

For Who the River Carries:
Marginalised Perspectives on American Rivers
in Twentieth-Century Literature

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of rivers from marginalised American authors of the twentieth-century. American rivers are notably diverse and variable natural features, and as symbols they offer extensive metaphorical potential. Rivers also hold a rich literary history in America, notably in the work of canonical nineteenth-century writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. The idealised depictions found in the work of these four authors act as a foundation which the marginalised writers of the following century both develop and subvert. The selected marginalised writers fall into three overlapping categories, to each of which is devoted a chapter. To examine those marginalised by economy and class, I have turned to Cormac McCarthy's 1979 novel *Suttree* and the poetry of James Wright. Both concern themselves with poverty, river pollution, theology, suicide, and the desolation of American idealism. In my chapter on African American writing, Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* and selected poems by Sterling A Brown, Audre Lorde, and Margaret Walker are the central texts. These works look to the river and find racial history within its current, evoking varied responses surrounding memory, trauma, creative expression, and recontextualisation. The final chapter explores William S. Burroughs's 1987 novel *The Western Lands* and the work of Minnie Bruce Pratt. By "queering nature," the river becomes both a bitter reminder of their marginalisation and a hopeful symbol of utopia and unity. Together, these texts and the rivers they represent demonstrate the disjuncture between the privileged and marginalised in America, calling for greater consideration of what we deem "American" and why.

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Introduction

If you were to ask every person in the United States of America to describe a river in their own words, the results would be as varied as the people themselves. Rivers can be picturesque or sublime, stagnant or of fast-current, ever-winding or straight, life-sustaining or polluted beyond use. Seemingly simple questions about the colour of water, the sensual experiences felt, of evoked emotions, of spatial normalcy, all complicate themselves inside a sample size as large and diverse. What trends would appear? Would certain depictions be renounced as outliers for not ascribing to some understanding of the national dominant? Could we determine characteristics of the participants based on how they represented their subjective river?

Rivers are potent and singular features of the landscape, active and variable, brimming with political, cultural, aesthetic, and geological history. Oberlin College English Professor T. S. McMillin examines the seemingly endless potential offered by representing American rivers in his book *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*. McMillin makes note of:

the notorious paradoxical qualities of rivers, their ability to be or do several things at once. Rivers move, flowing over land, through history, and among diverse groups of people, changing considerably from their source to their destination; yet they also stay, permanent blue lines on our maps, constant waypoints and lasting landmarks. Rivers connect . . . but they also separate (xii)

McMillin's considerations of the difficulty to pin down universal 'meanings' upon rivers act as a useful foundation to expand upon, especially regarding this effect on literary analysis. Another of his most interesting propositions regards "the *motivity* of rivers, their ability to motivate humans" by inspiring thought, desire, and self-reflection (158). He draws from an expansive selection of beloved, canonically-significant American writers and poets to

provide credence to this theory and proposes a mutually-beneficial relationship between writer and river.

Yet McMillin ascribes to a rather idealised view of the American landscape and its rivers, restricting his discussions to conventionally beautiful or 'powerful' rivers and the more patriotic, optimistic writers. In doing this, McMillin not only overlooks the many neglected, unattractive rivers of America, but also the writers who draw insight and inspiration from them.

McMillin provides convincing associations between the bucolic, slow-moving Concord River and the transcendentalist idealism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry D. Thoreau who grew up on its banks. The powerful and swift Mississippi informs the exciting, fast-paced adventures of Mark Twain; just as the wide, gentle rivers of pre-industrial New York inspire the thoughtful expansiveness of Walt Whitman. Yet what of those who only know rivers beset by pollution, rivers which evoke the negative, rivers which cannot be romanticised?

The most recent United States Environmental Protection Agency assessment of river quality concluded that "55% of the nation's river and stream miles do not support healthy populations of aquatic life" with "Over 13,000 miles . . . found to have mercury in fish tissue at levels that exceed thresholds protective of human health" (EPA 841, 0809). Alongside this, it was discovered that "Enterococci exceed thresholds protective of human health in nearly 1 out of every 4 river and stream miles" indicating the "possible presence of disease-causing bacteria" which increase "the likelihood of gastrointestinal illness" (EPA 0809).

With more than half of all the river miles in America now polluted beyond the threshold necessary for healthy aquatic life, the observations made by those

famed American writers have become defunct. Thoreau's belief that fish are "essential to the river" must now be disregarded, lest half of the waterways in America lose their status as rivers (*Week* 176). Although polluted rivers also existed throughout the newly-industrial nineteenth-century they are largely underrepresented in this period, only being widely discussed in the twentieth-century. This century brought forward a new lexicon of American writers, as voices long left unheard found publication and the segregated and classist literary landscape altered.

Alongside these new voices, new representations of rivers also surfaced, representations which illustrated the experience of marginalised America through engagement with the landscape itself. As with the writers of the nineteenth-century, there is immediate empathy found with the water passing them by, yet unlike those earlier writers, the empathy comes from shared experiences of neglect, devaluation, or misrepresentation.

The central purpose of this thesis is to look at specific marginalised writers and consider how the representation of rivers solidifies their experiences within an America not made for them. I shall link the spheres of literary analysis, socio-political discourse, and eco-criticism to fully consider both the aesthetic and real-world value behind representations such as these. The effect the river has upon rhetoric and symbolism is just as notable as the ecological and political issues it carries in its current.

For structural reasons, I have delineated these twentieth-century authors into three overlapping groups: those marginalised by class or poverty; by racial prejudice; and by sexual orientation. Each group endures unique forms of marginalisation and oppression within America, and each utilise the river to more deeply interrogate the effect this has on their perspective and the landscape itself.

Focusing on the representation of these rivers acts as a call towards wider consideration of the ways in which writers and poets depict their marginalisation, not the proposition of some decades-spanning literary trend. To look specifically at the rivers represented by the marginalised is to look at their perspective within a limited, symbolic space more conducive to comparative analysis. Rivers establish a tangible, neutral foundation for analyses that enter unwieldy conceptual and political spaces, confining that which could expand interminably.

To borrow the idea of “affordances” from Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, the river offers many affordances as both material object and literary form, providing “mutually shaping potentialities” when it comes to representation (23). It may provide sustenance, transport, economy, and flow in its materiality, as it may evoke ideas of nationhood, beauty, progression, and history as a literary form. Due to restrictions surrounding publishing and education, alongside factors such as immobility and censorship, the dominant representations of the river are built from privilege. As such, the representations from the marginalised become a new encounter with the same form, which, as Levine notes, “may activate latent affordances or foreclose otherwise dominant ones” (20). These newfound and excluded affordances of the river condense the larger ideas of marginalised experience and perspective into a narrow line of inquiry.

Yet, to examine the affordances, symbols, and aesthetics of the marginalised, we must first look to the literary canon which their representations are contending with. The four nineteenth-century writers previously referred to – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain – shall act as representatives towards distilling the dominant and diverse literary trends of this period. These four writers hold vital positions within

literary history, being positioned as central founders of the American literary canon. They are also all from aesthetically beautiful landscapes, holding diverse positions in society, and idealised perspectives on America.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Any discussion on natural landscape and American literature must include Ralph Waldo Emerson, the figure “who really put America on the map, who created for himself the practically non-existent role of man of letters” according to Joel Porte, the leading authority on Emerson (55). An essayist, academic, and poet, Emerson’s beliefs and perspective ultimately commenced the American Renaissance period, within which both Thoreau and Whitman are placed. Although Emerson’s writings do not principally concern themselves with river landscapes, he remains an essential foundational figure towards understanding the privileged perception of nature he and his contemporaries held.

In a symbolically appropriate analogy, James Russell Lowell, another nineteenth-century Romantic poet, wrote that Americans “were still socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and glories of blue water” (qtd. in Bertens 66). Placing Emerson as the man who unmoored the literary “ship” from England and steered it towards the American continent is an effective way of visualising the many conceptual rivers to which he gave access.

Emerson spent his early years in Boston, settled inside the upper-class while being raised and educated in strong Unitarian theology. He followed this Unitarian path closely in his occupational life also, acting as pastor and chaplain to the state senate as his father had (Porte 61). As Emerson would

later sever ties to the old ways of English thought, he too found himself pulling away from the long-held beliefs of his patriarch and his own expected life trajectory.

With the essay, "Nature" released in 1836, Emerson cemented his space in the literary canon by employing a theological perspective on the natural landscape of America. Leo Marx, a professor in American studies, argues that "Nature" "came to be known as the manifesto of Transcendentalism, a New England variant of European Romanticism" with a distinct religious overtone (Marx 12). Sheri Prud'homme simplifies Emerson's philosophy as the belief that "Nature, not Scripture was the best way to know God," something simultaneously Calvinist and modern (232).

As Emerson's Transcendentalist leanings grew, his disillusionment with traditional beliefs also did. In a particularly damning Address given in 1838, Emerson spoke against the strict formality of Unitarianism and suggested it to be a leading cause for the "universal decay and now almost death of faith" (Emerson, "Divinity"). This address acted as a "decisive blow against [Emerson's] father's church" and left many of his peers "troubled" for "their feelings were still bound to the old ways." (Porte 63-64). Emerson would continue taking strong stances within his writing and addresses, becoming a key figure in both the transcendentalist and abolitionist movements. In severing his connection to the traditions of English thought and theology, Emerson generated what are widely considered the first instances of truly American thinking.

Whereas Emerson's work may be classified by some as the origination of the distinct American voice, it is a voice of privilege and security which would be unattainable for the average citizen of the nineteenth-century or today.

Political Science professor Shannon Mariotti argues that the transcendental

idealism which Emerson describes is “primarily a mode of perception,” indicating that the way he looks at things “reflects what he values” (305). His inspirational declaration – “Build, therefore, your own world . . . So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies vanish” – depends upon a position already detached from the “sordor and filths of nature” (Emerson, *Conduct* 38). Beliefs such as this negate the validity of ecological concerns, positioning dissatisfaction with one’s environment as a problem of perception rather than America itself.

Nineteenth-century Massachusetts worked as an inspirational contradiction for Emerson, being famed for both its bucolic scenery and its financial prosperity in the early industrial period. Emerson profited from industry, but openly condemned it. These aspects of his landscape both actively influence his writing and his perception, which manages to venerate the picturesque, pastoral, and commercially successful landscape of Massachusetts by using the spiritual rhetoric of his upbringing.

The central river of Emerson’s life and oeuvre was the Concord, although he preferred its Native American title of Musketaquid – literally ‘Grass-ground river.’ Renowned for its slow-moving current, reflective surface, beautiful surrounding pastures, and amazingly clear water, it appears as the ideal location for the generation of strong philosophical thought relating to nature’s beauty.

The Concord River stimulates numerous responses from Emerson, most dynamically in his early poetry. “Two Rivers” depicts only the Concord, but considers the duality of its singular presence: both as Native Musketaquid and English Concord, as pathway to the “sweeter rivers” of transcendentalism, and as inspiration for Emerson to imagine an even greater river (Emerson, *Poems* 248). This “unnamed river of unspeakable scope and everlasting

nourishment” which Emerson only refers to as “my stream” embodies transcendentalism and Nature itself, appearing as one of literature’s most explicit descriptions of the influential potential of rivers (McMillin 34).

In his 1827 poem, “The River,” the Concord becomes a nostalgic symbol for time’s passage, likening the permanence of the American landscape against the ever-aging Emerson. He witnesses “the blue river, / The same blue wonder that my infant eye / Admired” and finds “grave parental love” in their waters, waters which “know me as their son” (Emerson, *Poems* 385, 386, 387). In depicting the Concord as caregiver for Emerson, he promotes reflection of the self and America, the river landscape still “Adorned with . . . my country’s primitive times” (387). The influential power of the Concord again appears, for after all these years, the river is “unaltered, save that now / He hath broke his banks and flooded all the vales / With his redundant waves” (385-6). The river grows larger by the year, spilling out beyond its banks while remaining entirely recognisable to those who are a product of it.

These two poems utilise the Concord as a symbol, but also celebrate the aesthetic beauty of “the stream I love unbounded” (248). Emerson speaks of the “sunny bubbles,” “inundation sweet,” and “summer voice” of the Concord, which repeats “the music of the rain” with waters so cleansing that “Of shard and flint makes jewels gay” (385, 248). This aesthetic idealism of the Concord infects Emerson’s work and perception, making all the unspecified, conceptual, and presumably commonplace rivers appear as if they too are the Concord.

His most famous work, “Nature,” illustrates the way Emerson views all rivers as extensions of his beloved Concord through his all-encompassing, omniscient depiction of natural space. In referring to the beauty found “By water-courses” he speaks of specific examples such as “the blue pontederia or

pickerel-weed blooms” and the “yellow butterflies” which appear along the Concord in July (*Conduct* 8). There is no mention of the Concord by name here; Emerson simply argues that water-courses in general feature a “pomp of purple and gold” unrivalled by art, for “the river is a perpetual gala, and boasts each month a new ornament” (8). Emerson employs unifying rhetoric to describe an aesthetic experience unattainable for those who live beside imperfect rivers, again situating their landscape as an outlier. “Nature” also utilises the river as a tool for reflecting upon transcendentalist ideals, reminding onlookers of “the flux of all things” or the ways the river flow “resembles the air that flows over it” (12, 21).

In his later 1844 essay also titled “Nature,” the river becomes the space for idealised fantasies of escapism, a way to “leave the village politics and personalities” behind, again showcasing the privilege provided to Emerson through space (*Essays* 313). The detached river landscape is “a delicate realm of sunset and moonlight,” an “incredible beauty” to “penetrate bodily” which remains “too bright almost for a spotted man to enter without novitiate or probation” (313). The river becomes a way to test one’s strength, beautiful to the point of becoming sensually alluring, a way to escape modernity and society.

Comparably, “Woodnotes I” treats the river as the saviour for a lost poet, guiding him to the ocean and providing sustenance at all points. “The falling waters led me / The foodful waters fed me” Emerson writes, illustrating the non-economic uses of a river through a lens simultaneously theological and primitivist (*Poems* 47). In the follow-up “Woodnotes II” the same virtues are celebrated from a detached perspective:

The river knows the way to sea;
Without a pilot it runs and falls,
Blessing all lands with its charity (57)

The river appears as a distinct force of benevolence, acting as both support system and motivator, in much the same way the Concord River provides Emerson with an aesthetically ideal river to build his philosophy upon.

Henry D. Thoreau

Along the banks of the very same river, you could find another notable American writer of the nineteenth-century, Henry D. Thoreau. Born into a middle-class family whose modest wealth came from a pencil factory, Thoreau attended Harvard and surprised his family by declining to enter the typical professions open to graduates. Instead, Thoreau and his brother John worked as school teachers and later opened the grammar-focused Concord Academy. Upon listening to one of his 1837 Harvard lectures, Thoreau met Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would ultimately become “Thoreau’s friend, mentor, and philosophical sparring partner” (McMilin 157).

Initiated into transcendentalist thought, Thoreau became intensely engaged with the landscapes he had cavorted across in his youth. This perceptive engagement with nature would result in the production of his two most celebrated works, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. Each of these recount his personal experiences with nature and living away from society with “the pictorial detail of an artist-naturalist’s sketch book” (Conron 145). Thoreau writes these in a manner similar to memoir, reminiscing upon what he saw, thought, and felt during these periods of his life – placing the landscape as the transcendental ‘motivator’ behind it all.

This is vastly dissimilar to Emerson’s approach, which yearned for objectivity and worked towards persuading his readers to ascribe to his system of

perception. "Walking" is the closest comparison to be made between the two writers, featuring Thoreau imploring his readers to aimlessly walk and experience nature, for we are "no more vagrant than the meandering river" (*Essays* 2). This is a considerably smaller goal than the theological destabilisation proposed by Emerson, and the avoidance of the objective remedies many of Emerson's problematic presuppositions.

Thoreau discovers the persuasive power of his writing not through expansive rhetoric, but in the aestheticised depiction of what Marvin Fisher considers "modest" and "mundane" landscapes while documenting their profound, philosophical effect on him (Fisher 381). He describes the "mirror-like surface" of the Concord waters being "more cerulean than the sky itself," boasting "such crystalline purity that the body of the bather appears of an alabaster whiteness" with even the native fish appearing as "a perfect jewel of the river" (*Week* 41, 22; *Walden* 176). Thoreau lets imagery speak for itself.

John Conron considers these semi-scientific, aestheticized depictions of "bright American rivers" in *A Week* as "a literary prophecy and counterpart of Luminist landscape painting" which began in New England several years later (*Week* 210, Conron 146). Conron also notes the significance of *A Week's* "convergence of sublime and picturesque aesthetics" when representing his "common" environment, establishing a "new way of seeing . . . the New England landscape" (149, 146).

This innovative perceptive technique is most notable as an illustration of Thoreau actively "inviting the river to influence his thinking," according to McMillin, as if the landscape informs its own representation rather than its inverse (163). From a particularly granular level, this can be seen by the changing personification of the river: appearing as a "brave river [that] ripples confidently seaward" when he follows the current, or an "unsympathizing

river ever flowing in an opposite direction” when he must travel upstream (*Week*, 101, 96). Thoreau directs the landscape alongside his personal experience but allows the river to retain its agency through its representation as the precursor to his arising thoughts, shifting emotions, and perceptive engagements.

The Concord and Merrimack rivers become a force with which Thoreau and his brother re-evaluate their lives. Upon watching a picturesque fisherman, they concur that “Human life is to him very much like a river” for the river leads his entire wellbeing, but as their travel progresses, they come to the same conclusion as the fisherman (*Week* 19). They drink “cocoa boiled in river water” as a means “to propitiate the river gods,” realise that “The river was the only key which could unlock” the “maze” of the landscape, and that “A man’s life should be constantly as fresh as this river” and never grow stagnant (19, 31, 71, 113).

In his later work, *Walden*, we can witness the river philosophy once thought only to belong to fishermen propagating within Thoreau too, as one of the final paragraphs reiterates that:

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. (330).

In journeying across the river, the landscape provides Thoreau with the perceptive skills needed to understand his humanity – in much the same way it trains his eye to view the reflected sky upon the water’s surface when one instinctively looks to the land below.

Another significant tale which rivers explain to Thoreau is that of American history and its potential future. “Walking” compares two rivers, the Rhine and

the Mississippi, which respectively embody past and future success to Thoreau. The Mississippi becomes “a Rhine stream of a different kind” for “the foundations of castles were yet to be laid, and the famous bridges were yet to be thrown over the river” and concludes that “this was the heroic age itself, though we know it not, for the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men” (*Essays* 14). The river acts as “an emblem of all progress” to Thoreau, but also a constant reminder of the historical past (*Week* 7).

Marvin Fisher situates *A Week* as Thoreau’s “meditative response to the providential mythology that drove American history and fashioned its official morality” allowing the river to symbolise “a stream of continental consciousness” still present “in the world’s history and in New England’s psychohistory” (381, 384). This is exhibited through Thoreau’s interest in the historical applications of rivers, whether as “the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travellers,” or as the space of “old battle and hunting ground[s]” (*Week* 7, 70).

Beyond this, Thoreau approaches indigenous history with a greater engagement than colonial history, an engagement which is, again, brought upon by the river’s influence. Like Emerson, he speaks of the ageless nature of the Concord’s native title of “Grass-ground” which it shall be named “as long as grass grows and water runs here” even after the human race has become “extinct” (1). The physical river also tells Thoreau of its native past, as “their arrowheads and hatchets, their pestles, and the mortars in which they pounded Indian corn before the white man had tasted it, lay concealed in the mud of the river bottom” (70). The Native American becomes “the unseen major protagonist” of *A Week*, a long-disappeared presence which only the river and those who float upon it seem to remember (Fisher 386).

For all the emblematic, patriotic progress and beauty of the Concord and Merrimack rivers, the distasteful history and present vulnerability of the landscape is also discussed extensively – leading Fisher to argue that *A Week* “is our first testament of ecological concern” (393). Thoreau discusses the dwindling population of fish following the construction of factories, dams and canals that has “put an end to their migrations hitherward” as a result of exploiting the Native-taught practice of weir construction (*Week* 27). The exploitation of the river is consistently foreshadowed in *A Week*, with Thoreau describing his disgust of the factories and mills that use the river as a power source, noting how they treat the river as “a mere *waste water*, as it were, bearing little with it but its fame” (74). Although he envisions a future in which nature has levelled these manmade encumbrances, and the fish return, it connects the falling river with “the imminent fall of mankind in a previously unfallen New World” and acts as a chilling forecast to the toxic pollution of the coming decades (Fisher 385).

Thoreau is a figure who ascribes his patriotism and idealisation to the American landscape and not its industry or economy, flirting with surprisingly modern eco-conscious ideas as he does so. Although many nineteenth-century Romantics celebrate and venerate the river, Thoreau allows the river to motivate and provide him with philosophy, rather than employing it to symbolise his own beliefs. The work of Henry D. Thoreau showcases some of the most conscious and overt examples of the distinct, causal effect rivers can have on a writer’s perception, rhetoric, and understanding.

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman bears a particularly contentious position in this selection, with his urban background and hotly-debated sexuality excluding his position among the more explicitly privileged writers and their picturesque upbringing. Born in 1819 to a family of modest means but strong views on patriotism, Whitman began working at age 11 and found employment in the printing business of New York City which encouraged his reading and interest in literature (*Biography.com*). Whitman “lived close to the East River and frequently rode the ferry back and forth” during this period – an experience which he would eventually canonise in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (McMilin 148). He turned to teaching following the destruction of the printing district in the 1835 Great Fire, and later became a well-respected journalist across America before his return to New York City in 1848.

It was not until Whitman self-published and released the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 that he became known for his poetry. Ralph Waldo Emerson considered it “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed” yet it received little attention until a revised edition was released the following year with Emerson’s letter published inside (“Letter” 21 July 1855). Even with Emerson’s utmost praise and Thoreau visiting him shortly after, *Leaves of Grass* remained a commercial failure until another reworked edition found success in 1882, but only after years of financial struggle, familial tragedy, and Whitman’s suffering of a stroke (*Biography.com*). He was celebrated in these final ten years of his life and continued to work on *Leaves of Grass* until his death, subsequently remembered as “the man who revolutionised American poetry” (Hudspeth).

Although Whitman’s significance to American poetics is undeniable, his character remains the subject of scrutiny due to the numerous inconsistencies

displayed by his philosophies and upbringing. "Whitman the poet was like nature itself" according to biographer Jerome Loving, and while his theory of natural unity further suggests an authentic naturalism to Whitman, much aligns him with the unnatural (Loving "Southerner" 363). Stephen Miller notes that Whitman remained "an optimist about the American future" who was "strongly pro-business in his later years" and is considered "the rare American writer who praises commerce" (33, 34). Although he celebrates lower-class workers in poems such as "A Song for Occupations," his admiration towards the business class remains unusually genuine for this period.

Regardless of being born to a working-class family and experiencing a considerable dip in wealth towards the middle of his life, Whitman's rough and common poetic character was largely performative and calculated. Stephen Miller argues that "Whitman had something in common with a popular nineteenth-century figure: the patent-medicine salesman" through his deliberate cultivation of a "rough image," changing his name "from Walter to Walt" and dressing "like a laborer" rather than "a dandy" as he did in his twenties (37, 36). With the legitimacy of Whitman's naturalistic, uncultured character called into question, the sincerity of his poetry also becomes uncertain. As Loving recognises, Whitman "celebrates the freedom of all nature" whilst declaring "that fugitive slaves must be returned to their legal owners" at the same period of his career ("Southerner" 375).

Whatever can be said about the division between Whitman's character and poetry, it does not extend to his experiences of his beloved New York rivers. It was while riding a ferry to Manhattan that Whitman "gradually came to the conclusion that the works of man are 'equally great' as the works of Nature" (Miller 38). Whitman himself states that "I have always had a passion for

ferries; to me they afford inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems” and that he would “go down and loaf along the Harlem river” after he was finished writing for the day (*Complete* 701, 908). The rivers of New York serve as practically useful, emotionally fulfilling, and poetic aspects of his landscape.

His adoration and interest in rivers is well-realised and beautifully represented across *Leaves of Grass*, with Whitman utilising a similar aesthetic idealism to that found in the works of Emerson and Thoreau. Whitman invites the reader to “Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink,” describes the waves as “The kisses of your lips,” the brook as “jocund,” or envisions “the spring waters laughing and skipping and running” with him (*Leaves* 254, 486, 304, 147). He transparently examines the inspirational river in “Others May Praise What They Like:”

Others may praise what they like;
But I, from the banks of the running Missouri, praise nothing in art or
 aught else,
Till it has well inhaled the atmosphere of this river, also the western
 prairie-scent,
And exudes it all again. (329)

This is a powerful sentiment and illustrates the necessity of landscape, more specifically river-landscape, towards providing the artist with authenticity.

Yet, Whitman is not from the Missouri river, but rather New York: commercially thriving and decidedly metropolitan. Whitman is considered to be “the first American writer to suggest that an urban landscape could be sublime” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” epitomises this focus on urban sublimity (Miller 39). He exclaims: “Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm’d Manhattan?” illustrating the picturesque idealism of “the reflection of the summer sky in the water” with as much

fervour as the decidedly industrial “foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night” (Whitman, *Leaves* 137, 135, 136). “Everything is bright and breezy and glittering” states Miller, like “a watercolor by Winslow Homer” leaving the reader to feel “refresh’d by the gladness of the river and the bright flow” just as Whitman himself was (Miller 39, Whitman, *Leaves* 135). With the many sensory details spread across the poem, we can not only recognise the sublime beauty of the East River, but also engage with Whitman’s personal experience of crossing.

This feeling is indicative of the ways in which Whitman’s rivers act as a connective force embodying natural unity, both transcendently and geographically. Throughout his poetry, Whitman catalogues and groups together rivers by certain perceived similarities and in doing so, further expresses their unified status. “Salut Au Monde!” has Whitman writing: “I see the long river-stripes of the earth” before going on to list seventeen rivers from all corners of the globe and forcing the reader to recognise their connectivity (117). Whitman brings forth the same unifying philosophy to American rivers in “Our Old Feuillage” as he envisions himself as a bird “atwixt the banks of the Arkansaw, the Rio Grande, the Nueces, the Brazos, the Tombigbee, the Red River, the Saskatchewan or the Osage” (147). This technique appears in several other poems of Whitman’s and establishes his unifying philosophy.

Yet this unity is also alluded to by representations of how rivers interact with other aspects of nature and human experience. This form of connectivity is why Loving argues that “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is “Whitman’s greatest celebration of the transcendentalist unity of existence” (*Song of Himself* 219). Alongside his watercolour rendition of the East River, Whitman allows “the actual, physical, and sensorial crossing of the river” to expand in significance and ultimately “affirm an impalpable connection between seemingly discrete

individuals regardless of physical or temporal distinctions” (McMilin 149, 150). This crossing from physical to transcendental is represented with delicacy, as Whitman recognises that “Others will watch the run of the flood-tide . . . A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them” (Whitman, *Leaves* 134). It is through the assertion that other individuals from any time period or place of origin will experience the same feeling he does when crossing the river that suggests “a profound oneness with others” instantly comparable to transcendentalist unity (McMilin 149).

As all rivers are connected to oceans, Whitman intimates that all rivers are connected to one another and impalpably connect to all people who experience them. This “poses that the East River [and by extension, every river] connects more than it separates” providing kinship between those who share in the experience of it (149). Much as “Two Rivulets” imagines parallel rivers becoming blended as “Companions, travelers, gossiping as they journey,” the power behind the rivers of Whitman’s poetry is of their ability to retain individuality while promoting unity (Whitman, *Leaves* 485). Whitman’s early years of taking the ferry across the East River not only connected the realms of employment and home, but also connected him with all other commuters and all other rivers through the suggestive power of that wide, urban river.

Mark Twain

In Hannibal, Missouri, Mark Twain was brought up in a house directly beside the Mississippi River, the natural feature which would come to define Twain’s boyhood, piloting career, and literary adulthood. Environmental Studies professor Stephanie LeMenager concludes that “the Mississippi River gave

him a lifetime of literary material” and through engagement with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, it would be difficult to disagree (407).

Twain’s youth seemingly exists upon the Mississippi waters, with his perpetual “fascination of river life” and adopted belief that a “true pilot cares nothing about anything on earth but the river” guiding the trajectory of his life (*Life* 55, 68). Although a far cry from the idealised visions of river life found in the Romantic poets, Barbara Eckstein argues that the “pastoral” and “biophilic” dramatisations of Twain’s youth found in both *Sawyer* and *Finn* attempt to “convey to a broad public what an American boyhood along the river should be” (27-28). The choice of ‘should’ is particularly significant here, suggestive of a form of idealism on display, as if the youthful adventure and excitement outweigh the depictions of slavery, paternal abuse, and other difficult realities.

Working outside of the American Renaissance canon which the three other authors were deeply embedded within, Mark Twain’s perception of the river is predominantly defined by this very tension: “the conflict between two visions -- romantic and realistic” (Schacht 192). This conflict is evident in his choices of terminology, with the adjectives used to describe the Mississippi ranging from “monstrous,” “savage,” and “villainous” to “remarkable,” “majestic,” and even “just and equitable” (*Finn* 91, *Life* 14, 95, 1, 93, 243). These aspects work towards Twain’s wish “to portray the Mississippi as a national treasure that is a majestic and beneficial force as well as a dangerous one” (McCammack 10). This intention is also consistently reiterated in the narratives he describes, featuring as many drownings and violent floods as he does moments of romantic beauty and nourishment.

This seemingly contradictory technique works well as a means to establish the Mississippi as a sublime natural feature, one which is god-like in its power to either smite or support. This interpretation is particularly useful when considering the way Twain reduces the agency of his characters as they follow the geographical determinism of the winding Mississippi. Literary critic Denis Donoghue relates this to the economic significance of the river, for “the energy of the river, as of the river god, is not lavished on our welfare, it is indifferent to our purpose” (245). By deifying the Mississippi, Twain’s conflicted representation finds new coherency.

Throughout *Huckleberry Finn*, the river provides aid for the protagonists drifting upon it, as they become economically abetted from selling the many logs and canoes which drift past, gather a “good haul” taken from within a washed away frame-house, or utilise the “plunder” found on a ship-wreck (Twain, *Finn* 55, 79). These scenes depicting the river’s assistance also make it clear that it has disrupted and harmed others in the very same events, representing both its benevolence and violence. In a scene richly suggestive of both aspects of the river’s power, “baker’s bread—what the quality eat” is sent downstream in an attempt to find Huck’s potentially-drowned body but feeds him instead (41). Without the river he would not survive, but simultaneously, without the river he would be in less danger.

Whereas the many floating bounties found by Huck “suggest that capital naturally flows where it is most needed” and that the river “may approximate a distributive justice,” several moments within Twain’s narratives explicitly portray the Mississippi as an unkind god (LeMenager 419). Within *Huckleberry Finn*, the most devastating example depicts Jim floating past the tributary into the Ohio River, thus terminating his potential freedom in Cairo and pulling

him deeper into the slave states. The power of the river is undeniable if it can provide or deny freedom to a slave through the pull of its current.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, numerous deaths of steamboat pilots are described alongside a factual anecdote regarding the destruction of Napoleon, Arkansas by the rising river tide. To Twain, this news reaching him is “the most wonderful thing I ever heard of” for it so utterly encapsulates the god-like strength and exciting danger the Mississippi represents to him (*Life* 320). Although the river may be “the life-blood of the nation” its capability of “incredibly destructive power” is never disregarded even when romanticised (McCammack 10).

This power is vulnerable, however, with Twain showing his concern at the appearance of the United States River Commission in the early 1880s. He “subtly criticizes the engineer’s god-like arrogance of trying to contain and remake one of nature’s purely powerful features” and considers the “brazenness of trying to control the powerful Mississippi” while remaining ambivalent about which shall overpower the other (McCammack 8). Although the hero of *Life on the Mississippi* is the all-powerful river itself, Twain recognises its susceptibility to exploitation, through both development of nation and capital.

The Mississippi becomes an autonomous, commanding feature of America and Twain’s oeuvre directly links the Mississippi’s development to the imperfect development of the nation as a whole. Stephanie LeMenager argues that Twain’s Mississippi is indicative of “empire articulated through water” becoming over-developed and under-protected due to its suitability as a trade route (407). The river actively retaliates against this development at all costs: destroying towns and steamboats, and creating radical socioeconomic shifts

through its frequent floods, but it can never succeed against American economy.

Unlike those before him, Twain “saves little space for reflective curiosity” upon his Mississippi, choosing instead to depict the river’s ferocious, perpetual motion as a sublime, albeit vulnerable symbol for America (Eckstein 28). He constructs his narratives following the rhythm of the river, ties the recurrent themes of race and greed to the river, voices his concerns for the future through the river. He allows his characters to survive or die, thrive or suffer at the pronouncement of the river. For Twain, the river decides all, but only if humanity does not manage to subjugate its influence for their own gain first.

The work of these writers showcase a state-of-mind built around “the grandeur of nature and its seemingly inherent meaning,” situating their perspective as one imbued with the landscape’s power, rather than believing they were projecting their own feelings upon the landscape (McMillin 1). Despite the diversity in experience, wealth, and upbringing across these writer’s lives, this patriotic state-of-mind is consistent. As time has moved forward, these projections have infected our understanding of American history as readers, illustrating an America before the fall. Yet for the lower class, the African American community, and the sexually diverse, America never rose high enough to fall.

The depictions here are indicative of what Terre Ryan considers ‘Manifest Destiny aesthetics’ in her book *This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism*. Noting that this aesthetic first appeared in missionary rhetoric situating America as Canaan, Ryan writes that Manifest Destiny aesthetics suggest a “promise of riches waiting to be plumbed,” promote the deliberate conquering or partitioning of “the spectacular,” and

reinforce “a class-based system of environmental degradation” which preserves the view and divide the people (9-10). This is visible all throughout art and literature of this period, including the works mentioned above, generating an elitist, politically-motivated mindset that informs the representation of natural American landscapes.

Emerson can build his transcendentalist philosophy on top of the satisfying unity the Concord River provides, just as Thoreau can allow the same waters to bleed into his mind and directly motivate his thoughts. Whitman can examine the waterways and find a greater understanding of himself inverted back at him, just as Twain can utilise the current of the Mississippi to generate an exciting narrative or to examine national economic progress. Being successful white men, they are free to use the landscape as they please.

These men learn how to view the nation, themselves, economic progress, history, ecology, and in Emerson’s case, the entire universe through the rivers of their upbringing. The marginalised writers of the twentieth-century also acquire the same perceptive skills when looking upon their rivers, but the resolutions which rise from the water are entirely adversative.

One: Lives and Rivers Polluted by Economy in *Suttree* and the Poetry of James Wright

It seems contentious to open a discussion on marginalised voices by examining the experience of heterosexual white Americans, but it is this very aspect which makes their relevance to spatial politics so notable. Rather than the international, complex history of racial and sexual prejudice, economic and class-based discrimination can be clearly isolated to specific geographic and cultural spaces.

One of the most significant and spatially-distinct groups of these underprivileged whites are Appalachians, coming from a rigidly-defined region encompassing certain counties of 13 states. The region has historically “relied on mining and other extractive industries,” with its denizens generally having “lower income, poorer educational achievement and less health care service availability” (Smith and Holloman 819). Appalachia has a “long history of exploitation by industries that establish and abandon hazardous facilities with little regard for the health of nearby residents” which continues to be a concern to this day (Kozlowski and Perkins 1288).

Industrialisation via these exploitative and hazardous methods is all too common in Appalachia and other regions suffering from economic hardship. Dissent has been consistently stifled through intimidation, political corruption, physical force, and the unethical ramifications associated with life inside a stratified and oppressive class system, leaving many Appalachians in a state of immobility (1291). The financial instability and geographic isolation of the region generates desperate and uncertain living conditions, where employment is all that separates middle-class lifestyles from desperation and impoverishment.

Yet this complicates our understanding of white privilege and the racialized social strata of the American class system, as Non-Hispanic Whites made up 91% of the Appalachian population in 1990; a statistic “essentially unchanged from that of the previous century—even as racial and ethnic diversity increased in the rest of the United States” (Pollard 2). Although there has been considerable growth in racial diversity since 1990, Appalachia remains overwhelmingly white and so-called Central Appalachia held a population of 95.4% Caucasian as late as 2010 (Pollard & Jacobsen 13).

Considering white privilege and the notion of environmental racism, which will be explored to a greater extent in the following chapter, the Appalachian region serves as an example of the significance class and economy holds in the American mind-set. Geography scholars Kozlowski and Perkins argue that class standing becomes indicative of how Appalachians “are never quite white enough” and “possess a ‘degraded’ form of whiteness” which makes it permissible for other white Americans to exploit their communities (1291). In viewing the lack of financial and educational privilege as proof that Appalachians have “lost” their white privilege, they can be treated as a minority and subjugated as such.

The two literary pieces central to this chapter are set in the heart of this region, and feature deeply autobiographical aspects relating to each writers’ upbringing there. James Wright’s poetry, which encapsulates the area surrounding Martin’s Ferry, Ohio; and the novel *Suttree* by Cormac McCarthy, which delves deep into Knoxville, Tennessee. Both of these areas are situated on the banks of polluted stretches of river and are comparable, yet discrete, in regard to environmental exploitation, economic desperation, and population demographics.

The Ohio River, and James Wright's complicated and thoughtful depiction of it, tells a story of pollution which is tantamount to many others. The river was first noted in early nineteenth-century travel literature for its beauty and abundance of fish, only for the building of "navigational dams" and riverside agriculture to make the river "muddier and more sluggish" until fishing died out in particular areas "largely because of pollution" during the 1950s (Lund 10, 13, 17). Pollution in the Ohio River "seems to have been at its worst in the late 1960s," the decade that James Wright held the most sustained focus upon the river in his poetry (18).

Yet the 1960s did not see the end of the Ohio River's pollution, and Wright was not the only person who recognised its significance upon his community. The river becomes the force which seems to connect the numerous forms of disenfranchisement faced by Ohio Appalachians. The four poorest counties in Ohio border the river, unemployment rates are higher than the non-river regions, and childhood asthma is "significantly higher" beside the river; as all of those "who live along the Ohio River are disproportionately subject to industrial pollution" (Smith and Holloman 819, 824, Kozlowski and Perkins 1288). The residents alongside the Ohio River "are subject to some of the most intense industrial and manufacturing pollution in the country" and face considerably higher risks than those in counties which do not border the river (Smith and Holloman 820).

A significant case illustrating the ways in which river pollution is authorised and poor communities are targeted is that of Little Hocking, Ohio. The chemical company DuPont® arrived in Little Hocking following World War II and brought numerous jobs to the small and struggling town. In 1984, company officials discovered that C8, a chemical "scientifically proven to

cause elevated rates of disease in the exposed population” was draining from their plant and polluting the water supply (Kozlowski and Perkins 1295). However, it was not until 2002 that residents were notified of this contamination and when interviewed in 2014 about this hidden information, only one third of respondents believed the C8 contamination of Little Hocking constituted a serious injustice (1288, 1293).

Kozlowski and Perkins, who conducted the interview, believe that the residents do not wish to lose the benefits and class-based privilege they receive by working at DuPont®, clinging to the nostalgic notion of the American Dream. As such, “defending DuPont’s® actions is also about defending a class-based and racialised suite of privileges that rewards acquiescent participation in the workforce” and retaining the privileged “whiteness” which so many impoverished Appalachians have lost (1294). This is a somewhat common occurrence across the region, with industries being “defended fiercely by residents, especially white men, who prioritise employment over environment and health considerations” (1291). This belief has ultimately made the residents of Little Hocking “the most C8 contaminated people on the planet” (1295). In controlling the means of income, industry has a way to control and exploit those who believe that privilege is a birth-right which has been denied them.

100 miles upriver from Little Hocking sits Martin’s Ferry, Ohio, where James Wright was born and raised. This location has specific literary significance for it neighbours Wheeling, West Virginia, the inspiration behind one of the earliest depictions of American industrial pollution: Rebecca Harding Davis’ 1861 novella “Life in the Iron Mills.” Davis puts forward descriptions of the river as “dull and tawny-colored,” “negro-like,” “stagnant and slimy,” but still

appearing as “the slow stream of human life creeping past” emblematising its community too (Davis 12-13). In a sentence almost indistinguishable from that of Wright and *Suttree*, Davis writes: “I know: only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost: thousands of them, massed, vile, slimy lives, like those of the torpid lizards in yonder stagnant water-but” (13). The people of Wheeling are infected with the industrial pollution of the river and its surroundings, becoming slimy, vile, and dull, as the Ohio River is. It is this aspect of pollution and its effects on both the river and those who live beside it which James Wright’s poetry examines a century after Davis.

Martins Ferry and the surrounding river communities gave Wright a viewpoint of America without the idealised, optimistic rhetoric with which so many other areas are saturated. In an interview conducted the year before Wright’s death, he recalled that “people were quite strikingly separated from each other along class lines” in Martin’s Ferry, yet all the residents remained “conditioned . . . to believe we have no class distinctions in American society” (Dave Smith 20). For Wright, the idealised vision of America was revealed as a falsehood after he joined the army and came to terms with the comparative financial affluence of his peers.

He speaks of his background in this interview, explaining the lack of a “tradition of education in the family” with his older brother being the first of the Wrights to ever graduate from high school (21). This can easily be attributed as a by-product of economic desperation, with youth feeling it necessary to abandon education in order to financially provide for their families. Wright quit his job in the factory his father worked in after only two days because it was so physically damaging, yet knew that many others were

not so lucky. He later worked in another factory, chipping paint off girders and coating them with lead (21). Although his poetry career began at the relatively early age of 29, Wright's youth was defined by these underprivileged experiences shared by both family and neighbour.

Within this industrialised, desperate landscape, Wright's poetics come to treat the Ohio River Valley as a microcosm of the impoverished America so often overlooked or disregarded by those of privilege. This small geographical space becomes the subject for many of his poems, emphasising specificities such as autobiographic content, colloquial diction, signifying place names, and the extensive detail associated with the 'deep image' movement. Rather than tackling the extensive issues of pollution, economic imprisonment, and poverty with an abstract "America" or "Earth," Wright narrows his perspective to the local and precise in the knowledge that his readers will identify wider truth in the specifics.

By focusing upon the landscape of his youth, Wright manages to express the internal conflicts of Martin's Ferry with a raw honesty which becomes hard to not empathise with. Wright speaks of his "peculiar kind of devotion to Martin's Ferry" and that he is "stuck with it" despite achieving the goal so many others were denied: "to get out" (Smith 20). This feeling of guilt and gratefulness for having 'escaped' is evident throughout his poetry and the interview, and what some dismissively refer to as "his growing obsession with the coal-mining town of his Ohio birth" is in many ways a justified, geographic form of introspection (Butscher 261).

Certain reviewers and scholars stress that Wright's upbringing was somehow counter-intuitive to his poetic skill, arguing that "It was Wright's misfortune to

have been raised in the Ohio River Valley” or that his poetry has the “difficult chore [of] draw[ing] beauty from the hard black desolation of a tortured humanity” (Stitt 87, Butscher 261). Edward Butscher continues by providing a more pointed, debatably prejudicial argument, that Wright’s “particular perception of America is as narrow as his limited characters” for it relays an experience not relevant to the privileged reader (265). Whereas these arguments demonstrate the elitist viewpoint that only specific experiences can be poetic, it also suggests that Wright’s poetry has in some way suffered from his upbringing, directly correlating with the earlier discussion on nineteenth-century writers and their privileged viewpoints.

As with many writers and the locations of their youth, Wright’s work remains inextricably linked to the Ohio River Valley, a landscape represented less often in poetry, and thus less relatable to many readers. Yet, as Wright himself argues: “anything can be the location of a poem as long as the poet is willing to approach that location with the appropriate reverence. Even very ugly places” (Smith 20). Anguish runs through all of Wright’s Ohio poems, but this reverence exists in the depiction of the working class citizens, the labourers and the homeless, the victims of a heartless system within a small, violated world.

In the centre of this despoiled landscape is the Ohio River, abused and polluted by industry yet always escaping towards the sea nonetheless. Wright is associated with the “uniquely American body of poets who sing their local river-scapes, waterways, estuaries and oceans” through the significance of the river imagery in his body of work (Kalaidjian 102). As with the nineteenth-century writers, Wright’s Ohio River acts as an all-encompassing symbol for depicting his experiences within American society. Yet the river here is

defined by its many foul passengers, be it “the fish-heads” and “rubble sludge” beneath, “the chemical riffles” within, or “the orange rinds, / Oil cans, cold balloons of lovers” atop (Wright 194, 354, 126, 348). At the rare points in which the river itself appears, it shifts between simplistic terminology – “The black river,” “waste water” – and the overtly dense: “the dark jubilating / Isaiah of mill and smoke marrow” (205, 124, 168).

Wright’s fascinatingly complex rhetoric surrounding the river is instantly comparable to that found in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*, a novel depicting the desperate lifestyle of those living beside the Tennessee River, a tributary of the Ohio within the Appalachian region. As with Wright’s poetry, the putrid contents of the river become the discernible features, with many forms of waste re-appearing across both works. Following the prior structure: McCarthy represents the “countless fish heads” and “rippled sludge” beneath, the “dread waste” within, or the “orange-peels ambered with age,” “oilcans” and “yellow condoms roiling” atop (McCarthy 269, 256, 4, 368, 7). This shared imagery is significant to our understanding of the similarity between these polluted rivers, but also to the ways in which each writer depicts them. As in Wright’s poetry, the simplistic rhetoric of the Tennessee River as “black and calm” or “brown waters” in *Suttree* can shift to the complex: “a giant trematode curling down out of the city, welling heavy and septic” (305, 274, 142).

Regardless of these similarities of representation and content, these connected rivers each have distinct histories of their own pollution for the purpose of economic greed. The Tennessee River is the largest tributary of the Ohio River and has a “peculiar flow” due to topographical and geographical oddities along its path, making it susceptible to periodical flooding and seasonal shifts

in water levels and flows (Schaffer 19). These shifting flows make the water stagnant and less oxygenated during the summer months, affecting the Tennessee River's "capacity to assimilate wastes," thus lowering the population of fish and the quality of drinking water (8). With much of the region already experiencing the negative effects of environmental abuse and desperate poverty by the Great Depression, the federal government passed the Tennessee Valley Authority Act in 1933 to oversee construction of numerous dams across the river to provide energy, control flooding, improve navigation, and provide economic opportunities for the region's residents.

It can be seen that the original vision of the TVA was idealistic, beginning with a heavy focus on the ways in which the development could be beneficial to the residents of the region, but over time the intentions and actions of the TVA inevitably shifted from humanity to economy (Prather 40-41). The objectives of the TVA "expanded from navigation to flood control and eventually to hydroelectric power while recreation and water quality rarely made it onto the policy agenda" (Schaffer 13). In an unpleasant but thematically potent development, the power generated from the Tennessee River during World War II was used to produce nitrate for gunpowder and provide energy for the Oak Ridge atomic plant which devised the first atomic bomb (Prather 41).

Yet this was not the publicised intention behind the TVA's developments, with their internal literature suggesting positive, populist change had been achieved. This internal literature has a fascinating connection to *Suttree*, for much of it was written by Charles McCarthy, Cormac's father. Literature professor William Prather deserves attribution for illuminating this facet of the novel's autobiographical history, whose 2004 article on *Suttree* was indispensable to my research. In a report titled "TVA and the Tennessee

Valley” appearing in the July 1950 edition of *The Town Planning Review*, Charles McCarthy provides an idealised and self-righteous presentation of the many successes of the TVA Act. “TVA is all things to all people,” he states, listing off the many achievements before simplifying the efforts as “convincing proof that the economic problems of a great river valley were capable of solution through democratic means” (Charles McCarthy 116). He refers to the valley before TVA as “the Nation's No. 1 economic problem” and triumphantly states that the “look of poverty has left the land” in the seventeen years after its inception (117, 129).

Yet Charles McCarthy’s position involved the removal of the poverty-stricken people who contributed to this distinctive “look” which so desperately needed eradication. Through his primary duty involving land acquisition and the removal of those who live upon that land, he became one of the leading lawyers on the “condemnation for Norris Reservoir” some 28 miles away from Knoxville (Prather 42). With the aid of Charles McCarthy, the TVA dispossessed 72,000 people by 1946 as part of their premeditated, controlled flooding of the area, destroying the traditional way of life associated with the area and leaving many with no financial assistance (42). Knoxville became a space of refuge for many of the displaced, something experienced by several characters in *Suttree*, notably William ‘Red’ Callahan. Charles McCarthy’s report makes no mention of these dispossessed thousands.

This emphasis on positive change in the report also appears in regards to the river itself, with the argument that the “nine dams [have] converted the Tennessee River from a muddy and erratic river into a series of clear- water lakes” (Charles McCarthy 118-119). This aesthetic dimension is repeatedly emphasised, with Charles McCarthy stating that “Fifteen years ago, the rivers

of the Tennessee Valley were rarely, if ever, clear” but now the “old muddy river has gone,” replaced by “beautiful lakes” that “support a rapidly growing recreation and fishing industry” (124, 128). To compare this depiction of the river to that shown in *Suttree*, set in the following year of 1951, illustrates a near dichotomous interpretation of the river quality.

Cormac McCarthy was born in 1933, the same year the TVA Act was passed, and in 1937 the McCarthy family moved to an upscale area of Knoxville for Charles McCarthy’s position as a TVA lawyer in charge of land acquisition (Priola). This position awarded Charles “an incredible \$5,200 a year at the bottom of the Depression” whereas the men of the Tennessee Valley who it was his job to evict, received just \$148 annually on average (Prather 46). With Cormac (henceforth referred to as McCarthy) leaving home and attending university in inner-city Knoxville in 1951, he witnessed the dire condition of the river and the townsfolk whom his father had supposedly been helping.

Although this complicates McCarthy’s class background, his rebellion against his father’s ill-gotten wealth by exiling himself to the landscape his father despoiled and amongst the people his father wilfully ignored is identical to that of protagonist Cornelius Suttree. This choice leaves both McCarthy and Suttree financially destitute and entirely ingrained within the social strata they were born above. As Prather theorises: “the young McCarthy had to understand the history of the river and the part his father played in bringing it to its current condition” which suggests that the semi-autobiographical *Suttree* acts as a direct response to the TVA Act and its devastating effects (53).

This is the significant difference between the Tennessee River of *Suttree* and the Ohio River of Wright’s poetry: *Suttree* depicts a desperate people dependent upon a river so hopelessly ‘harnessed’ that it cannot prosper,

whereas Wright depicts a people that must pollute themselves and their river with destructive industry as a means to survive. Each tells the story of the privileged exploiting a river and its people for their own financial gain, but the specifics change in the same way each author's experiences do. McCarthy denies his privilege to live the same life his father cursed upon the less fortunate, while Wright feels guilt for escaping the impoverished life he was born into. They each depict an exploited people who live and die by the grace of the polluted river, utilising fascinating rhetorical and poetic devices to interlink the social and environmental spheres in distinct, effective ways.

With James Wright's poetry, the river and its people become indistinguishable from one another through direct intermingling and poetic obscuration. Walter Kalaidjian suggests that Wright's body of work symbolises a search for "an essential language, which would voice the desolated landscape and spiritual bankruptcy, which had become Wright's native country" -- an idea which explains the poetic conflation of both people and geography (107).

Considering the violent effects of industry upon both man and landscape, the essential language must be able to depict their shared victimisation effectively and poetically.

Across his work, this juxtaposition of human and river holds numerous varying intentions and effects. "To the Poets in New York" provides a geographically non-descript, but unusually positive and unambiguous depiction of this juxtaposition, promoting an environmentalist attitude.

Daydreaming of a beautiful human body
That had undressed quietly and slipped into the river
And become the river:
The proud body of an animal that would transform

The snagged gears and the pulleys
Into a plant that grows under water (Wright 171).

By imagining a human literally *becoming* the river, Wright envisions the river being saved from its industrial tormentors through the newfound sentience and changed politics of the body. Later in the poem, he depicts a second figure, a “listener waiting for courteous rivers,” a passive figure starkly opposed to the active, “proud” figure who naturalises the polluting mechanisms (172, 171). Wright argues here that one must empathise and suffer with the river to change the dire situation, as inactive hope leads nowhere.

This empathetic approach to the river is set beside the depiction of impoverished labourers in an unpublished poem entitled “The Continental Can Company at Six O’Clock” printed in its entirety below.

The faces fall down the ramp into the yard
Beside the river.
Headlights roil over the water,
And the faces divide into drops of blood,
That fall over the high voltage wires of the fence
Into the river.
The water darkens to red fire.
And the blast furnaces of Benwood are lunging at the sky,
Animals blinded with anger.
Suddenly the faces flood into one dark red face.
The hood of each car is a dark sloop bearing a coffin
Toward the river.
This is October, the restless flames of dead blow torches have scarred the
wind.
Men are dying without ever knowing it.
America, America,
It is raining
In the river. (Qtd. in Stein 51)

Through the visceral imagery of fire, blood, water, and death; Wright asks the reader to consider the ways in which both the river and the labourers become one through, what Kevin Stein calls “the dehumanizing process” of factory work which Wright’s friends and family experienced (Stein 51). Here we see the faces reduced to drops of blood dumped into the river, only for the river to take on the properties of these faces and the labour which diminished them by becoming “red fire.” Wright presents this labour as little more than a funeral procession, carrying coffins to be dumped in the river and all for the advancement of “America, America.”

Although there are numerous other examples of river submergence and the subsequent dissolution of personhood throughout Wright’s work, another powerful illustration of this technique appears in his remarkable 179 line poem “Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child.” As the title and introductory paragraph explains, section 1 is an allegedly verbatim statement from a young black child named Garnie, who told Wright:

You know,
if a blind boy
ride his bicycle
down there
he might fall into that water
I think it's water
but I don't know
they call it acid
and if that poor boy
drive his poor blind bicycle
into that acid
he drown
he die
and then
they bury him
up (Wright 210).

The striking imagery is represented in a simplistic, colloquial style with a breathless, rhythmic enjambment running throughout. It is the final single-word line which becomes most striking, indicating that this boy who drowned in the acidic water will be raised to a higher position in order to be buried, as if he is now fundamentally connected to the sunken depths which killed him. The following six sections continue to depict similar imagery and connotations between humanity and water, where the human side seemingly exists only relative to the water it enters. This is visible in section 2, titled "to the Ohio":

Oh my back-broken beloved Ohio.
I, too, was beautiful, once,
Just like you.
We were both still a little
Young, then.
Now, all I am is a poet,
Just like you. (Wright 211)

As indicated from the lamentations of "my own river" and "my rotted Ohio" earlier in this section, Wright depicts his development as occurring alongside the Ohio River's as if neither could exist without the other (210, 211). The repetition of "Just like you" suggests the river to be the inspirational force leading Wright's decisions and philosophies, as if the two share a close relationship, be it familial or educational.

The final section of "Many of Our Waters" concretizes this notion of the familial relationship between Wright and the river, while also expressing the fears of the future felt by both.

You're my brother at last,
And I don't have anything
Except my brother
And many of our waters in our native country,
When they break.

And when they break,
They break in a woman's body,
They break in your man's heart,
And they break in mine:

Pity so old and alone, it is not alone, yours, or mine,
The pity of rivers and children, the pity of brothers, the pity
Of our country which is our lives. (Wright 215)

Despite previously alluding to Wright's brother Jack, it can also be read that the address to "my brother" is an address to the Ohio River which Wright hoped to be "just like" and associates with the other waters of America. As with many of Wright's poems, the incredibly specific geography expands to encapsulate the entire nation, suggesting that localised concerns are far from contained or controlled. With the suggestion that many American waters shall eventually break, ultimately breaking body and heart of the people who are already "in" them, Wright poses a stark warning at the dangers of this form of merger between human and river. As the final line suggests, all that remains is pity through our relation to the landscape and its people, the same pity found in the narrative of the blind boy and the acid he could not see.

Cormac McCarthy's approach is rather different in *Suttree*, for he depicts the river as the landscape entire, with the desperate human inhabitants as the "surface phenomena" upon it, always on the verge of sinking or further polluting the river (McCarthy 7). Empathy and equivalency inform Wright's intermingling of man and water, whereas McCarthy's description is more akin to a war between both parties, as if the intermingling is undesirable and non-consensual. In both cases, the river acts as a means to contextualise the characters and their actions, forcing the reader to use the foul landscape as a standard by which to gauge the status of its submerged inhabitants.

The uncanny, detached overture which opens the novel manages to introduce this philosophy of the setting as a discrete “water-world” with artfulness and ease. The narrator literally tells the reader that “We are come to a world within the world,” “A world beyond all fantasy, malevolent and tactile and dissociate” in which “the drunk and homeless have washed up” (5, 4-5, 3). As readers, this surreal depiction of what we soon discover to be a desperately realist landscape is perplexing, but it informs us of the significance behind the river which flows through the narrative. The diseased Tennessee River is this world within a world, one encompassing all, where even the lights of the city are reflected back as “discolored sores” once they touch the surface, where the dry landscape still “blears like Atlantis on her lightless seafloor” (258, 203). One of the final descriptions of the river puts the setting of *Suttree* as a basic dichotomy: “the waste-clogged river and the immense emptiness of the world beyond” (563). As this overture indicates, the reader is entering a world of filth and water, where the signifying class distinction is whether people stay afloat or sink.

This otherworldly overture emphasises the pollution, waste, and filth of Knoxville and the Tennessee River in the same manner as the novel which follows, yet more directly introduces the way man and river are juxtaposed. In utilising this disembodied, emotionless rhetoric, the significance of “ruined household artifacts that rear from the fecal mire like landmarks” becomes tantamount to the “dripping lepers” and nondescript “Countrymen” who appear amidst the ruin (4-5). Depictions continue to blur, until Knoxville becomes “a carnival of shapes upreared on the river plain” and we are given the standalone sentence: “Illshapen or black or deranged, fugitive of all order, strangers in everyland” (4, 5). In destabilising the clarity and context of this

depiction, the reader can no longer be certain as to what is being depicted, discarded waste or discarded people.

This striking and disquieting equivalency put forward embodies the central difficulty at *Suttree's* heart: if the world is a polluted river, what are we but pollution? We first meet the titular protagonist, Cornelius Suttree, gazing at his reflection, "a sepia visage yawning in the scum, eyes veering and watery grimace" (7). The reader meets the submerged Suttree first, and through the recurrent imagery of twins, doppelgangers, and reflections – the reader can never be sure they are not reading about "some othersuttree" who exists beneath the water (346). At one point, Suttree himself theorises the same philosophy, feeling like "little more than yet another artifact leached out of the earth and washed along, draining down out of the city" (368).

Conflating the disenfranchised people of Knoxville with the waste that is destroying their river is deeply problematic, especially considering McCarthy and the fictional Suttree's background of privilege. Yet McCarthy's incorporation of the archetypal characteristics associated with white trash "exposes the material conditions that foster cultural equations between material waste and abject social groups" and deems it reprehensible (McCoy 108). When forced to live under bridges or in dilapidated houseboats, amongst the filth and sewage, the cultural perspective likens the two and the cycle of disenfranchisement continues.

In strict representational and rhetorical terms, the associations between character and waste are also prevalent. As noted by Wesley G. Morgan, a sentence towards the end of the novel names "Donald, Hugh and Conrad" all characters who "appear out of the blue and are mentioned for the *first* and

only time in this single sentence" (96). With a cast as immense and cursory to the narrative as those of *Suttree*, this sentence features characters – who appear to be dead friends of McCarthy's – appearing like debris floating past too quickly to accurately describe. The narrative is "littered with grotesque bodies and overwhelmingly detailed catalogues of detritus" which ultimately symbolise the economic reality of the lives depicted while also invoking a more philosophical debate regarding the hierarchy of representation (McCoy 108). An appearance of McCarthy's dead acquaintances is deemed less worthy of detail than the passing filth, signifying to the reader which issues require more pertinent attention.

Louis H. Palmer III has a less sensitive interpretation of this depiction, believing that *Suttree* simply depicts "a wasteland with a population of waste humans" but he touches on a worthwhile point (185). If we are to view these humans as 'waste' we recognise that this is simply because they cannot be commodified by occupation, instead being forced to struggle amongst the other by-products of a wasteful and heartless system. "The color of this life is water" McCarthy writes, and in a water as toxic as that of the Tennessee River, the lives dependent upon it also acquire this shade (499). The river becomes the world to these people, these fishermen and hoboese, prospectors and schemers, for the world of economy and privilege has dumped them there alongside the rest of the detritus.

One of the most striking aspects of the work of these two writers is their sharp and often delightfully divergent utilisation of intertextuality, specifically relating to the previously mentioned authors of the American past. One can easily attribute the discussion above as a form of transcendentalism, allowing the characters within each text to converge with the landscape in a way both

oppositional and demonstrative of the Emersonian ideal. Save Wright's vision of a human-river union transforming mechanics to organics in "To the Poets in New York", transcending the body and becoming nature is recontextualised as a negative or isolating experience by both writers.

An irreparably damaged nature only offers damaged transcendence, invoking discomfort through the humans experiencing mutual victimisation or becoming waste. Even removed from these two leading viewpoints, the literalism of the transcendence shown here is off-putting, with Wright's poem "Redwings" declaring that a character's "five children are still alive, / Floating near the river" or Suttree's experience "floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth's cooling seas, formless macule of plasm trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come" (Wright 283, McCarthy 517). Each of these experiences could arguably be seen as transcendental, through the deep connection between character and natural landscape, yet they are far from idealised. When writing of the satisfaction to be found in coalescing with the natural landscape, Emerson never envisioned a nature so deeply violated and repugnant that union becomes undesirable.

Thoreau's transcendentalist usage of the river as an embodiment of American history appears throughout both works also, but with an emphasis on the dissatisfying present and brutality of the past. In a scene surely referencing *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Suttree travels to Concord, Tennessee and finds an arrowhead in the riverbed, stating to his partner: "They're everywhere. In the winter when the water is down you can find them" (491). As with the Concord and Merrimack, the Tennessee River is "afreight with the past" and filled with Native American artifacts such as "a carven gorget" and the aforementioned arrowheads, seeking to reinforce the

ways in which colonial “progress” has ruptured American nature, removing the mythic power and indigenous identity it once held (McCarthy 5, 394).

A similar effect is brought upon by Wright’s many references to the original meaning behind the name ‘Ohio,’ providing a point of comparison through the perspective of those who first encountered the river. He states in “Many of Our Waters” that: “The Winnebago gave you your name, Ohio, / And Ohio means beautiful river” exemplifying a cynical irony through the repugnance found in its current representation (Wright 211). In another emphasis of the beautiful Ohio left dead, “One Last Look at the Adige: Verona in the Rain” compares the contemporary Adige River in Italy to the pre-industrial Ohio River he never experienced:

The Ohio must have looked
Something like this
To the people who loved it
Long before I was born. (284).

By recognising the indigenous history of these rivers, the authors are not only remembering those who are the subjects of enforced cultural forgetting, but further damning the current ecological state of their rivers.

Even if the beauty has disappeared from the Ohio River, the beautifying rhetoric of Walt Whitman, Wright’s leading poetic inspiration, makes an appearance in several of Wright’s poems. Wright wrote a 1962 essay entitled “The Delicacy of Walt Whitman” and features numerous direct references within his poetry, even including appearances by Whitman himself as a character. George Yatchisin explicitly speaks of the “lessons [Wright] learned” from “his master Whitman” and suggests that Wright held an overarching “desire to emulate Whitman” (176, 175, 177). The technical aspects such as the

incorporation of free verse, unconventional enjambment, vastly differing line lengths, and the emphasis on parallelism are undeniable, but it is through the parodic incorporation of Whitmanian romantic rhetoric where this form of intertextuality shines.

In "Beautiful Ohio," Wright depicts the sewer main spilling "a shining waterfall out of a pipe" which he boldly calls "beauty" (Wright 317-318). The sewage ultimately takes on the same significance as the river in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" for it inspires a temporal, transcendental sense of connection to all the people of his hometown.

Sixteen thousand and five hundred more or less people
In Martins Ferry, my home, my native country,
Quickened the river
With the speed of light.
And the light caught there
The solid speed of their lives
In the instant of that waterfall. (318)

Rather than the sense of kinship Whitman felt with whoever crosses the East River in the unseen future, Wright encapsulates the kinship felt through geographic localisation in regards to a single moment. The millions of forthcoming travellers which Whitman envisions during his ferry ride are not visible to Wright, only the 16,500 inhabitants of Martin's Ferry within that profound moment of clarity. The sewage acts as an ironic substitution for the river, playfully signifying the damaged notions of normalcy and beauty found in an impoverished space, while also indicating that the river and the sewer have hopelessly coalesced.

Another poem which uses Whitman's romantic rhetoric ironically, "Ohioan Pastoral" puts forward a painterly view of a rural river landscape, complete

with sagging, oozing barns, “the body of a lost / Bathtub”, floating condoms, and “A buried gas main” (348). Although far from idealised in content, the rhetorical idealism is cause for alarm for Erik Martiny. Rather than reading these as ironic attempts at finding beauty in the miserable, violated landscape, Martiny argues that Wright has a “calm acceptance of spoilt landscapes” and treats pollution in a “recuperative manner” by aestheticizing his locations “in a kind of post- ecological gesture of acceptance of pollution and spoliation” (Martiny).

These claims coalesce into a particularly fascinating argument, that Wright’s “Whitmanian inclusiveness ultimately tends to disqualify him as an eco-poet” (Martiny). In utilising the romantic rhetoric of Whitman in depicting landscapes less conventionally attractive, as Whitman often did in his depiction of urban spaces, Martiny believes his work cannot be classified as environmentalist. Despite being praised by Elizabeth Dodd for his “biocentric – even pointedly environmentalist – aesthetic,” the consideration between form, content, and rhetorical style proposed by Martiny is worth considering (30). For it to be harmful to depict a polluted space in an idealised manner suggests an entirely new dimension to consider when discussing the politics of representing American space. Wright not only romanticises pollution and sewage, but also strip-mines, autopsies, violence, and most appallingly, drowned black children who appear as “cute little pickaninny fawns / Drifting face down the Hudson” (Wright 214). It is fundamentally unsound to believe that these are in any way genuine, and instead should be considered ironic hyperboles of the ways in which we are taught to appreciate our home, our country, our situation in life. Lest we appear ungrateful.

Huckleberry Finn is to *Suttree* what Whitman is to Wright, inspiring an approach that runs parallel for a vastly dissimilar purpose. Although not strictly relevant to the river focus here, Bryan Vescio's in-depth comparison between the narratives of each is a useful illustration of McCarthy's devotion to creating *Suttree* as a response to *Huckleberry Finn*.

Even at a glance, the echoes of *Huckleberry Finn* in *Suttree* are striking. The episodic, apparently digressive structures of both narratives seem to mirror the rivers that flow through their hearts. Both novels follow the exploits of picaresque protagonists who begin their wanderings in attempts to flee from their fathers. Like Huck Finn, Cornelius Suttree has a kind of Tom Sawyer figure for a companion in Gene Harrogate, whose outrageous schemes Suttree regards incredulously. Suttree even has his own version of Jim in Ab Jones, a black friend and father figure on whose behalf Suttree fights the white power structure near the end of the novel. Like Huck's efforts to free Jim, Suttree's assistance proves ineffectual and requires him to leave his community, apparently once and for all, at the novel's conclusion. Upon closer examination, Suttree appears not merely to echo Twain's novel, but to reread it. (74)

In breaking down the narrative parallels between the two novels, Vescio convincingly demonstrates the significance of *Finn* to McCarthy's construction of *Suttree*.

Huckleberry Finn is another novel which puts forth a river as the "world" of the narrative, a river-world that "collects and embodies all aspects of nature, of life and death, of the human and the unhuman" (Hoffman 232). These two rivers each expand to aesthetic dimensions the rivers themselves cannot flow to, but more significantly, each of these rivers disrupt the economic society America seeks to uphold. McCarthy's Tennessee provides the needs for survival to the people society would rather see disappear, much as Twain's Mississippi aids Huck's escape through the many bounties it directs him to.

The river-world floods during each novel – a notable detail in *Suttree*, considering his father’s statements that the TVA had eradicated this issue – which force houses adrift and redistribute wealth without objective. The Mississippi is largely kinder to its characters in this aspect, with Huck and Jim gaining all they need from the river, whereas the displaced character Reese from *Suttree* is shown to “squat for hours and watch the river pass, pointing sadly at valuables hurtling past with the speed of a train” (431). The Tennessee River cannot provide the opportunities for adventure or escape as the Mississippi does, either in a flood too violent to survive inside or appearing “in a grail of quietude,” moving at “a sluggard ooze” with a “dead surface” (McCarthy 6, 5, 143). The power of the river has been sapped by the TVA, leaving only stagnation and floods which both negatively impact the lives of those on its banks. The fears expressed by Twain in *Life on the Mississippi* about the vulnerability of his beloved river have come true on the Tennessee, and strange, impoverished versions of his characters find themselves stranded on a parallel, albeit vastly dissimilar path due to the deliberate repression of their river.

Another aspect found in Twain’s work is the depiction of the river as a God figure of sorts, a powerful force which can provide or smite those who encounter it. This representation is particularly visible throughout *Suttree*, with the river acting as a dying God which cannot provide enough for its worshippers. The TVA saw the river as a problem which needed solving, something to be eradicated, only to be achieved by taking “control of the river” by “harness[ing]” it, further cementing the Tennessee’s status as a once-free God (Charles McCarthy 117, 118). The few times the river is personified in *Suttree*, it is akin to a caged animal, appearing “highbacked and hissing,” or “surly and opaque,” while it actively “gnawed and pulled,” “chattered back a

querulous babbling," or slid past "with a slaverous mutter and seethe" (McCarthy 23, 109, 369, 383, 368). Suttree even pitches "small round pebbles at the river as if he were feeding it" following its flooding (398).

This animalistic river-god of the Tennessee also makes its divine judgements upon the people it encounters: both helping and hindering. Unlike the Mississippi, the Tennessee does not have the power to provide its worshippers with bounty and saleable commodities, but it also lacks the power to pose a mighty threat. It keeps the inhabitants alive through its supply of fish, but it just as readily kills the fish or cuts the fishing lines when it freezes over. Suttree is a commercial fisherman thanks to the river, as indicated by the simple exchange: "Are you still fishing? Yep. You want a job? Nope" but the river's harnessed status keeps him impoverished (157). Suttree also provides free fish to the vagrant community throughout the novel, further complicating the interplay between community, economy, and the river.

In its weakened state, any attempts by its inhabitants to raise their economic mobility above a certain threshold is unfulfillable. Reese and his family, whose house is sent adrift by a flood, implicate Suttree in a scheme to sell pearls found in the river. Yet after attempting to sell these to a jeweller, they discover them to be "Tennessee Pearls" that are "not worth a nickel" due to appearing "Somewhat gray, somewhat misshapen" (402, 403). These moments explicitly showcase characters further attempting to commodify the river, all of which turn out unsuccessful.

Appalachia is a predominantly Christian area and river baptisms are important to local culture, but pose an immediate problem within McCarthy's water-world and before its river-god. Baptisms appear reversed in the

Tennessee River, with the water proudly displaying the “sins” of the citizens upon its surface. The “bottles of uncured glass” suggest alcoholism, the condoms sexual promiscuity, the “forms of foetal humans” abortion, and so on (368, 5). The river cannot baptise or purify those who enter it, for it has become swollen with sin after taking penance for its inhabitants.

At one point, Suttree enters a surreal “swollen backwater of coves and sloughs where slime and froth obscured the shapes of floating jars and bottles,” where children urinate downstream and “slender nylon fishline, tangled hooks, dried baitfish, and small bones” litter the rocks (McCarthy 144-145). Suttree encounters a small group of Christians performing baptisms amidst this space which has been explicitly commodified for fishing and dumping waste. After dismissing the offer of a baptism, a churchgoer tells Suttree “You better get in that river” but he again refuses, because “Suttree knew the river well already” (149). With his knowledge of the commodified, victimised river-god, Suttree understands that it is in no state to save him or anyone else despite its best intentions.

In a later section which parodies this interaction through obscene exaggeration, a preacher on the sidewalk finds a turnip in “the gutter black and choked with refuse” and holds it aloft as proof that “He provideth . . . He give out the loaves and fishes” (460). The turnip is passed around his spectators, who each take a bite, and one old man crawls into the gutter “among the sewage” and demands baptism (460). In the ruptured water-world of Knoxville, recognition of normalcy and cleanliness is warped to all, where even “God himself dont look too close at what lies on that river bottom” in order to stay blissfully ignorant (496). With the river becoming the entire world of the novel, a violent and disturbing world nonetheless, the

opportunity of cleaning oneself in that same river is made void. Complicating this with the notion of the river as a god only further suggests its post-TVA weakness, with it no longer being able to provide what is needed to clean or baptise its inhabitants.

For James Wright, baptism is explicitly relevant to his poetry, with his fourth collection *Shall We Gather at the River?* sharing its title with the famous American baptismal hymn written by Robert Lowry. Numerous references beyond this collection's title refer back to this ritual practice, of being "gathered so often / Into your rinsing arms, / And bathed, and healed," of being washed clean, submerged, or made holy (Wright 211).

Yet only one baptism in Wright's body of work appears to be successful, that shown in "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martin's Ferry, Ohio" which depicts Wright's father and uncles digging a swimming pool beside the toxic river.

When people don't have quite enough to eat
In August, and the river,
That is supposed to be some holiness,
Starts dying,

They swim in the earth. (236)

With the dying river offering no chances for recreation, an alternative is found in the swimming pool which "becomes a sort of New Deal baptismal font - providing salaries to sustain the out-of-work men and their families, and offering them the literal and figurative opportunity to rinse themselves in its redemptive waters" (Stein 53). The elation experienced by Wright is palpable, as he suddenly leaps into the water, and repeats to himself that "my father / And my uncles dug a hole in the ground, / No grave for once . . . I am alive" (Wright 237). The invocations of "dear God" and "Jesus Christ" also appear,

and his visitation by a “haunted” girl who whispers “Take care now, / Be patient, and live” only further contextualises this as a restorative, baptismal experience (236, 237).

The success of this baptism depends on its location, a man-made pool, removed from the violated and inherently damaging Ohio River. The baptismal imagery of the river almost exclusively ends in devastation and death, rather than elation and rebirth. The baptism “does not serve as the emergence into a redeemed realm, but is a further initiation into the knowledge of death” (Kalaidjian 112). A chemically-polluted river does not purify those who enter its waters, but rather diseases them, making the desire for baptism immediately associated with the desire for death via water.

Drowning is a constantly recurrent image throughout Wright’s work, encompassing numerous metaphorical or symbolic interpretations alongside the devastating realism behind their usage. Suicide is a severe problem in Appalachia, with the suicide rate being “17 percent higher than the national rate” over the entire region, and “31 percent higher” in the central counties which these writers depict (PDA, Inc. 123). Even the opening sentences of multiple poems repeatedly depict this: “The police are probing tonight for the bodies / Of children in the black waters;” “Under the enormous pier-shadow, / Hobie Johnson drowned in a suckhole;” the aforementioned drowning blind boy of “Many of Our Waters” (126, 172). Drowning is simply another aspect of life in the Ohio River Valley according to Wright, with him simply putting forward that “I am not at home in my place / Where I was born and my friends drowned” (355). A similar notion is proposed by McCarthy in a striking piece of dialogue, which features Harrogate stating: “This time tomorrow you’ll be talking to a wealthy man” to which Suttree replies “Or a

drowned one" (McCarthy 257). The dichotomy of being born or drowned in Wright's poetry is echoed through *Suttree's* dichotomy between being wealthy or drowned, further illustrating the philosophies expressed by each text.

Yet both writers leave the audience in a difficult space when dealing with depictions of water-based deaths, for the motivation, intention, and reason of the death is almost always obscured. "Drowning and death are the risks in venturing the redemptive, human act," Kalaidjian argues, but is this desire for redemption within the river not a thinly veiled death-wish in and of itself? (110). *Suttree's* first significant narrative beat follows the dragging of the river for the body of a suicide, detailing how it disrupts *Suttree's* daily fishing routine. The body is depicted in vivid and grotesque detail, yet the reader is given no suggestion to the life of this passed man save his clothing and the fact "They found his shoes on the bridge" he jumped from (McCarthy 10). The reader never knows why this man may have killed himself, but the matter-of-fact representation of the occurrence suggests it is another warped form of normalcy for *Suttree*. Although suicidal thoughts plague *Suttree* throughout the novel, they are usually expressed as a simple disinterest in continuing his life rather than a particular motivation towards ending it.

On the other side of the spectrum, Gregg Lambert argues that "Just as all rivers must eventually end in the sea, in Wright's poems they must inevitably lead to the thought of suicide" (225). *Suttree* only visualises suicide via drowning once, imagining how it must feel "To fall through dark to darkness. Struggle in those opaque and fecal deeps, which way is up. Till the lungs suck brown sewage and funny lights go down the final corridors of the brain" (McCarthy 34). For Wright, suicide by the river is a constant occurrence, and in many ways, a constant urge for his poetic persona.

A particularly devastating suicide poem, "Three Sentences for a Dead Swan" sees the speaker discovering the dead body of "My black Ohioan swan . . . my black fire . . . my love" in the Ohio River (164). Through numerous references in *Shall We Gather at the River*, the swan appears to symbolise Jenny, a woman Wright loved in his youth who seemingly committed suicide by drowning in the river. A black swan drowned in the toxic waters it was born to swim upon acts as a particularly potent image depicting the life that Jenny, James Wright himself, and all the dispossessed and underprivileged of the Ohio River Valley have been cursed with. Yet, the representation of the river itself is also hugely significant:

Here, carry his splintered bones
Slowly, slowly
Back into the
Tar and chemical strangled tomb,
The strange water, the
Ohio river, that is no tomb to
Rise from the dead
From. (164)

Rather than invoking a baptismal philosophy of the river allowing one entrance into the afterlife, the Ohio River of this poem seemingly negates the possibility of the afterlife – trapping its victims in a strangled tomb they cannot rise from. Not only does the river take your life, it takes away the potentiality of a future just as sharply.

This rhetoric describing suicide via drowning is similar to that of the river itself, as he represents the misery and guilt alongside the peaceful lack of suffering it offers. In "To the Muse," another poem eulogising his lost Jenny, Wright romanticises her death as "sleeping down there / Face down in the unbelievable silk of spring," posing it as a beautiful act (175). Comparatively, "Humming a Tune for an Old Lady in West Virginia" describes with brutality:

the soft floppy whisper
A drowned boy made.
He rose in two pieces
A mile down river,
One cord round his pecker
And one shoulder blade (194).

Shifting between emotional, aesthetic, and rhetorical extremes detaches Wright from proposing a distinctive 'truth' behind this complicated and serious issue, instead allowing the individual instances to speak for themselves. "In Response to a Rumor That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia Has Been Condemned" takes on the patristic doctrine that those who commit suicide are damned to hell and subverts it with painful cynicism.

For the river at Wheeling, West Virginia,
Has only two shores:
The one in hell, the other
In Bridgeport, Ohio.

And nobody would commit suicide, only
To find beyond death
Bridgeport, Ohio (173).

By linking geographic reality and religious unreality, Wright finds a way to conjoin several properties of thought surrounding suicide and deems them equally valid. In his unpredictable and inconsistent rhetoric depicting suicide, Wright imitates the liquid flow of the river which condemns these figures to death or the other shore. Suicide becomes another potential affordance of the river, one which neither writer can fully resolve, being at once devastating, romantic, desirable, violent, gentle, and always dependent upon the coalescence between the victimised river and the victimised human.

Through the vastly complex and disparate spaces these rivers occupy in the work of McCarthy and Wright, the overlapping elements illuminate a coherent purpose behind their convergent representations. In these texts, the reader is forced to reconsider the space rivers occupy and recognise their inherent vulnerability and existence as damageable, finite things. The reader's understanding of American rivers could be based exclusively upon their own limited experience or even the idealised depiction found in classical American literature. Wright and McCarthy unequivocally reject this and instead depict all the waste, chemicals, lost hopes, and corpses which have entered and polluted what was once natural beauty. In emphasising the grotesque, the reader is forced to encounter the space which these people are unfortunate enough to occupy.

These rivers can offer no satisfaction to our speakers and characters, their inherent strength all but gone due to commodification and recontextualisation as dumping-ground or energy generator. No longer can baptisms be performed in these waters, no longer can they clean you or inspire you, they only provide minimal sustenance or the release of death. "[A] handful of beans boiled in riverwater" sustains the ragpicker beneath the Henley Street bridge, just as the "dark river of labour" gives Wright's figures the financial means to survive (McCarthy 12, Wright 227). In a text such as Thoreau's *Walden*, the rejection of capitalism and survival by the grace of nature appears feasible, but when nature is corrupted, where do we turn?

McCarthy and Wright illustrate an existence devoid of the blameless: their characters being forced to assist in the spoliation of their landscape to survive in a society which has no use for them as anything but labourers. The river offers solace, the occasional fish, the occasional peek of beauty, but nothing

which can save them from their dire situation aside from the ever-present allure of drowning. Symbolising the river as the dying guardian of the classless and impoverished emphasises the similarities shared between them: the lack of state protection, their mutual victimisation and exploitation, their artificially shortened lifespans, and their inability to save one another.

Two: Racial History's Undertow in *Beloved* and Selected African American Poetry

Before considering the implications of river quality and literature from a distinctly racialized, African American perspective, it is worthwhile considering the ways in which the first chapter's focus on economic and industrial concerns interact with race. Examining intersectionality acknowledges trends and correlations that affect the daily lives of many Americans, which also influence their literary representation.

For example, the median income of an African American family in 1989 was \$22,430 compared to \$37,630 for a white family, yet only a 2% disparity sits between the participation in the labour force of these two groups, suggesting a higher likelihood for African Americans to enter low-paying jobs (Bureau of the Census 1990). Considering this alongside other statistics, such as the disparity between the number of black and white Americans living in poverty (sitting at 29.5% and 10% respectively) provides a greater understanding of the extent of the issues represented. The poverty represented in the texts of the first chapter is worthy of analysis, but it remains an issue the vast majority of white America have not experienced first-hand whereas almost a third of black America has.

If the spheres of race and economy are interrelated, and as argued earlier, the spheres of economy and the environment are also intrinsically connected, we must unite all three spheres to properly engage with the complexities this literature puts forward. A significant concept linking all three spheres is that of 'environmental racism' put forward by Benjamin Chavis Jr in 1987.

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. (Chavis 3)

Chavis Jr. does not restrain his argument to insinuations and suspicions, instead putting forward direct causal claims that “Millions . . . are trapped in polluted environments because of their race and color” and that “People of color bear the brunt of the nation’s pollution problem” (3).

Working with the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, Chavis conducted extensive research into the relationship between locations polluted by hazardous wastes and the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of the communities who live nearby. Despite the numerous white townships like Little Hocking and Martin’s Ferry which are preyed upon due to economic desperation, “Race proved to be the most significant among variables” signifying “a consistent national pattern” (Commission xiii). Numerous other shocking discoveries further prove the extent of this issue, as over “15 million Blacks lived in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites” and “communities with greater minority percentages of the population are more likely to be the sites of such facilities” (xiv, xv). Damningly, Chavis notes that “The possibility that these patterns resulted by chance is virtually impossible” suggesting an orchestrated form of racism stemming from those in power (xv).

The experiences of African Americans in the river-polluting, industrial labour force like that represented in James Wright’s poetry were also greatly impacted by racial bias. Joe William Trotter Jr, a Professor in History and Social Justice notes that employers from the Ohio River bordering town of

Louisville paid “blacks lower wages than whites for identical jobs” while restricting their employment to “the most difficult, low-paying, and dirty categories of industrial labor . . . jobs characterized by disproportionate exposure to debilitating heat, deadly fumes, and disabling and serious injuries” (99, 100). With higher risks and less rewards than their white counterparts, African American workers were forced into a position below even that of the disenfranchised white labourers.

These issues are explored in depth with Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel *Sula*, which plots the destruction of a community and its environment across several decades following numerous river-based tragedies including the drowning of a child, the river’s pollution, the death of all its fish, and the numerous fatalities following a mishap during the construction of a tunnel spanning the river. Although *Sula* would be an essential text for a larger examination on marginalised representations of rivers, its intersectional nature makes it less useful for the group-by-group structuring of this thesis. Several of the conclusions drawn by *Sula* are near-identical to those from McCarthy and Wright – the representation of the river as a neglected god, the parallels between victimised river and victimised human, the emphasis on grotesque landscapes and drowning – which makes it less useful in examining the diversity of each group.

Instead, I have selected Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* which utilises a racialized, historical lens to arrive at a powerful and unique interpretation of the river’s connection to African American identity without the economic emphasis. The Afro-Modernist poetry of Sterling A. Brown from the 1930s, Margaret Walker’s poetry from the 1940s and 1970s, and Audre Lorde’s radical 1979 poem “Afterimages” provide a wider context for *Beloved* and put

forward complementary representations of race and rivers. The rivers of these texts are deeply connected to historical context and racial identity, suggestive of slavery and numerous other abhorrent events in the more recent past. For the black population, the American past is symbolic of an even darker and more oppressive period than their present marginalisation, destabilising the canonical texts which depict an American past of idealism and progressivism.

Rivers hold considerable relevance to slavery in America, becoming a means of freedom, transport, segregation, hope, and fear for the slave population. As early as 1821, the Ohio and Mississippi rivers were all that separated free states from the slave states of Kentucky, Virginia, and Missouri. In recontextualising the natural environment to be the enforcer of an intangible political idea, slavery pollutes the conceptual river as well. Simple terms such as “crossing the river” or the threat of being “sent up or downriver” acquire an implicit significance within the context of slavery, suggesting freedom or transportation to another plantation respectively. Similarly, in 1841, the Ohio River Valley native, Abraham Lincoln, described the disturbing sight of slaves chained together as being “strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line” (Lincoln 260). This connection between river imagery and its slavery context appears throughout true and semi-fictional slave narratives, fluctuating and straining under the conceptual weight placed upon it.

Although the Mississippi River is significant to many African American narratives of slavery and freedom, including Sterling A. Brown’s poetry, the Ohio River holds the most interesting geographical position. It’s foul industrialised representation in James Wright’s poetry had not yet come to fruition during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, but there were already signs of industry and pollution. Historian Darrel Bigham notes that slaves

were often expected to work on this economised river and its docks, building “canals and bridges,” acting as “stevedores, pilots, and stewards aboard steamboats” or transporting cargo to different river towns (20, 28). Although labour such as this would lead to the Ohio’s current pollution, it offered a unique space for Kentuckian slaves, due to its proximity to the free Ohio state where “Opponents of slavery were close by, and opportunities for slaves to run away were plentiful” (13). Kentucky slave-masters relied on the river for commerce, but in doing so, ran the risk of losing their slaves: a further contradiction of the river.

The choices of accommodation for African Americans were restricted by white landlords, who closed their options to dilapidated sections of cities, or to separate black communities which often lay on the riverside. In Cincinnati, “Little Africa” sat on the waterfront and acted as the first port of call for free blacks in the area, offering an immediate chance at entering an organised community with an established culture (35). The black residents of these river-towns were able to help innumerable runaways and fugitive slaves due to the unique opportunity their riverside accommodation offered (49). Yet, an interaction with the river is never wholly unilateral, for any “Strange negroes” found in river counties were assumed to be runaways and attracted slave-catchers, jeopardising the safety of these black communities (40).

This very issue led to the devastating actuality behind *Beloved*: the case of Margaret Garner, who “took the life of a three-year-old child and wounded another rather than have them returned to slavery” (43). Margaret and her family were allegedly freed from slavery some time earlier, yet the Fugitive Slave Act allows for slave-catchers to hunt on suspicion rather than fact. By invoking this horrific, under-examined account from the recent historical past,

Toni Morrison delves head-first into the unpleasant truths of American history and presents them from a perspective utterly un-idealised.

In the foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison directs the reader to the moment of inception for the novel:

“sitting in front of my house on the pier jutting out into the Hudson River, I began to feel an edginess instead of the calm I had expected . . . I couldn’t fathom what was so unexpectedly troubling on a day that perfect, watching a river that serene . . . Then it slapped me: I was happy, free in a way I had never been, ever. It was the oddest sensation.”
(Morrison x)

Morrison goes on to envision a woman, fully-dressed with a nice hat, emerging from this serene “deceptive river” and begins writing *Beloved*, a novel about the very absence of black freedom (xiii). The beautiful river provides a sense of freedom, but the edginess that follows is the recognition of the unequivocal lack of freedom found in the past.

Beloved takes place on the Ohio riverbank nearby Cincinnati and follows the lives of former Kentuckian slave, Sethe, and her daughter Denver. Sethe works “hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe,” yet the arrivals of Paul D, a slave she knew from the plantation Sweet Home, and Beloved, an inexplicable young “water-drinking woman” immediately strain her ability to ignore the past (Morrison 6, 79). Morrison examines the significance of the “personal history of characters for whom all memory is anguish,” those who consider all memories as unwelcome intrusions (Mathieson 6). This refusal to acknowledge the interwoven threads of historical self-awareness, racial identity, and personal recollection becomes the central tension of the novel, enforcing a diametric opposition between the intentions of protagonist and narrator.

“To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay,” yet to Morrison, the future depends on reconciling your cultural and personal history (Morrison 51). Due to the extreme trauma found in Sethe and Paul D’s past, their subjectivities are not the means with which to reach this goal, which turns the reader towards the river and water imagery throughout. The river is always present in *Beloved*’s narrative: literally rebirthing Beloved, providing Sethe safety during Denver’s birth, and offering freedom from slavery for several characters while drowning others. Ohio River becomes such a complicated image that even its appearance shifts near-constantly, sometimes “glimmering” or “silvery blue,” and others “jammed” with pig boats and offal or overwhelmed by “The stench, the heat, the moisture” (106, 99, 182, 303).

The scene of Denver’s birth is represented twice in *Beloved*, focalised through both Denver and the omniscient narrator’s perspectives. Ellen Argyros, a Rhetorician and Literary scholar, views the narrator’s rendition with concern, considering that “the dirty river water might infect Sethe or her child with a fatal case of puerperal fever,” viewing the scene as one of perilous, grimy realism (152). Yet, Denver’s focalisation of the same scene is akin to a “bedtime fairytale” carrying a “fragile illusion of safety” to Richard Moreland, a Literature Professor of similar discipline (508). This very same narrative beat and this very same river can appear dangerously dirty or fairytale-like depending on the purposes of each character and reader.

The emphases change in each description of the river, yet it always remains bloated with historical significance in both literal and figurative ways. With the “red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp” which Stamp Paid finds caught to the underside of his boat, or the “Sheep, cows and fowl too float[ing] up and down that river” that black

labourers must slaughter to survive, tangible reminders of racist oppression fill the Ohio (Morrison 213, 182). Even the Ku Klux Klan appear as a “dragon [which] swam the Ohio at will;” overruling the river’s enforced role separating an ideologically good side and a “bloody side” (79, 37). The Ohio River has been historically used to harm African Americans, just as it has freed them, and its undeniable, tangible presence in those past events constantly reaffirms the validity of times gone by.

This tangibility ultimately serves to reiterate the eternal nature of a river, perpetually moving through space and time as its context shifts or is bastardised, swallowing the surrounding influences of the cultural landscape in its motion. Stamp Paid can recognise that he has “been pulling coloredfolk out the water more’n twenty years” just as Baby Suggs can state that “There’s more of us they [white people] drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time” because of the river’s recollections (Morrison 220, 287). With the ideological significance weighted upon the Ohio River during the 1870s and the century beforehand, the realms of landscape, temporality, and ideology become one and the same. The English Literature scholar, Brian Finney argues that “The past is the Confederate South, the present is the Union North, and the meeting point between the two is the Ohio River that symbolizes a geographical, historical, cultural and ethical divide which the major protagonists of the novel have to cross” (22). In placing such significance on a geographical land-mark, it becomes entirely understandable why Baby Suggs could believe she has a fresh “heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River” or why Paul D could appear “river-whipped” as if the Ohio itself had become his new slave-master (Morrison 173, 134). The river means all things to all people who engage with it, yet the

Ohio holds autonomy in *Beloved*, and actively enforces its desires upon the characters atop its banks.

This autonomy is possible, for the Ohio River symbolises the undeniable truth of history, the collective racial memory, appearing objective, near omniscient. This is “the river’s occasional fist” which Morrison mentions in her preface, the presence of something tangible and eternal, summoning a collective memory which does not fully coincide with the present calm (xii). One is not truly free if present freedom is built on a refusal to acknowledge the past of subjugation, but the river forces us to recognise the tangibility of time and its significance to how we perceive ‘now.’ In an inverse of the River Lethe of Greek Mythology, the Ohio becomes a force for remembrance, no matter how painful it may be for those it reaches out to.

Reaffirming this interpretation, the motions of the narrative construction and the character’s issues with memory are immediately comparable to that of a river’s current or an ocean’s tide. Philip Page explains that “The principal narrative strategy of the novel is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, veer away into other matters, then circle back with more information about the initial fact, then veer away again, circle back again, and so on” (35). This immediately calls to mind the motion of water and parallels Sethe’s tidal psychology, specifically the concept of ‘rememory’ that “sometimes bouy[s], sometimes drown[s] her and her loved ones” (Greenbaum 84). *Beloved* treats the act of remembrance with equal significance as the objective truth of history, with the Ohio River consciously seeking to connect these two spheres.

Rebirthing *Beloved* is the most active and fantastical way in which the Ohio River attempts to achieve this intention. The moment “A fully dressed woman

walked out of the water . . . Sopping wet and breathing shallow" *Beloved* begins to play with the full potential of an autonomous river seeking remembrance (Morrison 60). *Beloved* appears as Sethe's sacrificed baby daughter grown to adulthood, not only allowing historical trauma to become tangible, but specifically embodying a life cut woefully short by the brutality of the enslaved past. Barbara Mathieson notes that this ghost who has "forcibly reentered the present . . . is miraculously endowed by Morrison with an individual voice and consciousness," a consciousness that directly connects Sethe to her repressed memories (12). *Beloved* becomes another character to experience rebirth via water, something experienced by Paul D's escape in the water-logged mud and across the river, Sethe and Baby Suggs journeys across the Ohio River to freedom, and the literal birth of Denver in the waters of the Ohio. (Page 35). In rebirthing *Beloved*, the river is essentially offering the one remaining family member the regenerative opportunity denied to her but awarded to the other members, reconnecting a family unit through their personal past and connection with the river.

Yet *Beloved* is not simply the reborn figure of Sethe's daughter, but a living embodiment of both the river and the collective racial history of her ancestors, two things inherently enmeshed. In many ways, *Beloved*'s position as Sethe's sacrificed daughter is contentious, for her "clearest memory . . . was the bridge" which she was trapped upon in the afterlife, and that "Sethe is the face I found and lost in the water under the bridge," implying that *Beloved* is simply one of many, a face chosen at chance (Morrison 140, 253). This implication is powerful for it suggests the extent of racial violence, putting forward an enormous number of instantly comparable victims left lifeless. In an abstract sequence from *Beloved*'s perspective, she speaks of "herself as an African captive on a slave ship" further suggesting that *Beloved* comes from a

space of cultural history and has a justified desire for remembrance (Matheison 12). This elusive space where Beloved has returned from is dark and vague, yet powerfully evocative in the way it considers memory, history, and water diffusing into one another.

Being born from history and aiming to provoke remembrance, Beloved's characterisation as an embodied figure with the stolen face of Sethe's daughter is thematically logical. However, her description remains fundamentally connected to the Ohio River she emerges from at her first appearance. Her interactions with others are consistently described by their watery effects, with Paul D feeling "desire that drowned him" at Beloved's seductions but "beached and gobbling air" once she leaves, or the final noise Beloved releases ringing "wide enough to sound deep water" before it "broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (Morrison 311, 308). Her body itself becomes a river, as sexual relations with Beloved escort Paul D "to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to" or her appearance reverting to that of "a naked woman with fish for hair" towards the end of the novel (311, 315). Sethe seems to understand that Beloved embodied more than her daughter on the final page, questioning "whose was the underwater face she needed like that" and "What made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained on?" signifying the historical and water-based sides to her embodiment (324).

To view Beloved as any one thing is misunderstanding the significance of her embodiment, but with the interwoven space between the river and collective racial memory, noteworthy interpretations can arise. To align water with history, memory, race, and the afterlife is to acknowledge the many ways in which these vast-reaching concepts intermingle and flow. Throughout the

novel, loose water and the small stream near their home of 127 evoke personal memories: how the “plash of water” conjures imagery of Sweet Home for Sethe, how Paul D “looked at her wet bare feet and asked to join her,” how Denver yearns for Beloved to remember “play[ing] together by the stream” or how Stamp Paid recalls that looking to the stream, “toward water,” ultimately made him and Baby Suggs miss the slavecatchers arrival that led to Beloved’s first death (7, 26, 89, 184). Considering this connection between personal memory and small amounts of water, the connection between the wide Ohio River and its wide collective memories gains credibility. No wonder Beloved can recall the bodies of African slaves dumped into the ocean, the ocean leads to the Mississippi River which leads to the Ohio – a slave trade route – further suggestive of the racialized interplay between history and geography. With the constant progression of time and the river, this sense of the eternal motion of water becomes elevated to something which encompasses history entire, even becoming an afterlife for those whose lives engaged with its waters.

Morrison deftly considers the many complexities found in her character’s grim histories and recognises that the river itself has also experienced this same cultural history. In equating these many areas of thought, the resulting impact turns African American history and trauma into something universal, something deeply ingrained in the very earth itself. The Ohio River floats heavy with all its corpses, mud, and industrial pollution, but contains a clear, true portrait of history and remembrance in its current which *Beloved* brings to the surface.

This interplay between race, history, and rivers is also present across a wide range of African American poetry, notably that of the Harlem Renaissance. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, editor George Hutchinson

notes that this momentous point in black literary history signifies “a general cultural awakening and moment of recognition” for the African American community across the country as their art began to be more widely appreciated (Hutchinson 2). Harlem acted as the “symbolic capital” for the movement, due to its concentrated “blackness” and that the “vast majority of publishers who took an interest in black writing were based in New York,” yet the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers were consistently evoked (6, 5).

The most famous example is Langston Hughes’s quintessential 1920 poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” which aligns black history with numerous international rivers “ancient as the world.”

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to
New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in
the sunset. (Hughes 36).

Hughes celebrates the eternal resilience and achievements of Africans in cataloguing their interactions with the great rivers of earth throughout history, all while maintaining a first-person rhetoric suggestive of an ancestral or racial connectivity. In *Beloved* and the majority of forthcoming poems, the historical rivers do not appear “singing”, “golden” or able to lull one to sleep. Rather, the rivers evoke difficult, painful memories which strengthen one’s sense of ancestral connectivity and culture, but offer no calm.

Sterling A. Brown’s poem “Crossing” from the late 1930s puts forward a deliberate and unsentimental reversal of a common form of river comparison found in African American writing: equating the river crossings from their slavery actuality and the biblical representations of such. Trotter speaks of

how a primarily black newspaper “*The Defender* portrayed the North as the ‘promised land’” while representing their motions over the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as a “flight from Egypt” or a “Crossing over Jordan” (98). This biblical, religious turning of images becomes commonplace and effective for many freed slaves, but Brown finds it unconvincing, the first two stanzas of “Crossing” explicitly stating:

This is not Jordan River
There lies not Canaan
There is still
One more wide river to cross.

This is the Mississippi
And the stars tell us only
That this is not the road. (Brown 204)

Brown’s aversion to the rhetoric of freedom is built upon the very history which the river evokes, represented in a way much like Hughes, albeit with a negative tonality. This is a strong example of the intersecting goals of the Harlem Renaissance, as the forward-looking “New Negro movement” and the “reevaluation of and pride in black history and heritage” collide to produce works built on history which look towards the present and potential black future (Hutchinson 3).

We have passed, repassed
So many rivers
Okmulgee, Chattahoochee,
St. Mary’s, Mississippi,
Alabama, Tennessee,
Mississippi. (Brown 204)

In restricting his reference points to the rivers of America, Brown turns Hughes’s positive message of endurance into a representation of the endless struggles for black people in America. Brown recognises the power in using

the proper names of geographical spaces “as bearers of culturally significant information” and seeks out a more pointed response from his readers as such (Gach 283). History and geography again appear fixed to each other, signifying the constant exiles faced by their ancestors, yet “Still are we motherless children / Still are we dragging travelers / Alone, and a long ways from home” (Brown 205). The remaining “wide river” to cross signifies the future hurdles they shall always face, due to the ever-reaching grasp of racism and inequality. As with the water current, African Americans are perpetually being forced to move forward through space due to oppression, and only looking backwards to history, to the many false freedoms of the past can change be achieved.

Yet as important as remembering your cultural history is, the experience is painful and destructive. Brown’s first book of poetry, 1932’s *Southern Road* which the following selected poems are taken from, features six poems which deal with the 1927 Mississippi flood in which “250 people were killed and 700,000 were displaced” (Johnson 115). This flood is not only another form of trauma inflicted upon numerous innocent black Americans to Brown, but also a betrayal of sorts from the river which once offered hope and had become deeply ingrained in racial rhetoric. In “Children of the Mississippi,” Brown recontextualises the river as a menacing violator, but one which remains distinctly connected to racial history and the context of slavery.

The flooded Mississippi itself is referred to as “black” seven times throughout the poem, and as it destroys all in its path, it seems to target only the African Americans: “*Black water creepin’ / White folks is sleepin’*” (Brown 67). It destroys and consumes all that is needed for the livelihood of the black community, “things as dear as old hearthgods,” and in the victims, it evokes “only dank

memories / Bitter as the waters, bracken as the waters, / Black and unceasing as hostile waters" (67). These dank memories respond to past traumas and injustices perpetrated against them, implicitly referring back to slavery and the forced geographic segregation which leads to tragedies such as this. Natalia Gach's argument that African American poetry's "hostility and severity" towards nature follows the "historical prerequisites" surrounding their "interaction with the natural environment [being] influenced by the economic incentives of the 'master'" is applicable to "Children of the Mississippi" (278). The hostility found here is entirely justified, a justification as yearning and questioning as the closing lines: "*How we done harmed you / Black-hearted river?*" (Brown 67).

However much hostility Brown may feel towards the Mississippi, it remains an important and precious cultural landmark which African Americans hold a certain ownership over. In "Cabaret," another of Brown's 1932 poems depicting the 1927 flood, the river becomes a victim alongside the blacks whom it displaced. "Cabaret" expresses Brown's "anxieties about the mass production of folk culture," according to English Professor Benjamin Johnson, taking aim at the idealised and white-washed depiction of the Mississippi found in the jazz song "Muddy Water" made famous by Bessie Smith (119). Brown seeks to provide starkly contrasting images between the authentic, devastated, victimising Mississippi River, and the disingenuous, crowd-pleasing lyrics to the song. "Muddy Water" fails to recognise the "hundreds of thousands of people in the Mississippi Valley displaced by flood" and instead only caters to the "rich, white northerners" who want non-confronting "exotic" entertainment, peddling "an idyllic fantasy" of the Mississippi instead of reality (Johnson 123, 125). Whereas the song depicts "Muddy water, river sweet" Brown instead describes "*Poor half-naked fools, tagged with*

identification numbers, / Worn out upon the levees," pulling no punches in his descriptions of the horrors of the flood (Brown 112). The representation of the flood only appears italicised and in parentheses, playing into the notion that this trauma is represented as something supplementary and insignificant, something overlooked.

In the powerful closing sequence, "Cabaret" seeks to make this contrast all the more sharp:

My heart cries out for
M U D D Y W A T E R

*(Down in the valleys
The stench of the drying mud
Is a bitter reminder of death.)*

Dee da dee D A A A A H (113)

The violent realities of death, mud, and stench are surrounded by loud, rousing romance – which becomes capitalised and spaced between each letter, as if seeking to overwhelm the truth and fill in more space upon the page. To Johnson, the closing line, imitating a concluding major chord is "the single ugliest thing in the poem" providing a false resolution to "a song that not only ignores the realities of human suffering in 1927 but also perpetuates the racist attitudes that turned the flood from natural disaster to human injustice" (125). Brown is showcasing a righteous protectiveness of black culture with "Cabaret," and he does so by suggesting a relationship between the problematic, violent river and musical expression, as if one must draw attention towards the other. "Muddy Water" is presented as a song which takes inspiration from the Mississippi but refuses to offer anything to the river in return.

All of this implies ownership between African Americans and the river, which as mentioned earlier, is explicitly equated with their racial history and collective memory. Whereas “Cabaret” establishes the ways in which landscape, history, and culture dictates rightful ownership of music by depicting its mistreatment, Margaret Walker’s 1942 poem “Delta” dramatizes the discovery of this sense of ownership and puts forward the potential for music to act as true expression. William Scott proposes that “Delta” acts as a “history of claiming what is one’s ‘own,’ tracing the movement from despair, through alienation, to the triumph of reclamation,” indicative of an expansion into the realm of creative expression so bastardised in “Cabaret” (1089). In shifting the tonality and structure from unabashed condemnation to tentative affirmation, Walker considers why and how African American culture has become so deeply engrained with landscape and temporal history.

The interwoven space of collective racial history and river imagery immediately appears, as Walker opens “Delta” with: “I am a child of the valley. / Mud and muck and misery of lowlands” (Walker 15). Notions of ownership are introduced into the poem, as the speaker attributes their birth to the landscape, even if the landscape here appears sad, grotesque, and all too corporeal. Suggestions of the river’s metaphorical potential appear soon hereafter, specifically connected to the mobility and versatility of black culture.

I watch rivulets flow
trickling into one great river
running through little towns
through swampy thickets and smoky cities
through fields of rice and marshes
where the marsh hen comes to stand
and buzzards draw thin blue streaks against evening
sky.

I listen to crooning of familiar lullabies;
the honky-tonks are open and the blues are ringing
far. (15)

Imagery of individual rivulets becoming one are juxtaposed with descriptions of the “familiar” musical expressions associated with black culture, intimating that African Americans have drawn themselves together through music, as even the dispossessed and isolated have led into this surging, far-reaching cultural movement. Yet, the speaker of “Delta” cannot recognise the validity of this non-idealised creative expression, wishing: “If only from this valley we might rise with song! / With singing that is ours” (16).

William Scott suggests that the speaker learns self-recognition and appreciation of their culture through the notion of sleep and wakefulness, a necessity in order “To gain knowledge, and thus possess what is one’s own (i.e. history)” yet Walker portrays this wakefulness through water imagery (1090). Section III of “Delta” details the reclamation of ownership, opening with “Now burst the dams of years / and winter snows melt with an onrush of a turbulent / spring” before “floods overwhelm us / here in this low valley” (Walker 18). Once again, the recognition of black history and culture becomes a flood, “a crystalline hope,” promising “a new way to be worn and a path to be broken / from the past” (18). With the speaker rectifying their space as the historical ‘other,’ a newfound appreciation and sense of ownership emerges, for “Our mothers and fathers labored before us” and although “we dare not claim” the river, “we are an age of years in this valley” and “with our blood have watered these fields / and they belong to us” (16, 17, 19). Their lack of legal or economic ownership is over-ruled by the collective racial history which the river brings forward, allowing the speaker to find respect for their culture, and for singing to return.

However much cultural appreciation and peace one can glean from the current of history, the transformative power is complex, bringing trauma, justice, and dissolution of the self in the undertow. A greater engagement with the trauma of the past comes in the 1970s, a period which William L. Andrews calls "the black women's literary renaissance," aligned with the success of women-of-colour writers including Toni Morrison, the later works of Margaret Walker, and Audre Lorde.

Audre Lorde's 1979 poem "Afterimages" not only looks towards the impact water has on our memories and engagement with history, but also to the impact it has on black bodies through the context of victimhood. Lorde focuses on the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American boy who was beaten, mutilated, and killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman, one Carolyn Bryant. "Bryant's husband Roy and his half-brother J.W. Milam shot him in the head, tied a 74-pound cotton gin fan around his neck, and dumped the boy's body into the Tallahatchie River" (Kolin 8). In evoking this horrific hate crime, Lorde does not attempt to dramatise or depict the event itself, but explores its effects on black history, the community, and herself.

Emmett Till "was baptized my son forever / in the midnight waters," Lorde writes, envisioning a form of symbolic motherhood found in her empathetic suffering. In evoking this direct link between herself and Till through the context of the "midnight waters" into which his body was dumped, Lorde fuses their experiences together and tightens the bonds between them regarding Till's significance in her own understanding of collective racial trauma. By recalling her personal experiences as an African American at the

time of his murder, Lorde considers the continual lack of justice the perpetrators experienced in the 24 years since.

Seemingly disconnected to Till's murder, Lorde examines another true event surrounding rivers and trauma, albeit one which occurred in 1979, the year the poem was written.

The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson
A Mississippi summer televised.
Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain
a white woman climbs from her roof to a passing boat (Lorde)

Although there seems to be little immediately connecting these two events, Lorde juxtaposes and fuses them to conceive of divine retribution through their water-based parallel. In witnessing the media's "secret relish / of a black child's mutilated body" alongside the pitiful empathy found for a displaced white woman, Lorde makes the two indistinguishable by racializing the context. As Lorde's eyes remain stained with the afterimages of Till's broken body, she imagines the white woman displaced by the 1979 flood as none other than Carolyn Bryant, only now facing consequences for her part in the murder of Till. This indicates the significance of racialized discourse in "Afterimages," with Lorde becoming Till's mother and the woman in the flood becoming an aged Bryant through the lens of racial history.

Lorde finds solace in this somewhat inadequate correlation between disconnected events, for it suggests the presence of a watery god-figure and the justice which Till was denied in death.

"If earth and air and water do not judge them who are
we to refuse a crust of bread?"

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman

and a white girl has grown older in costly honor
(what did she pay to never know its price?)
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment
and I can withhold my pity and my bread (Lorde).

By representing the river as a god, Lorde allows herself the chance to renounce her innate empathy in much the same way as the American Justice System did when acquitting the murderers of Till. Drawing a causal link between Till's body being dumped in the river, the flood, and Bryant's displacement provides the poetic, natural justice which the racially-biased human world will not.

However, Lorde's conception of justice is fundamentally flawed, with its flaws being acknowledged multiple times in the poem itself. Most explicitly, the juxtaposition requires Till's body to also be displaced from its actual dumping grounds in the Tallahatchie River to the Pearl River for the aforementioned causality to be effective. As Philip Kolin argues:

Lorde altered geography to reinforce the Biblical context in which she paints Till's martyrdom. Rather than having his body thrown into the Tallahatchie River, Lorde immerses him in the Pearl River, a name linked with great spiritual worth and one consistent with Till's current role as the black presiding spirit (or genius) of judgment (8)

Whereas Sterling K. Brown finds power in the specificity of the geography he evokes, Lorde uses the fluid nature of water to connect disparate events and rivers to build a powerful conclusion.

Margaret Walker's 1970 poem, "For Andy Goodman, Michael Schwener, and James Chaney" similarly relocates the bodies of the victims of hate crimes to a river, providing them with the peace which their shallow, dirt-bound graves did not. Walker looks to the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers, but rather than focusing on the brutality of their deaths as Lorde does, Walker

focuses on the potential for empathy found upon seeing these “three lives floating down the quiet stream / Till they come to the surging falls” (Walker 73). So powerful and consistent is Walker’s focus on streams and water, the reality of the case is lost, instead suggesting that the symbolism of the river holds a far more otherworldly and ungrounded meaning than that of “Afterimages.” Perhaps an explanation akin to *Beloved*’s structuring of the water-based afterlife is most effective here, with the river the bodies float upon depicting a journey after death.

One of the most fascinating side-effects of this relocation of the victims of racist violence is the way in which the new symbolic burial site becomes entangled with their own bodies. Margaret Walker sees Goodman, Schwener, and Chaney immediately equated to the river she imagines them upon:

Three faces ...
 mirrored in the muddy stream of living....
young and tender like
quiet beauty of still water,
 sensitive as the mimosa leaf,
 intense as the stalking cougar
 and impassive as the face of rivers (71).

From their representation as faces which are compared to rivers, they become “Three leaves... / Floating in the melted snow” which are “moving like a barge,” their humanity and selfhood slowly slipping away as they liquefy into the landscape (71). Finally, they become “Leaves of death floating in their watery grave,” the life and individuality sapped away from them as they enter the afterlife, history, and the African American consciousness (73).

Lorde’s “Afterimages” also makes use of this enmeshing between body and river, yet in regards to second-hand victimhood and the recognition of trauma.

It is this creative intermingling which provides the few instances of empathy between the displaced Carolyn Bryant figure and Lorde, as “Despair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud / caked around the edges.” Lorde and Carolyn Bryant are weighed down by the memories of Till’s body in the Pearl River, both finding themselves “betrayed by vision” which summons “tortured lungs / adapting to breathe blood,” their shared experiences “becoming dragonfish to survive.” The recurrent imagery of dragonfish is particularly intriguing, being fish which inhabit the deepest areas of the ocean, suggesting a history or memory that cannot be fully repressed. Lorde recognises that “my eyes are always hungry” and the sickening imagery of Emmett Till’s body becomes “food for dragonfish that learn / to live upon whatever they must eat / fused images beneath my pain.” The dragonfish, and by extension Till’s murder and the Pearl River, change Lorde’s poet-speaker’s body, as her eyes become “rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve” which only reflect “the flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain” (Lorde). Lorde looks towards the way marginalised groups become indirect, second-hand victims whenever members of their community are brutalised on account of their race, and again, evokes this through considerations of body, history, and water.

Beloved also features several details which parallel the imagery and conclusions “Afterimages” evokes, notably in the way that water seems to exist within the characters as representative of their traumatic past. Sethe’s eyes are “two open wells that did not reflect firelight,” while Paul D imagines his blood “frozen like an ice pond for twenty years . . . thawing, breaking into pieces that, once melted, had no choice but to swirl and eddy” (Morrison 11, 126). These explicit metaphorical images retain their relationship with the novel’s larger considerations of the relationship between water and past

traumas, but expand into the space of the body. Other ways in which Morrison evokes this can be seen through Paul D's consideration that white people imagine "Swift unnavigable waters" under every dark skin, how Amy Denver notes that Sethe's "swole" feet remind her of a drowned African American she saw, and the way Sethe measures her twenty-eight days of freedom as extending from "the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood" (234, 42, 111). Even when divorced from their Ohio River origins, all forms of water which interact with the African American characters of *Beloved* continue to carry the dense symbolism of the river, again insinuating a focus on the history of all water and the literal ingestion of it by the characters.

To close a discussion on race, rivers, and embodiment without noting Sterling K. Brown's famous 1932 poem "Riverbank Blues" would be remiss, for it so expertly displays both the positive and negative connotations which rivers bring. "A man git dis yellow water in his blood, / No need for hopin', no need for doin', / Muddy streams keep him fixed for good" Brown writes, suggesting the innate cultural history of the Mississippi. The figure finds himself satisfied and trusting the river, for it exists within him as it did for his ancestors, the "Ole river whisperin', lappin' 'gainst de long roots: / *"Plenty of rest and peace in these . . ."* Actively speaking to the figure, the river appears seductive, leaning on romanticised notions of the past in order to arouse a sense of comradeship between the man and the river. Yet the human poet-speaker takes over the poem, explaining how the river always "Dumps us in some ornery riverbank town" despite its many spoken reassurances that there "*Ain' no need fo' hurry, take yo' time.*" Finally, the poet-speaker recognises that the river lies, and will "*git you ef you stay,*" rejecting their long past together in favour of safety and

freedom, something particularly evocative when considering the analyses of rivers thus far.

“Riverbank Blues” closes on a stanza which directly positions the Mississippi River as yet another violator, a force with no regard for African American lives or livelihood, despite their shared experiences.

Towns are sinkin’ deeper, deeper in de riverbank,
Takin’ on de ways of deir sulky Ole Man--
Takin’ on his creepy ways, takin’ on his evil ways,
*“Bes’ git way, a long way . . . whiles you can. “Man got his
sea too lak de Mississippi Ain’t got so long for a whole lot longer way,
Man better move some, better not git rooted Muddy water fool you, ef you stay
(Brown 100)*

By shifting away from the inherent trust the first figure has in the Mississippi, we see the landscape itself represented as another entity seeking to harm black people and their property. Brown looks at African Americans and their culture becoming embodied by the river, inspired by the river, engulfed by the river, and does not find solace in the thought, only fear.

If we are to take the river as a symbol of the shared culture, trauma, history, and tangibility of African Americans, the many fluctuating arguments and conclusions these different writers come to are each justifiable. Perhaps, as Brown and Morrison paradoxically suggest, the story the river carries “is not a story to pass on” but Lorde and Walker’s argument that within these very waters redemptive power can be found is equally valid (Morrison 324). One of the few consistently recognisable conclusions which these writers all uphold throughout their work is the recognition that the white American authors who established the canon are incorrect in their assumptions.

A single scene from *Beloved* acts as the most direct example of intertextuality to be found across these works, but it is significant in the way it illuminates the issues which all of these works are consciously working against. The story of Denver's birth on the banks of the Ohio River is represented twice in the novel, once from a more objective view, once from Denver's idealised perspective. A lower-class white woman, Amy Denver, is out searching for huckleberries on the riverside and reluctantly assists Sethe in giving birth, beginning an "interracial river-side friendship" much like that between Huck and Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Argyros 150). Ellen Argyros considers Amy Denver as a stand-in for Huckleberry Finn himself, and the entire scene "as an attempt on Morrison's part to re-imagine the relationship between Huck and Jim in such a way that both characters are represented unsentimentally and with respect" (153). In looking towards the many disrespectful, idealised, unrealistic, and racist characteristics and interactions between Huck and Jim, Morrison finds it difficult to parse the novel's legacy: being at once progressive and regressive.

Much of this difficulty comes from the tendency for white America to idealise the past, making potential twentieth and twenty-first century readers view *Huckleberry Finn* as something more realist than romanticised. Morrison examines this propensity through Denver's retelling of the story of her birth, as Amy is transformed into an "intelligible and accessible" character in Denver's version, appearing as someone who can be more easily appreciated by the listener, or reader (Moreland 510). This is the same technique used in Mark Twain's characterisation of Huckleberry Finn, which underemphasises his many negatives and shortcomings in favour of his likeability. Richard Moreland nicely suggests that comparing *Beloved* to *Huckleberry Finn* shows "how the discourse of American romance both relies on these same

disciplinary and normalizing structures and also enables us to reimagine and renegotiate our encounters and interactions" (523). The great American romance evoked by Twain and the other three canonical writers featured is shown by black writers to be a falsehood, or at least built upon inherently privileged perspectives and contexts.

One such aspect of this romantic form which African American literature avoids, is that of the excitement and adventure found in danger. As the escape fantasy is tarnished by actuality and cultural history, the scenes which white authors often find exhilarating are instead depicted as traumatic, draining, and inherently negative. One such example of a white writer's inability to avoid this quality is Eliza's escape with her child over the frozen Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Amy Hughes considers a "sensation scene" because "Spectacle serves as both method and matter" (86). Comparing this to the harrowing, painful escape of Paul D in *Beloved*, or how Sterling K. Brown describes the way slaves "grow footsore / And muscle weary / Our faces grow sullen / And our hearts numb" as they evade slave-hunters in "Crossing" illustrates the inadequacy and impropriety of treating such an experience as simply exciting (Brown 205).

Another aspect of *Huckleberry Finn* which is consistently invalidated is the river representing progress. Progress found in African American history is never as fast or powerful as the Mississippi, which thus aligns their representations more closely with the Concord and Merrimack Rivers of Henry Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is the most closely comparable of the canonical texts to African American writing through its representation of the river as carrier of personal memory and collective history, while offering itself as a tangible, embodied representation of such.

However, the tone and rhetoric could not be more diametrically opposed, for Thoreau finds peace and ease in the past while the ever-oppressed African Americans find a history of trauma and mistreatment.

As Walker's "Delta" contends, this past of trauma can be contextualised into a powerful, liberating thing, but it is never a comfortable journey. Sterling K. Brown's "Children of the Mississippi" and "Riverbank Blues" posit that it is best to flee the traumatic past altogether and find freedom in a space built fresh. Both Walker and Brown utilise the imagery of flooding rivers to depict this engagement with their racial history, but Brown views the destructive potential, the death, the isolation; whereas Walker views the turbulent onrush as "flooding our lives with a passion for freedom" (Walker). "Afterimages" and *Beloved* split the difference, as each recognise the necessity to engage with history and the potential ideological freedom it brings, but also considers it utterly destructive to one's health and sense of identity. This difficult uncertainty never appears in *A Week*, which views history as something linear, personal, philosophically deep, but ultimately pleasurable and harmless.

Thoreau also exclusively represents picturesque rivers and waterways, which bring with them the rhetorical calm and tranquillity that his engagement with history follows. Although the works of these selected African American writers do not concern themselves as explicitly with the grotesque imagery of pollution as those of Chapter One do, there is a deliberate rejection of idealised landscapes throughout them. References to the polluting labour, the mud and grime, the bodies of the drowned, and stagnation appear at multiple times throughout each of these writer's works, but never under the guise of active aesthetical disgust. Rather, the depiction of ugliness is almost as tentative as beauty, for each one carries a judgemental weight and implicitly

moralise the landscape. Margaret Walker's "October Journey" provides a suitable example of this dichotomy, as "a blue stream sings cautiously" while gutter-water appears "afraid, / stagnant, and green, and full of slimy things" (Walker). Each of these aesthetic extremes are fearful of what they might represent, thus existing within a strained implicit space in which the reader recognises the beautiful or hideous through context alone.

This is largely due to the tarnished status of pastoralism for the African American community, the imagery associated with white romance now bringing forth memories of the agricultural torture of slavery. This poses a direct problem in comparison between the writers examined here and the work of Whitman and Emerson, whose engagement with rivers is largely restricted to the picturesque, romantic, and pastoral modes. This becomes one of the most devastating elements of *Beloved*, as "Every lovely thing remembered [becomes] a source of searing pain" for all the universally "lovely, cherished things [are now] tainted and blemished" (Mathieson 7, 6). In recalling Sweet Home, the plantation of Sethe's past, it appears "in shameless beauty" and makes "her wonder if hell was a pretty place too" (Morrison 7). Sethe remembers the beautiful sycamore trees before the boys hanging from them, so moved is her mind by the aesthetic beauty they instil. This alone justifies the refusal to engage with long-established aesthetic traditions when engaging with black history and its traumas, signifying the lack of relevance aesthetics hold in topics such as this.

Alongside this rejection of aesthetics, Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy is also disregarded aside from the recurrent concepts of dissolving into Nature and contextualising the river as an afterlife of sorts. For those whose lives are dictated by human affairs and politics, be it through current racist attitudes

and marginalisation, or slavery itself, transcendentalism fails. Nature offers little chance for people who are forcibly displaced from their homes due to human philosophies and violence. The literary critic Arnold Rampersad argues that “very few black writers, if any, have been teased by the great question of Nature and its relationship to humanity” which is integral to Transcendentalism and the work of all four canonical authors here (50). Instead, “Nature is always finally overridden and reduced, put in its place by the questions of power and politics, history and civil liberties,” those human questions which have dominated African American thought through oppressive necessity (Rampersad 51). This clarifies the strangely contradictory space the river occupies across these works, appearing as a powerful, potentially godly force which remains grounded due to its explicit symbolism as carrier of political, historical, and cultural thought.

These African American writers do not dam the river of the white American canon, so much as reveal a tributary running parallel, one with an entirely different context and history in its current. These rivers are never idealised, transcendental, or excitement-inducing, but tangible, muddy, and true. Each of these writers come to similar conclusions regarding the river’s significance and power, yet each arrive at different conceptions on how best to engage with it, so complex and unique is this symbol. By crafting a discrete racialized form of river literature, these African American writers are shunting aside preconception in favour of recognition, the recognition of a history unseen and a people violated by a country entire.

Three: The River's Queer Potential in *The Western Lands* and the Work of Minnie Bruce Pratt

In considering the significance of rivers to homosexual writers, the lack of geographical distinction poses an immediate hurdle. As people of any class, race, or creed can be born gay or lesbian, their marginalisation is not linked to a geography or spatial upbringing. Unlike the industrial pollution encountered by working class writers, or the distinct historical context of certain rivers for African Americans, the rivers which hold significance for homosexual writers are entirely singular and follow no predictable trend. Yet analysing the representation of rivers and natural environments gains purpose through their metaphorical and conceptual potential, evoking thoughts on fluidity, biology, juxtaposition, and freedom. This theoretical potential is also used by the oppressors of LGBTQ+ people, notably in the naturalistic fallacies and "Crime-against-nature ideologies" which "curtail lesbian and gay access to natural environment" and make "sexual justice also an environmental justice issue" (Stein 287). By forming statutes which contextualise gay and lesbian sexual activity as something "against nature," representations of the natural environment and its rivers become politically potent.

Catriona Sandilands, an Environmental Humanities scholar, first put forward the notion of 'queer ecology' in 1994, recognising the shared concerns of "change, accommodation, [and] displacement" found between sexuality and environmental politics (23). Her recognition of the intersectional potential between these spheres provides a particularly useful toolset with which to examine how homosexual writers manage to "'queer' nature itself, [and] create 'queer' environments" (22). Sandilands proposes that:

To queer nature is to question its normative use, to interrogate relations of knowledge and power by which certain "truths" about ourselves have been allowed to pass, unnoticed, without question. It is a process by which all relations to nature become de-naturalized, by which we question the ways in which we are located in nature, by which we question the uses to which "nature" has been put. To queer nature is to "put out of order" our understandings, so our "eccentricities" can be produced more forcefully. (22)

Arguably, the previously examined works by heterosexual authors in this thesis could also comfortably fit Sandilands' definition, yet the additional context for queer writers is worthy of its own discrete consideration.

The poetry of Minnie Bruce Pratt and William S. Burroughs's novels each manage to queer nature by incorporating similar techniques in vastly divergent ways. Pratt's poetry is subdued, devastating, realist, and sensitive; whereas Burroughs's fiction is excessive, comic, surreal, and grotesque. Despite this disjuncture in attitude, the ways in which they interrogate their sexual identity alongside natural environments are jarringly similar and lead to comparable conclusions.

Minnie Bruce Pratt's first poetry collection was published in 1981, and she is still active today, whereas William S. Burroughs final novel *The Western Lands*, was published in 1987. *The Western Lands* is the final part of his Red Night trilogy and also the central Burroughs text examined, with secondary consideration given to the first entry in the trilogy, *Cities of the Red Night*, published in 1981. With Pratt beginning her writing career at the same time Burroughs was ending his, 1980s America with its "political retrenchment and renewed conservative antagonism to homosexuality" becomes an evocative, painful setting for both new and old viewpoints (Stein 289).

William S. Burroughs was born in 1914 and spent his youth in St. Louis, Missouri: an area well-suited for “people with middle-class tastes who were comfortably off but not wealthy” (Baker 7). Despite the relative affluence of his conservative, suburban upbringing, the nearest river to his childhood home was the River des Peres, which Burroughs described as “a vast open sewer that meandered through the city” (qtd. in Miles 19). He fondly recalls “standing on its grassy banks and watching as turds shot out into the yellow water from vents along the sides” as a child, and how “the smell of shit and coal gas permeated the city, bubbling up from the river’s murky depths to cover the oily iridescent surface with miasmal mists” (19). After this vile description of the polluted des Peres and its effects on the city, he nonchalantly states “I liked the smell myself,” an early signifier of his later literary obsession in the grotesque, bodily, and obscene (19). Although other factors surely influenced the young Burroughs’s perspective, it is difficult to look upon *The Western Lands’ Duad*, “a river of excrement” without thinking of the des Peres (Burroughs, *Western* 155).

Burroughs’s recognition of his homosexuality is laid out in the autobiographical *Queer*, written and set in South America in the early 1950s, which also includes several significant moments set upon rivers. A memorable scene occurs on a waterfront in Guayaquil, Ecuador, as he watches “some boys swimming in the dirty river” and considers “if nameless monsters might rise from the green-brown water” (Burroughs, *Queer* 92). Once the boys notice Burroughs, their play becomes “overtly sexual” and he feels “the tearing ache of limitless desire” alongside the return of “Fragmentary memories” evoking past sexual encounters and fleeting images of the dirty river itself (93). This represents a turning point for Burroughs’s character (under the pseudonym

Lee) in the novel, signifying the sudden recognition of an idyllic and idealised form of gay desire found submerged in the dirty water.

Burroughs became famous in the years following, mostly in conjunction with the burgeoning interest in Beat writing throughout America. His prominence most notoriously peaked following the American publication of *Naked Lunch* in 1962, which was interdicted for obscenity charges and cleared four years later in what was “the last instance of complete literary censorship in the US” (Whiting 145). These charges were partly due to the graphic depictions of sex between men, which was furthered by Burroughs’s unapologetic openness about his sexuality. However, Burroughs never became a “poster boy for the gay liberation movement” or had his fiction “brought into the canon of gay literature,” for he and the “gay community . . . never wholeheartedly embraced one another” (Hibbard 22). This sense of isolation within American society and the gay community becomes a central guiding factor in Burroughs’s later, post-Stonewall writings, which imagine the potential space in which he could comfortably assimilate and become ordinary within.

This utopic thought process is what ultimately fuels the Red Night trilogy, written from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s and consisting of *Cities of the Red Night*, *The Place of Dead Roads*, and *The Western Lands*. Each novel’s title corresponds to the location which the characters are searching for, with *The Western Lands* following “a search for immortality” (Houen 540). These narratives all contain river journeys and engage with Burroughs’s queer identity and views on America and the world in a complex, elucidatory manner.

Minnie Bruce Pratt was born in 1946, and grew up in Centreville, Alabama, “a town by a river whose waters flow into the Gulf of Mexico, a river with star lilies in its shoals, and lumps of coal washed up on its sands. (Pratt, “Horizon” 25). Centreville is instantly comparable to the spaces described in the first chapter: a poverty-struck mining town with an economy built on extractive industries that have adverse effects upon the natural environment. The Cahaba River which runs through Centreville carries “Numerous and large violations of the EPA arsenic and mercury human health criteria” indicating a potential threat to human health via fish consumption (Pitt 85). As with James Wright, of similar geography, Pratt admits that “The only answer seemed to be to escape by moving up and away through the university, to take the route of the individual escape that is offered within capitalism as self-fulfillment and safety” (Pratt, “Horizon” 25).

Yet Pratt still feels a certain gratitude for Centreville, partly because of how nondescript it is, appearing as a blank space which embodies many of America’s national concerns. In later years, she uncovers the history of resistance in Centreville and recognises that this “is true of every county, town, or city in this country, each with its own buried history of struggle” (Pratt, *Rebellion* 46). The expansiveness behind the politics of her “typical” working-class town influences Pratt, widening her perspective on national issues and the significance of intersectionality, which she has devoted much of her life to since. Although much of her writing and radical work has revolved around finding space in feminist groups for women marginalised by race and religion, Pratt’s own experiences as a lesbian woman inform her position and opinions to a great degree.

Pratt's tensions with lesbianism are focalised on the ease of which it can be hidden, alongside the inherent necessity for her to express it. "I look quite stereotypically 'American' – like a woman in a toothpaste ad," she writes, recognising the privilege found in the very potential of concealment which those of other races could never experience (Pratt, *Rebellion* 37). Pratt fully understands why so many light-skinned people hide parts of themselves which could keep them "from fitting in, assimilating, [and] being safe in white Christian culture," for it compromises their position as 'American' (37). This begs the isolating, debilitating question: is it better to be comfortable and safe, or true to who you are?

Pratt, like Burroughs before her, was in a heterosexual marriage before recognising her sexuality. However, Pratt's marriage resulted in two sons, whom she was refused custody of following the divorce, solely on the grounds of her sexuality. Finding this comfort in her identity ultimately forced her apart from her own children, which she could not dispute against, as "my lawyer feared that 'calling the attention of the court' to my lesbian identity would mean that I would never see my children again" (44). Despite retaining minimal visiting rights with her children, Pratt recognises that "The terms were much harsher on me, the lesbian mother, than on any errant father" due to the court's belief that she had "defied the laws of God and man" (Pratt, "Easter" 142, 146).

The idea of "God's law" is shown to be painfully ironic in its circular logic in these biographical essays and poems, deeming "lesbian desire unnatural since it is not inherently reproductive" while punishing "lesbians who do reproduce by deeming them as unfit mothers and removing their children from their care" (Stein 298). This deeply unfair and traumatic experience of marginalism

became the leading force behind much of Pratt's poetry, violently illustrating the homophobic bigotry of America. Alongside this, Pratt notes that being punished for "choosing to act as a sexually autonomous woman showed me how many other boundaries had been placed around me – boundaries that were there to serve racist ideology, sexist ideology" (Pratt, "Horizon" 26). Whereas William S. Burroughs isolated himself from marginalised communities in order to foster his individualistic mindset, Minnie Bruce Pratt dedicated her life to building communities and safer spaces for those like her. Pratt's first poetry collection, *The Sound of One Fork* was released in 1981 after being produced and published by Pratt herself alongside the *Feminary* collective. In speaking of the American literary environment of 1981, Pratt states: "I would send my lesbian poems off to mainstream literary journals and get back curt little rejection notes . . . printers often refused to print material produced by feminists and lesbians even though we were paying them!" (Parks 11). Although their content is vastly different, this immediately relates to the obscenity case laid against Burroughs in the 1960s, albeit enforced by the literary sphere rather than the legal. The 1990 collection, *Crime Against Nature* was what truly brought Pratt into the spotlight, and still stands tall as the finest example of her incorporation of rivers and natural space.

As noted earlier, the lack of geographical distinction becomes problematic when considering the notion of a distinct homosexual space, which not only destabilises much of the assumptions we can make regarding the rivers in their lives, but also emphasises the isolation experienced by gay and lesbian Americans. Due to the ongoing societal benefit of concealing one's homosexuality, the community cannot be globally comprehensive, in contrast to the unity of identity afforded to those marginalised by race or religion. This lack of social and spatial distinction could clarify why Minnie Bruce Pratt "felt

painfully isolated as a lesbian” or why William S. Burroughs found it easier to believe “I’m not queer . . . I’m disembodied” (Pratt, *Rebellion* 50, Burroughs, *Queer* 94).

English Literature professor, Rachel Stein, whose writing often focuses on environmental justice, gender, and sexuality, looks to this sense of disconnection between gay people and their space. In an article examining Pratt’s poetics, Stein writes that “American laws regulating sexual behavior have drawn upon the Judeo-Christian belief that certain sexual practices are natural and others are unnatural, even crimes against nature” (286). By aligning the discriminatory laws of man under the classification of “nature,” the American legal system actively denaturalises homosexuality, treating it as something otherworldly. Stein recognises that “this discourse of unnatural sex dislocates lesbians from the social-natural order by framing homosexuals as societal pariahs and felons who are then excluded from social spaces and endangered within natural terrains” (285). Rather than finding connection through their shared landscape as the marginalised groups of the earlier chapters did, the shared experience of being without space becomes the central unifying factor for Pratt and Burroughs.

In grappling with this concept of shared isolation, Burroughs finds himself drawn to fantastical, surrealist geographies as a means of envisioning a true homosexual space. Kathryn Hume, an academic who writes principally on fantasy fiction, argues that these fantasy landscapes reflect Burroughs’s “sense of being born into the wrong world” as he searches for a place he may fit in (112). Through his consistent rejection from friends, family, and American society for being homosexual, the possibility of finding a community which felt homelike seemed impossible and Burroughs instead prescribed to the

belief that he was an alien (127). Regardless of the bustling, seemingly ubiquitous gay community within the worlds Burroughs creates, the isolation and threatening laws remain. At one point in *The Western Lands*, he announces “a new edict against sodomy, issued by the One God priests” in which the penalty is impalement, indicating the continuing violence and homophobia even within his fantasy geography (Burroughs, *Western* 101). Burroughs creates his phantasmic and overwhelmingly male environments to envision a truly gay space, but isolating factors are never avoidable and segregation continues in the background.

Burroughs depicts his experience of isolation in *Cities of the Red Night* in a graceful, albeit obfuscated way. At seven different points, Burroughs speaks of “silver spots” which “boil” in the eyes of his ever-shifting protagonists, which only occur during homo-erotic experiences and fantasies that relate to water. Be it the viewing of bathing boys, a sexual encounter with Dink Rivers on a boat, or setting up fishing lines with the man of your desires – these silver spots appear and the character passes out, ejaculates, or enters an empty void. These bring forth “an ache of disembodied lust and the searing pain of disintegration” or the “vertiginous sensation of being sucked into a vast empty space where words do not exist,” the characters literally being broken down, isolated, and silenced following their sexual encounters on the water (Burroughs, *Cities* 197, 128).

The distinction made between homosexuality and water is particularly significant here, for the many scenes of homosexual desire set on dry land do not evoke this immediate negative response. By essentially punishing these characters through the debilitating, isolating ‘silver spots’ when they present

their sexuality on, or beside water, Burroughs is calling attention to the ways in which the natural landscape itself can be used to condemn them.

Similarly, this sense of isolation is made prevalent in Pratt's poetry through the recurring concept of "no place:" a contradictory space representing the very absence of space. An immediate comparison can be made between Pratt's no place, and the space which envelopes Burroughs's characters after experiencing the silver spots. In her autobiographical essay, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," Pratt laments that "I had no place; that, as I moved through my days, I was falling through space" after coming out as a lesbian (*Rebellion* 44-45). Stein also recognises this, indicating that "there is 'no place' in the social system for her to retain all aspects of her complex identity" which leaves Pratt feeling detached from her physical geography too (299). Pratt's rendition of the no place, much like Burroughs's, is unequivocally built upon water, appearing as a river, an artificial fountain, or a space where even ocean waves appear as a "pattern of nowhere to go" (Pratt, *Dirt* 42). The poem "No Place," acts as the most compelling and extended evocation of this concept, but several other examples of "this no place" appear, alongside those with gendered addendums, such as "no place of hers" or "no place for a woman" (*Crime* 94, *Walking* 36, 27).

"No Place" is a particularly useful example of how this feeling of isolation can manifest itself geographically, appearing as the juxtaposition of various rivers within a single stanza, directing attention to the comparable qualities they each contain and the extensiveness of the problems they represent. The titular no place is visualised as all the rivers which separate Minnie Bruce Pratt from her children becoming one, indicating true geography yet also symbolically expressing the extensiveness of her oppression as a lesbian mother.

How tired we got of traveling the night land;
how we crossed river after river in the dark,
the Reedy, the Oconee, the Cahaba, all unseen;
how night and the rivers flowed into a huge void
as if that was where we were going, no place at all. (*Crime* 33)

In illustrating the ways in which these unseen rivers can become a “void” through the shared qualities they hold, Pratt is not only graphically depicting the space between her and her children, but also the isolating tactics of homophobic laws. Even though the physical landscape remains unchanged, its context shifts and the rivers concertina together into a metaphorical void, the only space which the displaced and oppressed are offered to exist within.

“No Place” is inspired by a dream Minnie Bruce Pratt experienced shortly after losing custody of her sons. “I began to dream my husband was trying to kill me, that I was crossing a river with my children, women on the other side, but no welcome for me with my boys,” she writes in 1984, six years before “No Place” was published (Pratt, *Rebellion* 42). In establishing this poem’s basis in a dream, Pratt not only aligns herself with the highly dream-influenced work of William S. Burroughs, but also with the space of psychological symbolism. Rachel Stein notes that “her husband’s recourse to the sodomy laws displaces the speaker from her former position as wife and mother, rendering her both physically and figuratively homeless” which the “huge void” of the rivers also accomplish (299). The nightmarish vision of a geographical landscape which physically changes shape to oppress the marginalised is a potent visualisation of the ways in which shifting contexts of nature and space seek to achieve the same.

In establishing this ideological, legal boundary as a physical, natural boundary, Pratt is working as the oppressor does through the fallacies of what

is and is not natural. The boundary of the river is that between the social and natural spheres, between legality and illegality, between motherhood and loneliness. In the portion of the poem depicting her dream, Pratt views herself as a refugee of sorts once she has crossed the river with her children in tow.

Groups of women pass by, talking, as if we are not
there. Who can I ask for help? I am awkward,
at a loss. We are together, we have come across.
We have no place to go. (Pratt, *Crime* 32)

Pratt recognises that passing over the boundary represented by this river is not a sufficient enough attempt to be treated equally, for the existence of the boundary is, in itself, oppressive.

In Burroughs's *The Western Lands*, the Duad's position as boundary is literal, but as with the fantastical landscape he represents, the river is the product of dream symbolism and acts in a more metaphorical manner than geographical. The Duad acts as the final boundary between Burroughs's characters and their admittance into the Western Lands, the Egyptian afterlife, where they shall shed their corporeal forms and spend eternity in comfort. However, the Western Lands are never entered for the Duad is never crossed, its position akin to that of the oppressive river in "No Place," for the existence of the boundary negates any potential freedom found.

The Duad is the physical embodiment of all of mankind's psychological and bodily depravity, appearing as "a frozen sewer" through which "All the filth and horror, fear, hate, disease and death of human history flows" (Burroughs, *Western* 257). To cross the Duad, you must encounter all forms of oppression and violence, and actively disregard them to be rewarded immortality, an idea which Burroughs's characters cannot accept. Its position as a product of the

oppressive elite is also made blatant, as Burroughs (appearing in first-person following references to his writing of *Naked Lunch*) states that “From death they built the Western Lands, and from pain, fear and sickness and excrement they built the Duad as a moat around the Western Lands, lest this exclusive country club be overrun by the peasantry” (196). This unabashed expression of a fantastical class system is striking, where the Egyptian Gods have taken the position normally occupied by those who lead the financial and legal spheres.

In considering the Duad as a river literally built by the elite to exclude others, the metaphorical potential expands considerably. Burroughs puts forward that “The *fellaheen* [farmers] are the food of Osiris, the mud his excrement, the river a vast urinàl where all the Gods void their urine” which, as noted earlier, carries all of humanity’s cruelty and carries “the conditions of life, the shit and farts and piss and sweat and snot of life” (195, 155). In utilising this complicated, surreal geography, Burroughs not only notes the oppressive boundaries set up by the elite and powered by the devoured Other, but also their involvement in all of the evil found in human history. If the Duad continues to flow, utopia and sexual freedom are unattainable, regardless of which side one finds themselves.

Burroughs’s aesthetic form strongly ascribes to the grotesque and repulsive, but it generally equates to a parallel focus on misery, violence, or oppression. In a shocking and noteworthy section, Neferti is recommended by an American man to find himself “a drowned whore, cured two weeks in the River des Peres, and roll and snort and wallow in her” (117). This is the sole mention of the River des Peres in *The Western Lands* and its sickening, violent context is indicative of Burroughs’s oppressed and oppressive youth, calling to mind his statement from the 1985 foreword to *Queer*, that “My past was a

poisoned river from which one was fortunate to escape" (Burroughs, *Queer* 14). Burroughs creates a equivalency between violence and river pollution, be it the consuming and excreting of farmers, the drowning of prostitutes, or the repeated references to poison and disease found in water.

The Duad is also populated with a variety of dangers, including "extremely dangerous animals, reptiles and amphibians" such as "great bloody worms with a disk-shaped mouth like a rotating saw" or "snakes with incurving needle teeth" (214). These fantasy beasts, with all their anatomical weaponry and predatory tendencies are far from realistic, yet symbolise the threat posed by this oppressive, exclusionary system. In keeping with their vastly different, but parallel techniques, Pratt also expresses the dangers of the oppressive river in "No Place," warning her children of "danger, sharp drop-offs, currents, / ledges like knives" (Pratt, *Crime* 32). In other poems, these realist fears regarding the potential for water to tear her children away is reiterated, be it "The youngest caught in the rapids" or her sons and their friends diving "death-close to limestone / teeth, the green water mouth the mothers warn about" (37, 93). Rivers, and the oppressive politics which they occasionally represent, have the power to harm people and destroy family units.

The rivers which are representative of the oppressor's rules in *The Western Lands* and Pratt's poetry are also shown to be polluted and grotesque, equating their aesthetic beauty and river quality with their symbolic potential. In "The Ferry," Pratt looks to the way ownership and autonomy can be wrenched away by the oppressors in relation to a woman and her ferry service across a "river sludged with mud, tires, a shopping cart" (*Walking* 84). At one of the downward points of "Dreaming a Few Minutes in a Different Element," when Pratt discovers her sons fighting, the previously idyllic creek becomes

swollen with refuse: "Beer cans piled in the gully, old Clorox / bottles, mottled plastic" (*Crime* 96). "The smallest is / getting the worst of it, of course" Pratt notes, again drawing attention to the politics of oppression through the guise of brotherly aggression, only once the water has been revealed to be polluted.

Yet, these negative rivers still exist within the minority of those that appear in *The Western Lands* and Minnie Bruce Pratt's poetry. Each represent rivers in a positive, often intriguingly queer-coded way, proposing their own recontextualisation of space as authority-figures did unto them. These oppressive rivers represent the boundaries set by man, yet Burroughs's prose focuses on "the eradication of boundaries," as do the "border-eroding poetics" of Pratt (Vernon 111, Peckham 221). These negative, oppressive rivers are depicted precisely because they are to be eradicated, recontextualised, or positively utilised by the writers themselves.

Figures who appear in the work of both Burroughs and Pratt utilise rivers in the conventional manners of cleaning themselves, eating fish, as transport, and for general recreational joy, yet the potential expands beyond this. Notably, Pratt finds the rivers in her life as a space to reconnect with her children, her past, and herself. Across multiple pieces, the river facilitates positive interaction with the children who were taken from her, for the natural space of the river allows her to be open and unashamed of her sexuality. In the short autobiographical prose piece, "Easter Weekend," Pratt notes that she told the children about her lesbianism along "the Cape Fear River" following "fried fish for supper" (144). In a complimentary poem, "The Place Lost and Gone, the Place Found," Pratt's children express their acceptance of their mother's sexuality by showing her the watery spaces which surround their new home removed from her: "a pond / sunk, hedged, and forgotten" and "the smallest

creek . . . saying, with no words, they have thought of me here” (*Crime* 50). In showing their mother the natural, water-based spaces in which they thought of her, Pratt’s sons showcase their support and acceptance of their mother, regardless of law.

Several other poems depict Pratt taking her children to the river as a bonding experience, as they “float down the Little Cahaba” together in “rubber inner tubes,” or helping them swim “past the hidden rocks / sharp as a bite or a broken bottle” (37, 96). Yet the connection expands to encompass the entire notion of motherhood, with Pratt recollecting the times spent on rivers with her own mother, the feeling of “ecstasy” as “I leap between water and water” and her children “dive down where I dived out from my mother” (96). In connecting these shared experiences across time through the natural states of both motherhood and the river, Pratt reclaims her position as a ‘natural’ being, finding “in the natural world an antidote to heteronormative oppression” (Stein 301). “Crime Against Nature” continues this trend of positive facilitation by including a triumphant scene of Pratt and her partner, Joan, playing with her children beside the river, defiantly breaking the laws set against them. “We are sweaty, smiling / in the sun, clinging to keep our balance, glinting / like silver fishes caught in the mouth of the moment” (Pratt, *Crime* 118). These rivers allow Pratt to recognise her position alongside her children, her mother, and her lover, giving her the connective tissue which effectively re-naturalises her lesbianism through these gentle, natural overlaps.

As Burroughs is not concerned with strict realism or interpersonal connections, the ways in which his rivers aid the characters are much more firmly situated in the metaphoric and unreal. The rivers may often restrict,

endanger, or isolate Burroughs's characters, but their powers can also be utilised by the oppressed to defend or free themselves. Although the many vicious creatures which inhabit the rivers of *The Western Lands* pose a direct threat to the protagonists, the danger is countered through Neferti's construction of a 'stonefish dart' which he can use against his foes. "Stonefish poison, which is contained in barbed spines that break off in the flesh, is perhaps the most excruciating pain a man can experience" yet it has been reclaimed by one of the potential victims and is now being used against the victimisers (Burroughs, *Western* 133).

Another vignette from *The Western Lands* tells the story of an isolated valley which houses a small, desperate community in its depths, reliant upon a stream for survival. They speak of a legend about a man who "built a flying machine from lizard, snake and fish skins sewn to a frame of light wood" alongside "a dowser's wand, carefully constructed of the lightest fish bones" to inform him when to escape (228). Although this is said to have happened many years before, the valley-dwellers still talk fondly of how "the scales of the fish and snakes and lizards caught the late sun and sparkled with iridescent lights" and attribute their eventual rescue and freedom to the man who flew (229). Thanks to the stream running down the valley, not only were these trapped, isolated people able to survive, but also escape their geographic oppression through recontextualising that which oppresses them.

These rivers not only aid the characters and speakers from a direct narrative stance, but also seek to resituate them within the strata of nature that the homophobic "sodomy laws" seek to remove them from. Across their works, Pratt and Burroughs depict "natural phenomena that symbolically subvert the fixed social order that criminalizes homoeroticism" through both realist and

fantastical means (Stein 303). A particularly effective example of this process appears in Burroughs's playful reminder that "Centipedes are sexually dimorphic. Also, the external genitalia of males are often concealed within the anal segment" (Burroughs, *Western* 80). In recognising that "the very creation of otherness . . . is the principal weapon of the oppressor," the normalisation of such ideas within the natural sphere disrupts the oppressor's rhetoric (Peckham 219). There is no innate notion of normalcy or otherness, each being used as arbitrary or oppressive tools, and as such, Pratt and Burroughs normalise the "othered" inhabitants and spaces of nature.

Pratt's descriptions of nature focus directly on eluding the conditions of what is and is not "normal," by favouring the so-called "strange" sights of nature, be they "a blue-tailed, yellow- / lined, orange-headed skink," "purple-bronze / wild hydrangea" or "the brown pods, / how seed rattles and springs and scatters if you fling / out your hand" (Pratt, *Crime* 96, 32, 50). Yet, the enforced negativity surrounding rivers influence the depictions of their uncommon denizens, becoming more metaphoric and less idyllic or harmless in their representation. When beside the river with her sons in "Crime Against Nature," Pratt encounters "a yellowstriped / snake, with a silver fish crossways in its mouth, / just one of the many beautiful terrors of nature" (118). Snakes are consistently equated with water and Pratt's sexuality throughout this poem, with "a blacksnake racing from a drain, firespitting" once homophobic abuse is hurled at her, or Pratt's tongue during cunnilingus, as "a tongue like a snake . . . winding through salty walls . . . the underground spring" (114, 116). The snakes in this poem are also creatures which "would be deemed "bestial" by the creators of the [sodomy] laws," but in emphasising the natural power found in their presence, Pratt illustrates their shared

geography, while also finding an equitable natural power within her own sexuality (Stein 302).

However, Pratt also empathises and connects herself with the silver fish in the snake's mouth, the victim, most powerfully in "Dreaming a Few Moment in a Different Element."

And the water
pulls at our feet, trying to carry us south,
south, going to the Gulf, going to be sucked up
by clouds or cyclonic mouth, water floated on
by fishermen, and swum in by beautiful unseen fishes
the colour of glass jewels, rose-red, yellow,
iridescent blue and green. The men haul them out,
year after year seeing a dull spill of thousands,
plain fish, grey in the air, and, yet, once brilliant,
different, in another element. (Pratt, *Crime* 97).

Here, the oppressive notions of normativity are symbolised in the many stunning, beautiful fish losing their colours at the hands of men who displace them. Pratt follows the river and its fish as they travel to the sea, before graphically depicting their reduction into a space of normativity, concealment, and restriction.

Rather than constructing allegorical significance between their gay identity and natural realism as Pratt does, Burroughs instead imagines a quasi-fantastical world which is naturally heterogenous but homonormative, where the natural world and systems are built around the presupposition of homosexuality and the ubiquitously male. An evocative and irreverent example appears in *Cities of the Red Night*, in which Burroughs envisions an entire river-based ecosystem built on the ingestion of semen. Burroughs paints an idyllic image of a boat gliding along a river, "past youths in the boughs of trees, masturbating and shaking the ripe fruit into the water with the spasms

of their bodies as their sperm falls also to be devoured by the great greenblue fish. It is this diet of fruit and sperm which gives the fruit fish its incomparable flavor” (Burroughs, *Cities* 220). This encapsulates that which roots Burroughs’s anti-realist, unnatural geographies inside the realist considerations of earthly nature. Although the many surreal, science-fictional, or fantastical elements could potentially denaturalise his worlds, Burroughs treats them with an eye keenly trained on contrast, specifically against heteronormative American society.

In a 1980 conference address Burroughs made to the Institute of Ecotechnics entitled “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” he equates the future of humanity with the evolution of the salamander. “[O]rdinarily a salamander starts his life cycle in the water with gills; later the gills atrophy and drop off and the animal develops lungs and comes up to land: then they go back and spend the rest of their lives in the water and they have to come up to breathe” (Burroughs, “Horsemen”). Through this analogy, Burroughs puts forward the theory that humans are not biologically designed to remain as they currently appear, that the environment shall be what changes them, and that these changes shall be irreversible: “Once you lose your gills you can never get them back” (Burroughs, “Horsemen”). In considering this theory, the homonormative space of the *Red Night Trilogy* clarifies itself as a futuristic space in which humanity has evolved beyond heterosexuality and the biologic need for women.

An instantly comparable vignette in *The Western Lands* explains in biological terms exactly how a homonormative space could come to fruition by describing fish being transferred from one environment to another, entirely dissimilar environment. Burroughs notes that biological alterations “occur in

response to drastic alteration in equilibrium in small, isolated groups. All isolated groups are inexorably assimilated into an overall uniformity of environment” and envisions this having occurred with the isolated gay communities slowly becoming the new standard (Burroughs, *Western* 192). This is furthered through Burroughs’s choice to write “an anti-Christian, anti-matriarchal, pro-homosexual historical revision” alongside this vision of the future, as if refusing to acknowledge heterosexuality in much the same way homosexuality has been omitted from canonical art and history in our society (Russell 108). The strengths of this representation extend beyond the playful hypotheticals they pose by also staunchly arguing that sexuality is only relevant in relation to geographical and social context, which actively rejects the sodomy laws which seek to denaturalise their identity.

Alongside the playful and provocative argument that homosexuals are simply the next evolutionary step in human biology, Burroughs creates another distinctly gay-coded group which still experience the oppression of crime-against-nature ideologies: the “Hybrids” between humans and animals. This form of queering nature is regulated by “The Biologic Police” who warn that: “To break down the lines that Mother Nature, in her ripe wisdom, has established between species is to invite biologic and social chaos” (Burroughs, *Western* 32). Burroughs then reiterates his argument made in “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” yet using newts instead of salamanders, seemingly agreeing with the fears of the Biologic Police while still viewing biological and social chaos as a desirable, positive future. In queering nature, Burroughs finds more room for diversity, for gay freedom, for individual expression, and sticks firmly to the river and its creatures in representing this idealised development.

This recurrent focus on water as a symbol for gayness is powerful in its efforts to renaturalise homoeroticism, while also powerful in its scope for celebrating 'strangeness' and the uncommon. "Many of Burroughs's fleeting sexual fantasies record copulations with fish boys or lizard boys, masturbating into water, eating fruits by water" Kathryn Hume notes, and it is through this recognition of the homoerotic potentiality of nature which Burroughs most deftly employs in response to heteronormative writing (117-8). In *Cities of the Red Night*, one of the most idyllic and positive gay relationships follows Audrey and Dink Rivers, the American boy he falls for. Aside from the explicit reference to rivers with Dink's surname, he is also an instructor in body control, able to "stay under water five minutes," seen "walking on the green-brown water" like Jesus, and comes from Middletown, described as "a deep clear stream, some bridges, naked boys" (Burroughs, *Cities* 100, 318, 305). Dink becomes representative of idyllic American rivers and idyllic American masculinity, and his connection with Audrey is so deeply natural and timeless, that a pitchman describes their relationship as "The age-old story of Adam and Eve" (305). With Dink Rivers, Burroughs is not only reclaiming idyllic romance from heterosexuality, but also reclaiming the American river-space as his male lover, his natural muse personified.

Minnie Bruce Pratt also finds the rivers of her poetry as worthy of homoerotic desire, yet rather than using human hybridisations and personifications as Burroughs does, she equates realist river imagery with the female body and lesbian sex. "Reading Maps Three" explicitly describes the romance between the poet-speaker and her unnamed lover as a river in itself: "the inexplicable / pucker of water from an unknown source, a trickle of river / beginning, and our desire" (Pratt, *Dirt* 44). Whereas this becomes effective through its subtle shift from unassuming environmental description to metaphor, "The Ferry"

intercuts between imagery of lesbian sex and water frantically until the two grow blurred.

The bed trembles like a bridge falling, her
face down, spread, dead woman's float. Then over
at the other's hand, laving, not saving her, but
a meeting of waters, hidden shoals. The boat
of her legs, a vee of white, opens, waits (*Walking* 87).

The respective restraint and amplification of these descriptions work at juxtaposing the river and lesbian romance so that their connection cannot be questioned, each inseparable from the other within the stanzas themselves.

Pratt's most erotic description of rivers appears in "Dreaming a Few Moments in a Different Element" which sumptuously describes "the creek, its cool smell rising, animal / scent, promise, the incessant water released, / hidden seeps and springs" (*Crime* 93). This emphasis on the naturalism, unknowability, and sensual pleasure offered by the creek is described in an unapologetically attractive and desirable manner. As the poem progresses, the speaker's relationship with the creek is artfully recontextualised by imagining swimming as a sexual act.

the creek, pure unknown upwelling, sex, what
I put my hands in, how it was to touch her,
like me running down to be the first to meet,
enter, and be taken by the creek in the early morning. (95)

Rachel Stein recognises that this analogy between lesbian sex and swimming "presents homoerotic desire as natural, unstoppable, and attractive as clear, fresh water welling up from the ground, it also recasts the creek itself as an earlier lesbian lover whom the speaker 'enters' and is 'taken by,' thus queering nature by figuring this interaction between human and natural world as homosexual rather than the standard heterosexual relationship assumed

within much nature writing" (302). This stanza expands beyond the realms of the poem itself, naturalising homosexuality, recognising the power of rivers on the individual, and questioning the heterosexual dominant.

It is this line of thinking through which Burroughs and Pratt most dynamically respond to and engage with the American canonical texts of the nineteenth-century. Although these early texts are revolutionary and progressive for their period in many ways, their consideration of gender roles and sexuality remains limited.

In representing romantic engagements with the river as found in Pratt's poetry, the most directly applicable appears in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Thoreau retains a gender-neutral, scientific albeit romantic representation of the rivers throughout, yet one of his embedded poems drastically shifts to direct feminisation:

Some tumultuous little rill,
Purling round its storied pebble,
Tinkling to the selfsame tune,
From September until June,
Which no drought doth e'er enfeeble.

Silent flows the parent stream,
And if rocks do lie below,
Smothers with her waves the din,
As it were a youthful sin,
Just as still, and just as slow. (53)

This jarring and unexpected personification of the river is steeped in sensual imagery and presents the Concord as both mother and daughter, river and rill. Thoreau finds the idyllic space of the river alluring and expresses it by engaging with his own romantic understanding of femininity. The only other points at which the river is feminised regard his incorporation of quotes from

early paratexts that refer to rivers using female pronouns or as “sisters,” suggesting that this gendered representation of landscape is out-of-date, save its deployment in this sole poem.

Considering the lack of gendered landscapes found in the work of these nineteenth-century authors, this suggestion may well be correct. The closest examples come from Mark Twain, who uses female pronouns for ships, river-towns, and America itself, but not the Mississippi River he loves so dearly. However, Twain contradictorily feminises the river in *Life on the Mississippi* when he explains his inability to view it as a romantic force. The beauty of the river is lost after he becomes a steamboat pilot because he overlooks aesthetics for utility, yet his point of comparison is of doctors, wondering “What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a 'break' that ripples above some deadly disease . . . Does he ever see her beauty at all” (Twain, *Life* 94). In rejecting the aesthetic beauty of the river, Twain's analogy immediately draws a parallel to the beauty of women and by extension, his own sexuality.

One of the most popular ways to romanticise the landscape for the selected nineteenth-century Romanticists is through continuing the entrenched representation of Nature as a feminine force, as both mother and muse. Coding Nature as a maternal figure reinforces a traditional theological hierarchy, relegating Nature to a position more bodily and less rigid than the masculinist creator-figure of God. As such, whenever natural landscape inspires desire in a male writer, invoking the feminised Nature ascribes his own heterosexuality to the interaction.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry often looks to Nature as a romantic muse, with certain poems drawing direct parallels between human romance and that

between poet and Nature. "Threnody" depicts a female lover of the poet-speaker who seemingly embodies the features he truly desires in Nature:

The mysteries of Nature's heart;
And though no Muse can these impart,
Throb thine with Nature's throbbing breast,
And all is clear from east to west (Emerson, *Poems* 155).

Not only is this human muse immediately situated as a symbolic embodiment of nature, her purpose is immediately aligned as a means to benefit the male poet-speaker: diminishing both her and Nature's autonomy. Comparatively, Emerson uses human romance to more clearly examine his engagement with the natural, allegorising the difficulty of connecting with Nature in "The Harp" by claiming that "The Muse of men is coy, / Oft courted will not come" (237). Envisioning Nature as a woman to be courted furthers the heterosexual dominant yet in assigning the title "Muse of men" he excludes women and, by extension, homosexuals of any gender from romantic engagement with Nature.

This discouraging sentiment also appears in the essay, "The Conduct of Life" in which Emerson argues that "Nature wishes that woman should attract man" and that "A beautiful woman is a practical poet, taming her savage mate, planting tenderness, hope, and eloquence, in all whom she approaches" (Emerson, *Conduct* 294). The heteronormative perception here is to be expected from writing of this period, but this instance encapsulates the double standards of femininity on display. Nature may appear as a woman when Emerson is feeling inspired and attracted to it, and the women he finds himself enamoured with may be aligned with nature, but man remains the "savage" in need of womanly eloquence.

Thoreau also engages with this contradictory understanding of the femininity of Nature, comparing that which he finds aesthetically beautiful in both nature and women, but avoiding any conceptual parallels lest they suggest women are more attuned to nature than men. He erotically imagines Nature's female body "dripping and oozing from every pore" in the rain, but also imagines Nature providing "horns / To bulls" and "To men wisdom" but "For woman she had nothing beside; / What then does she give? Beauty" (Thoreau, *Week* 11, 200). The feminisation of Nature acts as a heteronormative veneer over Emerson and Thoreau's desire, still associating men with the savage and natural, and women with the civilised and gentle in all other instances.

Catriona Sandilands writes that she is "constantly amazed by the profound heterosexuality of [the] metaphors," used to represent one's love of personified Nature, asking "Why do women not embrace "sister earth" as a lover? Has the sexualization of nature been so completely, so *unwillingly* penetrative - "raping" the wild - as to render celibate our affections?" (21). Minnie Bruce Pratt's treatment of the river and natural spaces as lovers immediately rectifies this, reclaiming her position within nature as both woman and lesbian, while also allowing her to continue working within the established history behind Nature's feminisation. Pratt is not rejecting the feminised Nature of the past, but rather recontextualising her presence in order to experience that which the male, canonical authors did.

Burroughs also writes of a female Nature-figure throughout *The Western Lands*, but only in the rhetoric used by the ruling class and governmental bodies, aligning this perception of gendered nature with the oppressor. Instead, a small standalone routine showcases a figure experiencing a moment of divine intervention from an explicitly male force, which makes the figure discover

“all the questions and all the answers, and there is only one answer, so he wrote ‘Nature Boy’ and got cured” (Burroughs, *Western* 175). This sole mention of Nature Boy acts as Burroughs’s small evocation of a masculine spirit found in natural space, one of the rare sequences both intensely positive and immediately resonant. Nature must be recontextualised for Burroughs or Pratt to fully engage with, for the established canon and the crime-against-nature laws explicitly seek to exclude them.

Amidst this, Walt Whitman’s position is complicated due to the ongoing debates about his own sexual orientation due to his recognition of male beauty alongside female. Lines such as “I announce a man or woman coming, perhaps you are the one” from “So Long” or “The Female equally with the Male I sing” from “One’s-Self I Sing” suggest a gender-neutral understanding of romance, and potentially Whitman’s own bisexuality (Whitman 417, 1). Whitman still often refers to Nature as a female force, in “I Sing the Body Electric” he even refers to Nature simply as “the Female,” but he also allows the potential for its masculinity, naming Nature “Master of all or mistress of all” in “Me Imperturbe” (Whitman 8, 9).

Alongside this refreshing perception of beauty as something removed from the gendered, heterosexual space, Whitman looks to the heterosexual erotic as something between two beautiful forms, rather than a female beauty which the male speaker finds alluring. In a wildly suggestive single line of “Spontaneous Me,” Whitman writes of “The hairy wild-bee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied” (88-89). Whitman does not feminise the flower to express his desire towards it in a heteronormative manner, but rather to depict

the natural interaction of bee and pollen romantically. Whitman detaches himself from the interaction and describes with equal eroticism the male bee and the lady-flower, using the established juxtaposition of nature and heterosexual romance to celebrate the motions of nature instead of justifying his romantic perception through performative heterosexuality.

Pratt and Burroughs also directly reference certain elements of these texts in their work, drawing forth new interpretations. Pratt associates herself with transcendentalism in the autobiographical short story "Easter Weekend," telling her child that "I believed there was something without a name, an energy, like electricity, that came and went through everything, and we all held a bit of it. When we died, then our energy went to be part of everything" (Pratt. "Easter" 141). Comparatively, Burroughs constructs his geographies by mixing the adventure fiction he read as a boy, *Huckleberry Finn* included, with the idealistic landscapes of America found in transcendentalist and frontier writing. Although the intertextual engagement here is made with reverence and sincerity, the simple act of drawing reference to them within a queer setting is bold and subversive.

Other aspects more directly destabilize the work of these canonical authors, namely Pratt's poem "The Ferry" which recontextualises "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" by politicising the Whitmanian representation of time to discuss the ever-present status of historical trauma in space; or the extended river journey of Ali and Farnsworth in *Cities of the Red Night* which self-consciously reverses "the older black man, younger white boy motif of *Huckleberry Finn*" and resituates itself as a homosexual relationship (Russell 105). Other direct references appear in Burroughs's work, such as a mention of Thoreau having "drowned himself in Waiden [sic] Pond with a dead loon around his neck"

(Burroughs, *Western* 13). With these minor glances backward to literary history, Burroughs and Pratt subtly acknowledge the heteronormative understanding of nature as they carve their new tributary away from it.

This new tributary not only veers from the heteronormative canon of American literature, but also directs itself towards the Utopic in its consideration of a potential homonormative space. The central tension of formulating what Jamie Russell calls “queertopia,” is identical to that of representing a distinctly gay-coded river, with the homosexual experience being global, but remaining isolated within heteronormative society (172). In recognising their lack of any definitive landscape, no space can accurately depict all the spaces significant to the global community or invoke Utopia and as such, none becomes all.

In *The Western Lands* alone, Burroughs alludes to the rivers: Mississippi, Nile, des Peres, Raton Creek, Missouri, Amazon, the paved-over river of Piedad, Panama Canal, and numerous other unnamed rivers of his own imagination, each flowing into the other in an endless passage of water. The transitions between storylines and the rivers they take place upon are often hard to distinguish, through the descriptive nature of the writing style and the often-concealed identity of his characters. Following a description of the fictional Duad as full of “mud,” “excrement,” and “the *fellaheen*,” the next river encountered is said to “reek of fish, river mud, sewage, and *fellaheen* sweat,” yet the narrative has seamlessly entered Memphis in the past ten pages and is now describing the Mississippi River (Burroughs, *Western* 195-6, 206). This occurs with all the locations represented across the Red Night trilogy, an effect described by Burroughs as “a spatial panorama . . . not sequential but arranged in shifting associational patterns. Your attic room in St. Louis opens

into a New York loft, from which you step into a Tangier street" (183). These seamless transitions are written as if Burroughs is looking down upon the entire world in a single landscape: the only space which could include all the topics, communities, and gay characters he seeks to depict.

Whereas the concept posed by Burroughs responds to the literal, fantastic shifting of space, Pratt confines her juxtapositions to those sharing particular contexts or connections with the human identities upon each space. Although the many disparate rivers flowing into the huge void of "No Place" appear as a boundary to Pratt, there are certain points which showcase a tentative desire felt for the no place of isolation and disconnect. Standing "where everything mingles, simultaneous, undivided / instant before we plunge into the green sliding- / south cold water" finds Pratt losing an understanding of her own self, but also a connection with all around her through mergence (Pratt, *Crime* 93). When Pratt finds herself in that 'no place,' she is entering a realm which only the oppressed and those like her experience, thus finding a certain kinship with the void and what it represents.

In a particularly powerful sequence of the poem "Cahaba," Pratt recognises not only her own connection to the Cahaba, but that of all women.

In my town by the water
mothers, sisters, daughters
flow like the river
in the dry beds of men,
within crumbling limestone walls.

We could flood the fields (*Dirt* 5).

In writing of the dry beds of men and the potential flood which women could bring, Pratt is advocating for women working together, loving one another, and expanding across a world they are restricted from entering. This powerful

reclamation of the Cahaba as a space for women utilises the same technique as that found in "The Ferry" with women forced under titles built on relations rather than individuality, "mothers, sisters, daughters," ultimately coming together into the interconnected, non-exclusionary group: women.

The Cahaba and many of the other rivers found in Pratt's poetry underscore the lack of space for a woman such as Pratt, but women coming together in the same manner as those varied rivers underscore their similarities, shared experiences, and potential futures together. These women are different, yet they are all women, and their interconnectedness works to highlight the fact that Pratt is never as isolated as the landscape she inhabits. This becomes the utopic space for Pratt, a utopia built on the global connectivity of isolation and oppression as it leads all women to a space free from male oppression.

Burroughs's engagement with the utopic also represents isolated people becoming unified through single-gendered interconnection. The poet, Belle Randall, argues that "every major character seems to have been created in the image of his author" challenging "the conventional notion of the autonomous character" (Randall 16, 17). In organising his cast of characters this way, Burroughs is successfully situating his figures within the fragmented and fantastical location, essentially providing them with a home of their own, and by extension, one for himself through the innumerable similarities these characters share with Burroughs.

John Vernon puts forward a succinct and evocative statement which further expands the potential behind Burroughs's technique here: "All objects and bodies exist sometimes in a space whose ideal condition is fragmentation and atomic isolation, and sometimes in a space whose ideal condition is mergence, the eradication of boundaries, the running together of everything and

everyone" (111). This not only hearkens back to the earlier discussions of feelings of isolation, of reclamations of space and identity, and the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory things, but also the tantalising idea of this being an "ideal condition." This further proposes the utopic mode which Burroughs's fiction works within, but also relates to many of the ideas which Pratt is engaging with throughout her poetry. Isolation and fragmentation allow one to come to understand their identity better and to become autonomous, but the similar idea of mergence allows a sense of community, normalcy, and connectivity to flourish.

The significant difference here between the negative appearances of the no place and the negative examples of fragmentation in *The Western Lands* is through their emphasis on mergence and connection. The unreached afterlife of the Western Lands is desired not because of the loss of corporeality, but because it solves the rupture wrought by Cartesian dualism, just as the no place which isolates Pratt from her peers also extends to encompass an entire globe of people who share her experiences. Pratt can find positivity when being so close to another woman that "her breasts became mine until / I did not know who I was" even if it recalls the experience of detachment found in the no place, just as Burroughs can rectify his fragmented sense of identity by envisioning a fragmented geography as his home (Pratt, *Dirt* 11). By engaging with the spatially oppressive and the conceptually negative, Pratt and Burroughs do not simply shed light on the horrors of America as those of past chapters do, but propose a positive alternative. Rivers and ideas of nature are used to isolate the homosexual community, but Burroughs and Pratt subvert, and in some cases embrace, these isolating tactics to find a hopeful openness that flows towards self-acceptance, social reform, and even the suggestion of an inclusive utopia.

Conclusion

This is not a comprehensive survey of American marginalism. Within a larger project, considerations of Native American and Hispanic / Latinx Literature could flesh out the race chapter, just as transgender literature could expand the discussion on sexual politics. Similarly, engagement with literature of the disabled, immigrants, the non-Christian, and the intersectional could produce interesting revelations not found here. All would be beneficial towards providing a more complete dissection of how American rivers are represented by the marginalised.

What juxtaposing these authors, their texts, and their rivers together reveals is the significance of juxtaposition in itself. The specifics change for each text and grouping, but all consistently concern themselves with juxtaposition and parallelism, both implicitly and explicitly. The central point of comparison is between the privileged, accepted 'norm' and the othered experiences of the authors, but the differing ways in which they examine this are illuminating.

All of the direct addresses to the American literary past found in *Suttree*, *Beloved*, and the poetics of Minnie Bruce Pratt and James Wright are examples of this technique. These are not so much intertextual homages, but rather damning portrayals of how the idealised portrayal of America in the canon are falsehoods built from privilege. These past texts provide an instantly recognisable counterpoint to the experiences depicted by the marginalised, destabilising the reader's established thoughts on America.

As Terre Ryan notes, "Manifest Destiny aesthetics continue to inform mainstream perceptions of landscape, environmental policies, and representations of national identity, including patriotism, sometimes at great cost" which this self-reflexive employment seeks to deconstruct (9). When

Wright speaks of the beauty of an open sewer in Whitmanian prose, he is utilising an accepted rhetorical form on an unacceptable subject, forcing an uncomfortable juxtaposition within the reader. Similarly, McCarthy and Morrison write scenes which parallel those from *Huckleberry Finn* but emphasise the negative implications and lack of realism to disavow Twain's representation. By representing an America utterly despoiled and segregated while using the rhetoric, imagery, and perspective of these beloved canonical authors, new conclusions and concepts appear through their collision.

These nineteenth-century texts become indicative of the lives their authors led and the privileged America that informed them. By taking aim at these works through both direct referential parallelism and self-conscious subversion, these texts align themselves as representative of what lies "outside the frame" of the canonical texts. The historical aspect of these texts is also significant, but most notably for the African American writers whose re-evaluation of history has already been examined in Chapter Two. Regardless of the shift in time, invoking these works pose the marginalised texts as a natural progression, as if America's fall from grace has been so expansive that the frame cannot exclude what it used to.

This idea of excluding truths from the frame of representation remains all too common in American literature, notably regarding the representation of unattractive, uninspiring, or neglected space. Although rather obvious at this point, the representation of these forms of spaces in any format becomes overtly political through their rejection of the idealistic, established aesthetics of American landscape. Landscape aesthetics inform understandings of national unity, inspire patriotism, and provide an idea of American "normalcy." As Terre Ryan argues, the equal veneration of the picturesque, beautiful, and sublime natural landscapes in American painting was useful

after the Civil War, providing “common ground over which the nation could reunite and heal” (15). Although mostly relegated to intertextuality and the implicit, the settings of these texts are consciously positioned against the established presuppositions of American landscape.

In certain texts across all three categories, direct juxtaposition between multiple rivers or geographies are made which further develop this effect. As Caroline Levine recognises, “Some networks are densely local . . . Some are utopian, transnational, and discursive” (119). The networks of these texts provide examples of how these two extremes are operated between and politically utilised. William S. Burroughs stands as the sole writer of the transnational and utopic examined here, and although his technique has been examined in Chapter Three already, it is worth reiterating in this context. With all spaces, even those beyond earth, fluidly merging together, Burroughs depicts the lack of space for the marginalised while also imagining a utopic space outside of the spatiotemporal where they may truly find home.

In contrast, the limited locality of the economically marginalised characters in James Wright’s poetry, *Beloved*, and *Suttree* is significant for it showcases their immobility and dependence on local community for survival. Spatial juxtaposition still occurs indirectly through the intertextuality which features so heavily in these particular texts, relating to Whitman and the Romantics, white American river writing, and *Huck’s* Mississippi respectively. *Beloved* undertakes a more extensive point of juxtaposition, but a necessary one too, for even slave narratives from white American writers romanticise the landscape. Consider the statement that the Mississippi, “this river of dreams and wild romance has emerged to a reality scarcely less visionary and splendid” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe 148). Romanticising the American landscape contradicts its contextual position in the narrative as another

oppressor, which Morrison actively rebels against through noting the “shameless beauty” of the plantation compared to the mud, heat, and stench of Cincinnati (Morrison 7).

Between these two poles provided by Levine sit Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, and Minnie Bruce Pratt: disrupting spatial logic by juxtaposing multiple rivers together and drawing forth that which separates and connects them. Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” collates the African rivers of black history to invoke the everlasting resilience and rich history of their race, whereas Brown’s “Crossing” collates American rivers together to depict their diaspora and the continual displacement of African Americans even after emancipation. Similarly, Minnie Bruce Pratt uses the same effect to showcase political violations of the oppressed, depicting the isolation, fragmentation, and interconnectedness of oppressed people, be they homosexual, slaves, or indigenous peoples. Her poem “Reading Maps Three” argues that “the struggle begun / somewhere else: a river lowland, the Mobile, the Tombigbee, / or in the river of grass, Pahokee, Okeefenokee, or north / along the Combahee, the Lumbee, the Cape Fear, the Mattaponi, / the Potomac” (*Dirt* 46). By juxtaposing multiple rivers (even fragmenting the status of river by including those “of grass”) through their traumatic histories of rebellion from slaves and Native Americans, Pratt uses this technique to depict the expansiveness of this unspoken national history. This rebels against Whitman’s image of national unity and pride brought forward by juxtaposed American rivers in poems such as “Our Old Feuilleage.”

These overt political purposes clarify the representation of the landscape as a spatial conceptualisation of the central disunity which these writers are juxtaposing, that between the marginalised and the privileged in America. Due to the accepted literary canon of American being predominantly white,

middle to upper-class, and heterosexual, these undeniably 'national' experiences are disregarded as those outside of the majority, as even Whitman's poetry was towards the start of his career. Yet, many of these twentieth-century works find a glimmer of potential in coming together as the marginalised, as the Other, and overshadowing the established idea of American normalcy. In her quintessential essay "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," Minnie Bruce Pratt provides two powerful examples of the ways in which this concept is beneficial for the marginalised, literature, and America as a whole.

Firstly, Pratt speaks of attending the twentieth anniversary of Dr. King's Selma march, and how "Walking as a lesbian, with a group of Third World and white lesbians, with the thousands, with the half-million people streaming slowly between the monumental government buildings, past the hot marble walls, I affirmed to myself that I finally was grasping the interconnectedness of me and 'the others'" (*Rebellion* 66). The sense of wholeness denied through oppression can be rediscovered through mergence and the development of a newfound unity with the fragmented people who face comparable problems. This is precisely what Caroline Levine points to when defending the politically difficult idea of national boundary and wholeness, by looking at the way it can also "introduce *more wholes*" through the unification of the excluded (56).

River imagery again becomes beneficial in discussing this notion, as it is the very emphasis on fluidity and mergence which allows the marginalised to transcend the borders and restrictions surrounding them. Each form of marginalism has been characterised thus far as its own isolated river with a discrete history, set of difficulties, and aesthetic qualities but are they not all tributaries from the same nation-spanning river of inequality? As directly posited by the poetics of Margaret Walker and Minnie Bruce Pratt, perhaps if

all these waters come together, there will be a great cleansing flood upon the ravaged land and they shall be free.

This revolutionary thought process is indicative of the efforts made by all of these texts: for their distinctly American experiences to be acknowledged and treated as such. A beautiful illustration of the need for this representation again comes from Pratt's essay:

We each have only a piece of the truth. So here it is: I'm putting it down for you to see if our fragments match anywhere, if our pieces, together, make another larger piece of the truth that can be part of the map we are making together to show us the way to get to the longer-for world (*Rebellion* 32).

Through interweaving spatial comprehension and subjective perception, Pratt emphasizes the diversity found within individual spaces, but also the unseen expansiveness found through interconnection and relationship building. The map which the immigrant family in your neighbourhood holds expands to another country, which also must be accounted for in the creation of an objective spatial truth, disrupting exclusionary ideas of nationhood.

Non-fiction writer and critic, Brenda Wineapple notes that nineteenth-century writers tirelessly searched for aesthetics and rhetoric "elastic enough to represent each singular individual and yet, somehow, to include and symbolize all Americans" (57). Yet how could these writers, born into privilege or surrounded by incredible scenery, ever include the newly-emancipated slaves, the impoverished workers of early-industrial West Virginia, the closeted homosexuals leading false lives of their own era? The segregation, the ugliness, and the regressive aspects are directly contradictory to the patriotism they are seeking to represent and are thus deemed "unamerican."

Why should whiteness, economic comfort, and idealism be indicative of how American a writer is? Even in this thesis, it is near-impossible to discuss without setting up an exclusionary dichotomy between the accepted American canon and that of the marginalised. By making a distinction between the writing of lower-class, black, and homosexual Americans and that of canonical “American literature,” I am positioning them as outsiders to an untrue norm. The presupposition of whiteness, success, and heterosexuality in our envisioned “standard” American is a fallacy, one built upon past aesthetics and rhetoric which excluded as much as it venerated. These presuppositions, directly related to our presupposed ideas of American landscape aesthetics, are difficult to pull oneself away from, which is why these “marginalised texts” are so worthy of serious consideration.

The works examined here stand firm as examples of truly American literature, even expressive of “the down-to-earth, the real, the concrete, and the unpretentious, which are presumably the most American” according to Wineapple (56). Their engagements with nature, history, identity, race, society, economy, and morality are all quintessentially American – as much as the four selected canonical authors – yet they remain in sub-sections delineated by their class, race, and sexuality. These works all call for reformation on what it means to be an American author, generating a new canon which both rejects and embraces the established tradition.

This returns me to the river, which has been neglected in this conclusion thus far, but for good reason. Rivers are rich in historical and stylistic value, providing a seemingly endless array of different meanings, emotions, and aesthetics dependent on the purposes of each writer. They are also inherently political, as “environmental inequality is closely associated with minority standing across the USA,” thus becoming suggestive of societal issues

(Kozlowski and Perkins 1290). But in these works, rivers remain a symbol, a subject to be represented, a setting for the action.

My choice to examine these pieces of literature through their representation of rivers is simply an organising principle. Numerous pieces of writing examine the impossible questions of America, of landscape, of marginalism, but these writers all turned to rivers just as the privileged writers of the nineteenth-century had before them. As McMillin writes, “Different rivers mean different things to different writers,” similar to how “TVA is all things to all people” according to Charles McCarthy, Cormac’s wealthy father who worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority and assisted in the rivers pollution (McMillin xvi, Charles McCarthy 116). The rhetorical potential of rivers is irrefutable, with its contextualisation by both oppressor and oppressed illustrating the extent of its literary usage. Yet, some of these meanings are positioned as unpatriotic or “singular” and are disavowed by the national consciousness, even notably absent from McMillin’s *The Meaning of Rivers*.

With this thesis, I hoped to unpack the representation of a single image from a diverse range of American writers and discover what informed, unified, and guided their perspectives regarding the narrow space of the river. Instead, I found that this image carries with it the weight of each writer’s experience as marginalised Americans, expanding outwards into a flood, a tidal ocean. Even for the few rivers examined here which are comparatively hygienic, they are polluted with the politics, history, and inequality of the land which they run through. For certain marginalised writers, the imagery of the sky, bodies, birds, clothes, mountains, food, may carry these foul passengers instead of rivers. Rivers are just a single example from a plethora of images tarnished by American oppression, but they are the one I, and these writers, have chosen.

In opening this thesis, I imagined a nation-wide survey asking each American to describe a river and hypothesised the variance in results. This implies that within all individuals, there lies a river we carry with us, be it one from our hometown or our first holiday abroad, one glimpsed or one deeply familiar. I visualize the measly Porirua Stream of my childhood: young boys searching for crabs in the foul-smelling mud, dumped shopping trolleys trailing algae, black swans and seagulls, the concreted banks. You may imagine something entirely different, something with its own set of memories and moralities attached, something more akin to Pratt over Twain, or Thoreau over Morrison. Whatever that imagined river looks like, it belongs to you and flows into all the other waters of earth.

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