of slavery and its legacy. Like Alcott and Stowe, Morrison challenges the representation of landscape as a space of transcendent, individual escape, but she does so on the grounds of race as well as gender. Morrison's novel cites both the importance of establishing a different way to imagine landscape, and simultaneously calls for an

alternative conceptualisation of domesticity. Just as Alcott and Stowe challenge the experience of landscape as a process of domination, Morrison highlights the consequences of this for those devalued or excluded in this power relationship.

Kingsolver extends this concern, both chronologically, to the segregation of the South in the 1950s, but she also positions this in a global context. *The Poisonwood Bible* suggests the impact of the process of American domesticity upon the countries beyond its borders, and whose natural resources are controlled in order to maintain this ideal of the American home(land). Like Morrison, Kingsolver exposes what is at stake in the construction of the American landscape and calls for an empathetic response to the lives of those who are directly affected.

In considering the genre's concern with affect, this study then proceeded to examine the fourth feature of ecodomesticity: how the sentimental is rewritten and reproduced in the contemporary genre, particularly in relation to the natural world. I found that affect still holds a central place in the novels examined, and that the character of the vulnerable female child remains a prevalent device in the genre. In this study, this is seen in the character of Beloved, killed as a baby; in Ruth May in *The Poisonwood Bible*; and in Robinson's many orphaned female characters. However, this figure, depicted particularly in the face of danger in the natural world, also recurs in other contemporary domestic novels, such as the children who have lost their mothers and face the Florida swamps in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia*, and Hurricane Katrina in Jasmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, or the phantom girl who haunts the Alaskan wilderness in Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child*. In Robinson's novels, *Housekeeping* and *Lila*, as in the nineteenth century, the orphan represents a figure of sympathy and simultaneously the possibility for female independence, and especially an opportunity to

explore a different, freer relationship to the American landscape. Perhaps surprisingly, the use of affect does not draw on a nineteenth century reinforcement of a domestic feminine ideal, but instead reemploys the genre's use of care to subvert power relationships. This application of the trope in Robinson's work allows for the extension of affect from the home to the natural environment, to call for a recognition of its fragility, but also to acknowledge its independent agency, much as seen in the figure of the female orphan. She thus extends both Alcott and Stowe's recognition of that in the landscape that cannot be comprehended, and she foregrounds the idea of interdependence that Stowe approaches in *Dred*. In her return to the ethic-of-care, particularly in *Lila*, she calls for a revaluing of affect, not only within female relations, but in human and non-human relationships more broadly, suggesting the humanity that is otherwise lost.

Finally, in establishing the fifth point of development in the ecodomestic novel, I asked how the didacticism of the nineteenth century novel was refracted into the environmentalist concerns of the contemporary novel. In the nineteenth century domestic novel, the didactic was often linked to the religious, as seen in Warner and Cummins's novels, as well as in Stowe's writing. My research here has shown the continued interest in the ethical and spiritual within the didactic: drawing on a principle of caring for others and a metaphysical connection between the human and non-human to teach a responsibility for the American landscape. Sometimes this has been asserted as an alternative interpretation of Christian doctrine, as in Alcott, Stowe or Robinson's work. John Gatta explains that a "nature spirituality frequently presents itself in American literary culture as a supplement rather than a surrogate for revealed religion" (Gatta 5). These writers similarly identify a spiritual force in nature that

clarifies or reifies what they have been taught by established religion, although it stands as an alternative interpretation to that expressed within a male-dominated church or philosophic group. The spirituality of Morrison and Kingsolver, however, is one step further removed from the established church, and identifies a force shared between humans and the natural world that is not necessarily connected to the power of a single, overarching deity. Nevertheless, whether rooted in religion, or more abstractly spiritual, all five authors identify a strong connection between their protagonists and the natural world, and it is this that forms the basis of the ecodomestic message of the novel.

Each of these texts suggests female adolescence as a key moment in the rejection of a patriarchal conception of the landscape. Suggesting the journey to womanhood offers an alternative conceptualisation of the natural environment may seem limiting, particularly because it reiterates the affective values that have traditionally been used to restrict women to caring roles within the home. However, this research suggests the extension of these values from the home outwards, to other humans and to the non-human natural world, rather offers a revaluing of traits that have been denigrated because of their traditional association with femininity. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver extends Robinson's interest in affect, particularly in the idea of emotional interdependence with others, to a more overtly didactic form. In doing so, she returns to the nineteenth century domestic novel's call for social action, as seen in Stowe's writing. Kingsolver's novel is a useful example in which to consider the moral lesson that stands at the centre of the domestic novel, particularly in the process of the coming of age, because it makes more explicit the concerns seen in the other four novels in this thesis. Her writing not only challenges the patriarchal construction of landscape but also emphasises an urgent need to reimagine

the landscape on a broader scale, in order to address the far-reaching repercussions of this ideology. While, as seen in the discussion of Kingsolver's novel, some critics have struggled to position the political didacticism within this literary genre, my research suggests a reconsideration of this aspect of the domestic novel. Today the term didactic has a derogatory connotation, suggesting a restrictive moral preaching, or instruction as an ulterior purpose (*OED*). However, the etymon of the term didactic is the Greek *didaktikos*, meaning 'skilled at teaching.' These texts unabashedly privilege empathy and ethical thought within the genre and, in relation to environmentalism, this comes at a critical time. Caring about and valuing the non-human environment, and teaching others to do so, has become essential at a time of environmental crisis.

I have argued for these novels to be considered as ecodomestic, and suggest this as an understudied tradition in American women's writing, because they share a concern with the interrelation of domesticity and the landscape. While environmentalism as a contemporary political movement is not seen in the nineteenth century domestic novel, ecology, the relationship between people and their environment, as I have shown, is similarly a central concern of these texts (*OED*). In his analysis of writing about the religious response to the natural world, Gatta notes this interest more broadly in postindustrial American writing, where it is becoming harder to retreat to wilderness, and thus writers are increasingly examining how the "human community should be considered an integral part of the ecological 'household.'" (12). My findings contribute to his work by exposing this interest, not as something new, but as a continuing tradition in domestic fiction. In her essay collection, *Small Wonder*, Barbara Kingsolver explains how creatively imagining the home is fundamentally reliant on an understanding of the human connection to the surrounding natural environment: "We sing the song of our

home because we are animals, and an animal is no better or wiser or safer than its habitat and its food chain. Among the greatest of all gifts is to know our place" (Kingsolver 40). For Kingsolver, and within this tradition of women's writing, home is defined as the space in which humans explore their relationship to the landscape. These ecodomestic novels subvert the call to "know our place", a phrase historically used to silence women, transforming it into a call for humility in the relationship with the natural world, questioning an assumption of human dominance.

My research thus contributes to literary criticism in three central areas: ecocritical theory, domestic novel theory and affect studies. Within ecocritical literary theory, these findings call both for an increased attention to women's domestic fiction, and further to writing that is traditionally excluded because it has not appeared obviously to be "about" the natural world. Lawrence Buell's first definition of an environmental text, for example, is that "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device." However, within the domestic novel, the marginalisation of the natural world is often used to portray the protagonist's restriction to the domestic sphere. As I have shown, it is precisely at the margins and in the silences of the text that the most revealing writing about the landscape occurs. This thesis has challenged the concept of the female domestic novel as a genre set apart from writing about the natural world, and has argued that, within American literature, writing about domesticity is often intimately connected to the imagining of landscape.

Similarly, the findings in this research call for a reevaluation of the place of the natural world within theories of domesticity which, although furthering study into the relationship between public and private spheres, still have much work to do in the reexamination of the relationship between the home and the landscape. This research

unsettles Jacobson's suggestion of "a shift in the politics of home from stability to instability" (182) between the nineteenth century and contemporary domestic novel. Alcott and Stowe's work exposes a dissatisfaction with the construction of domesticity as a space apart from the American landscape, and thus posits a complex, dissonant relationship to home in the nineteenth century domestic novel, which extends into the contemporary version of the genre.

Of further interest to affect studies, and particularly to ecofeminist theorists, could be the relationship between empathy and environmentalism within this fiction. These writers explore the relationship between affect and reason, calling for a balanced, rather than binary approach, as seen particularly in Robinson and Kingsolver's novels. The naturalist and feminist scholar, Florence B. Krall, suggests in her research: "Connection to place and to the 'more-than-human' for me is not some sublime, undifferentiated oneness, not a merging with Nature, but rather a genuine respect for separateness, difference, and the secrets of life that surround me yet remain mysterious, ambiguous" (Krall 242), much as Lori Gruen describes in her definition of "engaged empathy." My research reveals, particularly in the work of Kingsolver and Morrison, a similar interest in an empathetic relationship with other humans and the non-human environment that is founded on a simultaneous respect for difference.

My intention when I began this thesis was an examination of the interrelation of home and landscape in the contemporary domestic novel. In setting out to contextualise the influence of the nineteenth century genre, I intended to investigate and challenge the reading of the American landscape as a space apart from the home in the mid-nineteenth century novel. However, an introductory chapter became the two full chapters included here on Alcott and Stowe. In returning to the mid-nineteenth century domestic novel,

despite believing the representation of the American landscape to have been overlooked, I had not anticipated the depth of this interest in the natural world in the two novels and authors explored in this research. In Alcott's oeuvre, *Moods* is a unique example of a domestic novel with an extensive interest in the landscape. However, the exploration of exotic landscapes in her sensation stories, as well as the representation of the natural world in her children's literature, raise the question of to what extent she continued to explore a female transcendentalism, in particular in relation to domesticity. My archival research into Stowe also revealed a surprisingly extensive interest in landscape, and there is more research to be done on her paintings, drawings and non-fictional writing in relation to her representation of the natural world in her novels. In particular, her move to the South, to a cottage in Mandarin, Florida in 1867, and her written sketches from there, in *Palmetto Leaves*, warrant further attention in connection to her combined interest in the interrelation of domesticity and the natural world.

Nina Baym's study of "woman's fiction" further suggests this interest in the relationship of the home and the landscape pervades the mid-nineteenth century domestic novel even more widely than the examples in this thesis. She mentions the frequency with which these texts often include "set pieces of lush nature description" (xvi-xvii). Baym's descriptions of the narratives of less well known works today indicate the extent of further research that might be undertaken to explore this more fully. For example, in E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Mother-in-Law* (serialised in 1850, published in 1851), she describes a character called Gertrude Lion, "a Nordic beauty who is six feet tall, rides, hunts, eats roots and berries, cannot bear to be indoors, and generally upsets every notion of conventional femininity while remaining a woman with the 'majesty of Juno and the freedom of Diana.'" (120). In Caroline Lee Hentz's

Rena, The Snowbird (1850), Baym describes Rena, a dark-haired tomboy: "Through Rena, Hentz makes the statement that the wild girl who longs to be a boy is just the girl who will mature into the best type of womanhood" (130). Baym also includes Maria Cummins's *El Fureidis* (1860): "a fantasy of the 'natural woman' as she develops in nonwestern culture. These parochial romances often equated all nonwestern civilizations with a state of nature" (173). These are glimpses of heroines who echo Alcott's Sylvia and her explorations of freedom in the natural world, while Cummins's novel suggests the exploration of the connection of race and the natural world seen in *Dred*. Further research might assess both how these novels challenge or reproduce traditionally patriarchal conceptions of the landscape, such as the sublime, while also considering to what extent they resist these models, as seen in the work of Alcott and Stowe. Further exploration of connections to nineteenth century movements of landscape conservation and preservation would also shed further light on the ecodomestic possibilities of these texts.

My research has thus only begun to expose the broader interest in the relationship between the natural world and the domestic in the work of these two writers. As a result of this, it only hints at the extent to which the nineteenth century domestic novel resisted the separation of landscape from the domestic sphere. A limitation of my thesis comes as a consequence of these discoveries in relation to Stowe and Alcott: what I considered a narrow focus, into a specific aspect of a literary genre (literally the background setting), has transpired to be farther-reaching than I anticipated. The scope for further analysis in this area would mean, were I to approach the topic again, it would be as two studies, rather than one. The value of my work is that it stands as an initial challenge to the assumption that the nineteenth century

domestic novel was not interested in representing the American landscape, and I acknowledge the amount of material still to cover in this area. While my thesis thus only provides a glimpse into this desire for an alternative relationship to the landscape by mid-nineteenth century writers, drawing new attention to archival material, such as Stowe's sketches and May Alcott's holiday diaries, as well as to neglected writing such as Alcott's "Letters from the White Mountains" has suggested the possibilities and benefits of further study.

A further limitation of my research is in the area of race. In my introduction, I explained the parameters of this thesis did not allow for the depth of attention to domestic novels by African American women that I felt this deserved. While I still believe this to be the case, my research demonstrates the continuing centrality of race to the relationship of the American home and landscape, particularly when the construction of both is intimately connected to the legacy of slavery. In her study of African American environmental thought, Kimberly Smith explains the importance of hearing these perspectives: "Listening to their voices leads to a deeper understanding of our common task: to redeem and to possess a land cursed by injustice - to make of our shared world 'a more fitting home' for human lives" (Smith 201). Smith reveals the importance of understanding alternative imaginings of the landscape in reconfiguring the space of home. At the end of this study, I am conscious that in this regard my work would have benefited from the greater inclusion of African American voices. *Beloved* reveals the extent to which the understanding of the American landscape has been shaped by the white imagination, and the ghostly black orphans haunting the edges of Robinson's text that suggest there is more research to be done in this area. A contemporary domestic novel, such as Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, a coming of

age story from a home in the path of Hurricane Katrina, demonstrates the continuing concern of African American writers with the white political shaping of the American landscape. Further work in this area of the domestic novel would also contribute to the increasing attention to African American intellectual thought about the environment by critics such as Smith, Outka and Finseth.

While my research opens up further study within the genre of the domestic novel, it also suggests possibilities for further study of the interrelationship of domesticity and landscape in other genres, or beyond women's writing. As suggested in the introduction, some further research exists on the domesticity of male nineteenth century texts that have been read as primarily concerned with landscape, particularly that undertaken by Brown, Dassow Walls and Wider. Similarly, Jacobson has explored the contribution of male novelists to the contemporary incarnation of the genre, highlighting a "general confusion about masculine domesticity and its literary and cultural place" (153). Further research might well be conducted within male domesticity in order to determine how the ecodomestic perspective extends beyond women's writing. To what extent do these writers also advocate a home better integrated with, and respectful of, the natural world, and how are women positioned within this context?

Finally, there are interesting developments in contemporary women's ecodomestic writing beyond the domestic novel that suggest further study beyond the genre. Writers like Kingsolver, Robinson, and Smiley have used the non-fiction essay to explore ecodomestic concepts, and these would warrant further exploration beyond the parameters of this study. This use of non-fiction extends beyond the essay to the memoir, as seen in Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, or a text such as Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, which unites her spiritual journey of self-discovery as a young woman,

the exploration of the loss of her mother and reflections on her domestic life, with her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. Ecodomestic themes are also present in American women's poetry, such as that by Mary Oliver, who imagines living in "an empty house,/ With vines for walls, and a carpet of grass" ("Why I Wake Early").

While the identification of home and landscape as mutually reinforcing concepts is yet to be considered further beyond the genre, this thesis has shown the critical place of landscape representation within the domestic novel itself. Krall explains the space of the "ecotone," at the boundary of two natural communities: "In the natural world, edges where differences comes together are the richest of habitats" (Krall 4). The value of this space can be extended to the study of ecodomesticity: some of the most fertile literary imaginings of landscape are found at the boundary with the home. This is the habitat, as Alcott notes, "where all manner of wild things live undisturbed," a space of the "savage exuberance" of Stowe's swamp (275). Not only does this mean uncovering richly unusual representations of landscape, but more importantly this "wildness puts us in our place," and calls for a greater humility in the human relationship to the natural world ("Letters" 121; *Dred* 275; Kingsolver *Small Wonder* 40). In representing the human home as inseparable from the broader ecological household, the ecodomestic novel thus presents a reimagining of the American landscape that is increasingly relevant in the climate of environmental crisis. For this reason, in particular, Morrison's vision of home "with a doorway never needing to be closed" may also be applied to the critical study of the natural world from within the domestic novel so that its reimagining of the American landscape continues to be explored ("Home" 9).

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