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Conjunction and Disjunction in Annie Proulx's Post-West: An Affective Critical Approach

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AN AFFECTIVE CRITICAL APPROACH**

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The ghosts from these western lands
are gonna rise up against these English sands
Like a tumbleweed on a reckless course
These barb wire fences can't keep us apart
Where are the heroes that sang them old songs
You recognize a hero 'cause he don't belong
We gave up our youth and model railroad trains
Picked up guitars and we changed our names
With experience of a tortured youth
You turn up the music and go in search of the truth.

–The Beat Farmers, *Hollywood Hills*

I came across Annie Proulx's books as a reader, long before even considering ever carrying out any scholarly work on her. Her readings always took me back to a place about which I thought I knew a lot yet I did not: the American West. It was not until a few years after my first reading of *Postcards* that I ventured into exploring her work, environment and ideas as a writer in a deeper way. There I discovered her approach to place, her attention to the local, language and the weather, as well as her understanding of the West as a region, motivation and credo. All that helped me reassess my traditional assumptions of the West –which I had visited on quite a few occasions–. They were, I realized, incomplete if not false, a myth in decline, just another white man's appraisal of the so-called American Dream, fed globally in the form of Western movies and literature along history. At the same time, I was drawn

by stories and characters that I had met in other cultural spaces such as music –in albums from Jason & the Scorchers, the Long Ryders or Steve Earle, to name a few– or movies such as *Paris, Texas* or *Blood Simple*, which, from the 1980s on started to portray different Wests with different people and different outcomes. Proulx’s literature completed the picture and complemented my new understanding of the West: changing, different, non-traditional. Every time I traveled back there my outsider view took more into account the teachings of these authors. Bruce Springsteen’s immigrants or Gus Van Sant’s landscapes were just bits of the same whole. Permanent economic decline, towns losing their ethos or disappearing farms, together with traditionally excluded characters as black cowboys or lesbian ranchers populated a homogenized landscape of Wal-marts, 7-Elevens and Conoco stores. In a way, the whole myth was reversed: people were different and the landscape – urban, rural– was too. No cowboys on horseback or Far West towns. The whole idea of the Old (Far) West was vanishing in slow-motion, which was just a turning point in my perception of the region. Driving from West Virginia to Nevada was more an exercise of finding the distinctive traits of each region –“where’s the border?”– than artificially driving the mythic West along the long-gone Route 66. “Is there a West?” or “Does it still exist?” Those questions turned into issues that absorbed me up to this day and made me see the region from a new different perspective. Twenty years into the new century now studies on the American West have consolidated a canonical field of study. International conferences, university symposiums, and associations have emerged together with a steady and growing bulk of critical theoretical literature. The region has finally found its place among the shelves. Now, next to an old Zane Grey collection, one can find a number of books that precisely

question that West. I realized that there was a common interest shared by scholars from which I could learn a lot of things. And that is how I was drawn into Annie Proulx and the studies of the American West.

My interest in ecocriticism comes probably from long-time attention to landscape. I have always been involved with land and interested in the way in which regions have been reshaped under the action of humans, how virgin coastlines have transformed into horrendous and never-ending formations, and how we have extracted and have not even started paying back, so ecology has always felt like a natural standpoint, based on common sense and measured up to personal responsibility. The urgency that seems to press us now is not new. The undeniable ill-fate of the land on which we stand is an issue that requires more than just our attention, an awareness that associations, scholars, media and scientists alike demand. Past the questionable fashion of “going green” lies a philosophy or critical attitude of which I would like to be part. Ecology has to do with responsibility and common sense, awareness and sacrifice, and I believe that ecocriticism is maybe one of the main tools for scholars that seek answers to those needs. The field of ecocriticism, not necessarily an action, means to me a way to make people concentrate on very specific issues that affect the natural world from a number of other perspectives. The field of ecocriticism is one of the fast-ever-growing areas of study, as –said above– it is crisscrossed by an endless number of endless fields that deal with the politics of space: architecture, biology, visual arts, or literature. The field, I understand, takes undoubtedly a political stance as it measures up how and if we should dominate nature and what the possibilities are in contemporary living regarding our social and economic connections. If, as Ursula Heise suggests,

“ecocriticism promises to become one of the most intellectually exciting and politically urgent ventures in current literary and cultural studies” (514), one cannot help it but feel a compelling urge to carry on with such an endeavor.

Likely, a determining and final factor in my decision to focus on the work of Annie Proulx was the opportunity that I had to meet her in her house in Centennial, Wyoming. After a twenty-minute conversation on art and literature, we ultimately focused on landscape. Her final suggestion was: “Why don’t you write about landscape?” It was a message that went further than any scholarly reading: she was pinpointing the most relevant feature of her work. Not only did she offer her encouragement, but she also added that she had great regard for 18th-century Dutch masters and the way in which they handled landscapes. It was only after a while that it became clear how significant that encounter would prove. At that point, I was still debating what direction my research would take and I put the work aside for a while. In the meantime, Proulx’s name became associated with Hollywood, when Ang Lee adapted “Brokeback Mountain,” which earned her worldwide attention. When I resumed my research, I was fully aware of the weight of landscape in her writings, having verified it through intensive readings of all her works of fiction –at that time four novels and four short-story collections– and I decided to go back to the beginning: *Postcards*. Revisiting that work from the perspective of landscape gave new meaning to Proulx’s words, which now seem more like a prediction than a suggestion.

At the beginning of my research, I took as a critical framework Scott Slovic’s concepts of “conjunction” and “disjunction” (*Seeking* 137) –two opposing attitudes through which one can approach nature–. I used them as an examining tool for *Postcards*, Proulx’s first novel. That explored how Proulx addresses nature through the

transformation of the American landscape over a period of forty-four years. In the background lies the rural way of life that has disappeared in the aftermath of World War II. In the foreground, we find attachment to place and the agency of new generations of improvers and newcomers, who have become disconnected from the land and do not know how to (re)gain intimacy with it. Using the concepts of “conjunction” and “disjunction” (as two opposed attitudes to landscape that will be fully developed in this dissertation) I discovered two clearly established ideas within the framework of ecocriticism and the studies on nature writing. It was a critical approach performed only from an ecocritical point of view, incomplete and aimed at being developed into further fields of study, what has resulted in the framework for this dissertation.

For this dissertation, I am planning to intertwine ecocriticism with the studies of the American West. Ecocriticism is one of the most recent arrivals on the literary criticism scene. Although from the very beginning in the 1980s, it has never formulated a field-defining statement, it is commonly agreed that it focuses on the relationship between literature and nature. As Lawrence Buell explains, there are numerous ways in which these two terms can be related, which will be clear from the multiple approaches which the discipline encompasses (“Insurgency” 702). In the last decade, the rise of this field as a major critical movement has made itself felt, alongside its growing expansion into other fields and disciplines. That interdisciplinary quality may well form part of its definition. The interrelation between environmental criticism and other disciplines is where the field has found its place. Critics such as Buell and Heise still demand a further branching out of ecocriticism into other forms of expression, such as art or music (Buell et al. 434).

Others, such as Cheryll A. Glotfelty, claim that ecocriticism “expands the notions of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere,” something that other literary approaches refer to as “society” (“Introduction” xix). In this particular case, I consider it necessary for the course of my work to attach this field with that of Western Literary Studies, another relatively recent and active field of research, which has become a part of canonical literary studies. In the course of its development, studies of the American West have managed to stir and flip pastoral notions of the West by taking into account authors coming from independent fields of study –cultural studies, feminism and gender studies, architectural studies or ecocriticism, to name a few. Authors such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Krista Comer or Neil Campbell have all contributed to bringing the field into existence. The discipline aims to encompass, dissect and permanently redefine the West through its many literary expressions, both past and present, as well as to establish a solid field that transversally expands and opens up in the same way as ecocriticism. I think that Proulx’s vision of the West demands such a reading.

These are the main issues that Proulx’s committed fiction addresses in *Postcards*, and which will be reassessed in what I consider her “Western corpus” – which I justify in a section devoted to it. I chose to examine the novels *Postcards* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*, and the three volumes of short stories on Wyoming, *Close Range*, *Bad Dirt*, and *Fine Just the Way It Is*, all of them works by Annie Proulx. My justification is not only based on their geographical setting (the narratives are set in Wyoming, the Texas Panhandle and a large area of the Midwest) but on Proulx’s relationship with the Western landscape, its history and its people. This bulk of Annie Proulx’s work has mainly been studied within the framework of the American West and

that alone, I believe, would as well be a compelling argument for the corpus that I propose. Together with this, I find that the fact that she has been a long-time Westerner and the universality of the Western landscape that she so vehemently projects and protects are two additional arguments that support my choice. References will be also made to *Heart Songs*, *The Shipping News*, *Accordion Crimes* and *Barkskins*, the rest of her long narratives, which transversely refer to the relationship between humans and their environment.

As stated above, this dissertation joins the two critical literary approaches of ecocriticism and the studies of the American West with the aim of underlining a new vision of the region through Neil Campbell's concept of the "affective spacetime of regionality" (*Affective 2*), fully developed further. He argues against the concept of the West as a fixed idea or a static stance by suggesting that the West is essentially a changing process, a region in constant motion where all involved elements –external, local, climate– are equally relevant in it. Regionality is seen as a process, an active one, a series of two-way relations, connections, a matrix of relatedness, an action of becoming. Campbell calls these processes "regioning" (*Affective 5*), stressing on this idea of movement. Regionality pays equal attention to the local yet Campbell acknowledges –and I follow– a crucial shift in his previous concept of region, "circular and enclosed'," into a political and active one. This point will be developed in the next chapter.

In the course of this study, I argue that the process by which Proulx's characters achieve conjunction or suffer disjunction with the landscape, namely the West, clearly reflects that dynamic move and define the region in a new and different way. I argue that Proulx's contribution to the concept is explicit and will explore the limits of its aim, that is, I wonder if this is the sole purpose of her

literature, other than entertaining. Proulx's West will be then read as an affective critical regionality, and will be fully developed in the critical framework section.

Prior to the analysis, Chapter 2 is devoted to contextualizing the literary corpus to be used in this investigation, the relevance of Annie Proulx's method of research for all her fiction, and a full development of the critical framework that I have just outlined. Her life and wanderings are closely connected to her subjects, as she has explained in a number of interviews and readings, and that is what the first section develops. Together with that, her intensive and extensive method of research, which she considers essential in the creative process, is amply described in the section.

The analysis includes three chapters –3, 4 and 5–, each devoted to one of the works from the corpus, *Postcards*, *That Old Ace in the Hole* and a selection of stories from the trilogy of *Wyoming Stories*. Even though at first I considered that a thematic-based structure could incorporate all the narratives together in a chapter, I finally found that *Postcards* and *That Old Ace in the Hole* depict characters that reflect two opposing ways to enter landscape, and that they offer two complementary visions –often intertwined– of the American West, an arrangement that provides my work with credibility and a global vision. That is why the two demand an independent chapter. Last, the three volumes of *Wyoming Stories* are dealt with together, not only to illustrate the lives of characters in conjunction or disjunction with landscape but to reinforce the idea that Proulx is dealing with the new non-linear, dynamic concept of the American West, a reading that Campbell suggests through the concept of affective critical regionality.

Formally, this dissertation follows accurately the guidelines of commonly used MLA formatting style as a framework for consistency throughout the whole document, with attention to the new 9th edition¹ guidelines. This refers to the discourse, citations and references, as an attempt to emphasize brevity and clarity. MLA discourages extensive use of explanatory or digressive notes, however, I still have opted to use footnotes, although I have truthfully tried to keep them to a minimum.

¹ I have followed the guidelines in MLA's 9th edition as suggested by two bookmarked websites. On the one hand, the official MLA website -<https://style.mla.org/>- has offered comprehensive explanations whenever a doubt arose; on the other, I have frequently consulted and followed the comprehensive page that the University of Purdue offers to students and researchers, including a very helpful citing generator: owl.purdue.edu/owl

Chapter 2. Contextualization

The old man loaded up everything that he owned
On a wagon and headed out West
The old woman fearlessly faced the unknown
'Cause she figured he knew what was best
And they settled down hard on a government grant
With six mouths to feed and forty acres to plant
And the rain came down
Like an angel come down from above
And the rain came down
It'll wash you away and there ain't never enough

–Steve Earle, *The Rain Came Down*

The present chapter establishes the main guidelines of this dissertation. First, I include an introduction on the author that will try to steer away from just a plain and linear biography available today anywhere online. The point of those biographical notes is to establish a direct relationship between Annie Proulx's life and whereabouts and her methodology in completing her fiction. This peculiar literary lifestyle –never getting actively involved in the communities where she lives– makes her narrative unique and yet detached from personal affection or sentimentality. Another point is made with her process of extensive research for her subjects –landscape (the American West), characters, language–, which comes directly from her background in history research during her college years. The next section is devoted to the tight relationship between

Annie Proulx and nature, her involvement with nonfiction nature writers such as Barry Lopez and Wendell Berry, as well as her clear standpoint towards environment. At this point one of the interpretive tools for examining the corpus of this dissertation is presented.

Following that, an obvious but no less important segment discusses Proulx's relationship with landscape and the American West. Here, references to her attachment to and her concern for the West are joined by her differential envisioning of the region, which I argue is closer to post-Western positions than traditional or fixed visions of that West. The second tool in the critical framework is explained here: how studies of the American West join ecocriticism to analyze Annie Proulx's fiction in this dissertation. Last, the final section deals with a justification for the choice of fiction –the corpus– for this dissertation and the proceedings in which to carry on about it.

All the above will be reflected in the chapters devoted to the corpus' analysis. There, Annie Proulx's literary methodology of writing, her attachment to nature and the West and the critical framework selected for the examination, will all come together and organically unify, with the aim of reflecting what her vision of the Western landscape – human, urban, natural– ultimately conveys.

2.1 On Annie Proulx: Research and Eavesdropping

After the success of director Ang Lee's motion picture adaptation of Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1999), Proulx's name and work has been appraised as synonymous with the notion of breaking with traditional assumptions about the

American West, as a number of scholars and critics recognize: “Rather than offering idealized heroes or solutions, Annie Proulx presents a lyrical documentation of the resilience of this overly mythologized lands, despite man’s continual attempts at its conquest” (Abele 115); or “Proulx achieves a de-mythologizing of the West” (Varvogli 30); or “It is not a glamorous view of the West [...] It is a West whose only debt to mythology is its burdensome weight” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 12); or “Proulx is deliberately holding up conventional images (of the Western identity) with an eye toward scrutinizing their truth and offering more accurate revisions in their place” (Ryden, “Corpse” 82). These are just some examples. Reviewers of her works –not always enthusiastic– in literary magazines or global newspapers also refer to her West in terms as “a West that is a touch more colorful than the one you and me inhabit” (Shank); or “a happy book of stories about the American West, something John Wayne would be proud of, would be an outright lie” (Maury); or “a harsh and silly place” (Rafferty). Again, these are only a few of the many features that some journalists formulate when reviewing her work. Regardless of their level of accuracy, all together they unconsciously make the –starting– point that Annie Proulx’s West is not the conventional one. She has described the proliferation of many different Wests, and the destabilization of the status quo that manifests itself in various ways: challenging the story of the cowboy hero, women in control of Western stories and mythmaking, homosexuals happily settled on the prairie, and extractionist capitalism replaced by communal dreams of an ecosocial ideal. She has also called attention to a kind of nature-minded fiction that so intimately explores ethical drives and philosophical landscapes, that it is inviting to examine just how closely this fiction is allied with the nature-writing genre. Her characters are constantly confronted with and subjected to a landscape –often, but not always, rural– that is far removed from

traditional myths and assumptions. The relationship between landscape, place and human beings is the matrix from which all her narratives depart.

Annie Proulx has confided to a number of journalists from different media that all her writing begins with a landscape: "Place is where it all starts," she often states (Proulx "Imagination"). She starts her writing process by getting to know a place: its biology, geology, and all the intricacies of ecological interconnection, on which her inquiring eye temporarily resides. She accomplishes this through intensive and extensive research. Proulx had built up a solid reputation as a researcher before devoting herself to fiction, at the age of 53. When *Heart Songs* (1988), her first short-story collection was published, she had already written a number of how-to-books in order to make a living, and she had held down a variety of jobs (Rood 3). During that time, she perfected her old historian college habit of researching by analyzing her subject—quite often nature—in detail, thus establishing a solid relationship with it. Her personal process of research and nomadism shapes her fiction and the effect that it has on the narrative process. The manner in which Proulx renders her palette of landscapes, the way in which she blends characters within those landscapes, and her obsessive attention to detail all go back to the manner in which she learned to acquire her knowledge of her subjects: "in making the leap from being a historian trained in *Annales* school to a fiction writer obsessed with regional cultures and landscapes, Proulx's nonfiction writing was excellent preparation" (Hunt, "Insistence" 5).

It would not be an exaggeration then to affirm that everything in Proulx's narrative stems from research. Even though this is a technique widely used by contemporary authors, in Proulx this *modus operandi* is taken to the extreme. Her research is both intensive and obsessive. This might very well be the definition of her working process.

Before publishing *Heart Songs* –a compilation of stories previously published separately in 1988– at the age of fifty-three, as I have already mentioned, she had already built a solid research background. Her habit of researching down to the last detail was acquired in her college years, while she was doing doctoral work in Renaissance economic history, although she never finished her doctoral degree, as she had to support a family of three sons and move to a rural place near the Canadian border to live “like a latter-day Henry Thoreau” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 2). She has repeatedly explained that during graduate school she was attracted to the French Annales school of history, “which pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and craft techniques, the development of technologies” (Proulx, *Missouri*). Annales historians look for the evolution of everyday life in the context of larger social, economic and even geological change rather than focusing on the narrow definition of history as a record of the activities of the alleged great men. In her literature, she replicates this pattern as she is “keenly interested in situations of change, both personal and social” (Rood 3) and her focus on individuals living in periods of major social and economic upheaval –of which *Postcards* is a clear example– verifies the extent to which her academic training has shaped the course of her career as a novelist. It is in these situations of change on which the bulk of this thesis will lean, as it will be fully developed later on. In her online autobiography, she confirms that “all this was invaluable training for novel-writing and it set my approach to fiction forever, the examination of the lives of individuals against the geography and *longue durée* of events, that is, that time and place are major determining factors in human life” (Proulx, *online biography*), and she has repeatedly declared that she was a historian

before she was a writer, as well as a free-lance journalist, writing how-to books to support herself.

Proulx's eagerness for research and her fascination for detail were initially developed at the beginning of her literary non-fiction career, when she wrote a number of articles on such varied subjects as fishing, apples, cider making, hot peppers, canoeing techniques and syrup making, for magazines such as *Gourmet*, *Horticulture*, *Outdoor Life*, *National Wildlife*, *Gray's Sporting Journal* and *Country Journal* (Rood 4). She also wrote a number of books on apple cider, growing grapes, dairy foods or fence-building. Rood argues that all this non-fiction, which Proulx now rejects² offers the historical perspective that she often brings to her subjects, as we repeatedly find detailed stories of the cider, the dairy, birds, accordion tuning techniques, boat-making, trapping or fence-building (Rood 9). Proulx has always admitted that her academic background has been instrumental in the research that goes into her fiction: "It became second nature to me to explore how and where things were done," she states, and what is displayed in her literature is the result of "serious academic hours in libraries and archives and an inborn curiosity about life" (Proulx, "Imagination"). Through her obsession for detail, we learn about her knowledge of fly-fishing, canoeing, and bird hunting in *Heart Songs* or *Close Range*, for example, while a lot of historical research comes to the surface in *Postcards* and *Accordion Crimes*.

When analyzing her writing style, many critics praise this wealth of detail, although a few others are critical of this fascination for accuracy. Rood gives the example of how she reflects the changes in cooking over history in her books to refer to her fascination

² Rood explains that Proulx now dismisses those books, even though they are in demand by collectors, as they came from assignments "for hire that she wrote to earn money" (Rood 5). There is no mention to them in her online autobiography. It is interesting to mention that Proulx won a Garden Writers of America prize in 1986.

with these important aspects of everyday life as a key element that adds depth to characterization. One cannot imagine anyone writing the detailed account of how an accordion is made on the first page of *Accordion Crimes* without a great deal of background research:

He had cut the grille with a jeweler's saw from a sheet of brass, worked a design of peacocks and olive leaves. The hasps and escutcheons that fastened the bellows frames of the case ends, the brass screws, the zinc reed plate, the delicate axle, the reeds themselves, of steel, and the ages Circassian walnut for the case, he had purchased all these. But he had constructed and fashioned the rest: the V-shaped wire springs with their curled eyes that lay under the keys and returned them to position in the wake of stamping fingers, the palette rods. The trenched bellows, the leather valves and gaskets, the skidded kidskin gussets, the palette covers, all of these were from a kid whose throat he has cut, whose hide he had tanned with ash lime, brains and tallow. (Proulx, *Accordion Crimes* 17)

Research on accordions for *Accordion Crimes* became a challenge: "There were no books on accordions available," she complained (Proulx qtd. in Smith), so she turned to oral traditions after not finding much in libraries and traveled extensively all over Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana to learn as much as she was able to on accordions:

I wanted to hear the tapes they had. There they've done a huge project on taping all of the musicians over a period of five years, so I listened to a lot of those tapes, not just the music [...] We went to some of the most outrageous dance halls you can imagine places where she found all of these musicians. We went to a strange rundown place where you almost fell through the floor, and the music was just romping, it was incredible [...] For several years I dropped in on dances and everywhere. It was

actually a great deal of fun to do the research. (Proulx at John Adams 1996³)

Even though research proved hard and long, it was ultimately fruitful and didactic. Graeme Smith insists on this aspect when discussing Proulx's musicology: "In *The Shipping News* she instructs the reader on such matters as thwarts and gunwales. Similarly, in *Accordion Crimes*, she captures her obsessiveness with accordion makers and players in her fastidious descriptions of constructions and tuning technologies" (Smith). In his review for *The Adelaide Review*, Kerry Goldsworthy goes even further when reviewing *That Old Ace in the Hole* by stressing the fact that it is detail from research that eventually reflects the power of the narrative: "Proulx is fascinated by the way that the density of material detail can reveal the history and culture of a place – cooking, windmills, music, weather" (Goldsworthy).

That same didactic tone can be found in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, one of the main texts examined in this dissertation, where the reader realizes the amount of research on plastic jewelry and related materials:

Within specialties there are often subsets of rare specialties, and so it was with Bromo Redpoll and Tam Bapp. Bromo had collected a dozen phenol parasol handles with fancy metal bands. Tam sought out the British urea resin from the 1920s known as Beetleware –the forerunner of melamine. Silicone, polyurethane, epoxy were what they wanted but

³ I am using three sources from three long talks by Annie Proulx that can be found and accessed online. Two of them took place at the Amsterdam John Adams Institute, a relevant and very active European institution devoted to the study and promotion of American culture and art by giving voice to artists and writers. In their website they describe themselves as "an independent podium for American culture in the Netherlands," offering a Transcontinental cultural bridge between Europe and the U.S. The Institute claims to "have brought the best and brightest American thinking from the fields of literature, politics, history and technology." (Source: www.john-adams.nl). Annie Proulx was invited twice, in 1996 and in 1999, on behalf of the publishing of *Postcards* and *Close Range*. A similar type of source is included referring to Annie Proulx's recent visit to the New York Public Library on 6 October 2020, after her latest essay book *Fen Bog & Swamp: A Shot History of Peatland Destruction and Its Role in the Climate Crisis* (2022). I am using an identical quoting form when referring to these three sources by using "at" and the corresponding year.

never would they buy anything for more than a few dollars. A side specialty was Bakelite jewelry from the 1920s. (Proulx, *Ace* 19)

This research has been the object of discussion, considered in terms of literary result or accuracy. Howard Norman, in his review of *The Shipping News*, agrees that Proulx is not “showy” in that sense, although he describes *The Shipping News* as “almost an encyclopedia of slang and lore. The way her Newfoundlanders talk, the most factual account seems as high-spirited as gossip over a supper of snow crab, cod cheeks, lobster salad and seal-flipper stew” (Norman). The book has not escaped controversy, especially in Newfoundland. In his analysis of *The Shipping News*, Newfoundland scholar Stuart Pierson acknowledges but criticizes her research and the deliberate use of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (DNE):

But the book that one meets on every page is the DNE. Proulx loves words, and especially she loves archaic words with abrupt consonants in them –stokawn, scuddy, taggled, pecked, squiddy, komatik, slindeer. All carefully cleaned from the DNE. But she does this rather mechanically, without taking into account the nature of the DNE, how it was compiled or how it stands in relation to how people speak. It is as though everyone who lives in Killick-Claw has all the entries in the DNE ready to hand. (Pierson 152)

He concludes by describing the book as “a musky portrayal of Newfoundland” (Pierson 152). It is interesting to note that the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* became Proulx’s night-table reading during the whole process of writing the novel, as a key part of her methodology (Varvogli 12).

Proulx expounds this methodology as a part of a standard operating procedure that she seems to replicate with each of her novels. As she relates in *The Missouri Review*,

I spend a year or two on research and I begin with the place and what happened there *before* I fill notebooks with drawings and descriptions of rocks, water, people, names. I study photographs. From place come the characters, the way things happen, the story itself. For the sake of architecture, of balance, I write the ending first and then go to the beginning. (Proulx, *Missouri*)

In the same interview, she admits that she devotes long periods of time to it, and confesses that her approach to research is “my main pleasure. Since geography and climate are intensely interesting to me, much time goes into the close examination of specific reasons” (Proulx, *Missouri*). Later, she supplies an endless list of sources where she finds that information, a common feature in most books:

I read manuals of work and repair, books of manners, dictionaries of slang, city directories, lists of occupational titles, geology, regional weather, botanists’ plant guides, local histories, newspapers. I visit graveyards, collapsing cotton gins, photograph barns and houses, roadways. I listen to ordinary people speaking to one another in bars, stores, Laundromats. I read bulletin boards, scraps of paper I pick up from the ground. I paint landscapes because staring very hard at a place for twenty to thirty minutes and putting it on paper burns detail into the mind as no amount of scribbling can do. (Proulx, *Missouri*)

The final stage of Proulx’s “established obsessive researched method of working” (Edemariam) consists of squeezing the vast material accumulated. For the most part, the numerous interviews, painted landscapes, lists of names from phonebooks and the large number of photographs result in a sentence or short paragraph. Sometimes this amount of research still proves insufficient for her purposes, as in the case of *That Old Ace in the Hole*, for which she was carrying out a study of windmills. She was trying to characterize

a windmill repairman as the protagonist, and she would rather give a story a different twist than venture to write about something of which she does not have proficient knowledge (Proulx, "Abiding"). In this particular case, she admits to a case of overindulging by filling up boxes of eventually unused material. These boxes are undoubtedly heaped up together on her cherished "project shelves" (Steinberg), waiting to be carefully and accurately used in a story or narrative still to come.

In short, this is the first characteristic to examine Proulx as a writer and perceive how her writing is linked to her life. This was the aim of this section, not just to present a standard biography that can be found anywhere. This connection of literature and life unfolds into the two different approaches that I present here: Proulx's life is equally and intimately linked with specific landscapes and the American West, as the next chapter shows.

Language is another distinguishable element in Annie Proulx's research, since the representation of regional and local speech is one of the main features of her prose. She often connects geography with language, through study and observation. She carries it out as a very conscious action that has become another act in the libretto of the methodology just described. As stated, when immersed in the writing of *The Shipping News*, Proulx virtually slept next to the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* during the time in which she was writing the novel. She makes use of reference books as well as telephone directories, although her most powerful tool is perhaps her hearing and her habit of making herself unnoticed. It is something that she has learned and improved throughout the years:

The attention to local patois and regional turns of phrase is second nature at this point. When I hear a vigorous and lively phrase I write it

down or try very hard to remember it. I do keep notebooks of phrases and expressions. When I'm working on the text of the novel, I go through these lists and try and incorporate words and phrases one might hear. (Proulx, "Abiding")

This is how she fine-tunes the language to each area. *The Shipping News* is soaked in Newfoundland English, just as Wyoming English is prevalent in *Close Range* and the Texas drawl in *That Old Ace in the Hole*. The range is no less than splendid in *Accordion Crimes*, an encyclopedia of immigrant English dialect variations. Proulx transcribes the vernacular directly, keeping grammatical errors for the purpose of characterization.

Language research goes much further than the study and direct transcription of regional speech. The use of the different levels of language is another technique at which Proulx is adept. In *The Shipping News*, for example, she makes use of newspaper articles, commercial letters, traditional folk songs and dialogues on boat building or children's vocabulary. This handgrip on various linguistic levels appears in *Postcards* at the beginning of each chapter. The opening postcards mirror not just the semantic, but also the phonological skills of the people who write them, thus creating a chronological social picture: the postcards from protagonist Loyal to his family are full of grammatical mistakes and his handwriting is nearly unintelligible, whereas the ones from companies are neatly and correctly typewritten, and family postcards are familiar in tone.

The use of non-linguistic elements is another feature that comes directly from research and has an immediate influence on the formal aspects of the narrative, either as a characterization device, a means of filling in missing parts in the story, or as relevant elements in the structure. They appear notably in her first three novels—although not in *That Old Ace in the Hole* or any of the Wyoming volumes— and they are placed at the beginning of each chapter or section, functioning as a necessary narrative ingredient.

They have been carefully chosen, studied and analyzed. All the chapters in *Postcards*, for instance, open with a print of the back of a postcard with information that helps the reader fill in the blanks, a relevant feature widely discussed in the analysis. The chapters in *The Shipping News* are launched by printed knots with their name and explanation, taken directly from *The Ashley Book of Knots*, *The Mariner's Dictionary*, and *Quipus and Witches' Knots*. Apart from narrating a part of the story, they also “knot” it, and tie it together. In the same way, the eight sections of *Accordion Crimes* are introduced by a print of an accordion, together with its name, and the evolution of the instrument throughout the whole 20th century.

Proulx’s extensive acknowledgments at the beginning of her books reveal the relationship between each of her works and the type of research carried out –scope, length, location– and directly invite the reader to examine and question the investigative process that the writer has carried out in the pursuit of her subject matter. These long lists of greetings and recognitions also allow the reader to see the exact junction where knowledge meets imagination and creativity in the literature of Annie Proulx. Writing these endless lists of acknowledgments is a practice more associated with academic and other non-fictional works, even though some writers do thank editors, institutions or family members (Varvogli 13), something that might very well have its origin in her academic background. The list of resources is often overwhelming. In *Postcards*, for instance, Proulx expresses gratitude to librarians in Wyoming and New Hampshire. In *The Shipping News* there is a mention of the Coast Guard Search and Rescue Unit, a member from the Horticultural Society Library who “confirmed some obscure

horticultural references” (Proulx, *The Shipping News*)⁴, as well as fishermen, loggers, and people that she met and talked to in Newfoundland.

The list is even longer in *Accordion Crimes*, where the four-page acknowledgments include musicians, scholars, librarians, bookstores, accordion makers, storytellers, hotel clerks and waiters. In *That Old Ace in the Hole*, after a three-page list of acknowledgments –ranchers, managers, publishers, workers, mothers and daughters, haymakers, wardens, artists and cockfight participants– she humorously closes with a “that about does it” (Proulx, *Ace* xii). Those pages do not only testify to the extensive research carried out, which she describes as “pleasurable finds,” but they also explain the road that she has taken in fiction writing as opposed to the write-about-what-you-know approach. She finds this “a constipated, navel-picking approach to the world that does not encourage growth of the imagination. Use your imagination. That’s all writers have got. In a very awful way, this demand that you write about your own experience is to ask you to smother what’s genuinely interesting about you and your mind and how it works” (Proulx, “Imagination”), as she told Katie Bolick in an interview for *The Atlantic Online*. In another one with Ellen Kanner, she repeats herself, remarking “The worse piece of advice given to young writers is to write about what you know. What folly, what nonsense! Use your imagination. That’s all writers have got” (Proulx qtd. in Kanner). Proulx insists on research as one of the necessary tools in composing literature, and she is contemptuous of “this very unpleasant trend that one should only write about one’s own personal experience. That’s the worst piece of advice ever given to students. If only people would write about what intrigues them, what they *don’t* know, would do a little

⁴ This is coming from the acknowledgments, which are not paginated.

research, would become questioning as well as observant. That's the pleasure in writing" (Steinberg). This is precisely the genesis of her work and the essence of her methodology.

Thus, rather than dwelling on familiar territory, Proulx prefers to go somewhere new and write about what she finds. Once she had *Heart Songs* published in 1988, and she was able to devote herself to writing, she started to travel in search for her subjects.

The acclaimed *The Shipping News* (1993) emerged out of a fishing trip to the region:

In 1988 I had gone on a fishing trip to Newfoundland with my old friend [...] Tom Watkin. He disliked the island but I was stunned by the place (I have a habit of falling immediately and deeply in love with places) and experienced a visceral excitement quite inexplicable. Within hours of landing at Port aux Basques the idea for the novel *The Shipping News* was in my head. Over the next two years I made 10 trips to Newfoundland's Great Northern Pacific to do research for that book. (Proulx, *online biography*)

Traveling research has not stopped ever since. "In 1993 and '94 I travelled extensively in California, Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming, Quebec, Louisiana and Texas doing research for *Accordion Crimes*" (Proulx, *online biography*), she points out, to clarify the extensive material in the novel that comes from research⁵. After moving to Wyoming in 1993 – where she lived for fourteen years– she drove cross-country "several times to catch the unfolding of the landscape" (Proulx qtd. in Rood 7). A "pattern" was thus established:

⁵*The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature*, at the New York Public Library, is the repository of "The Annie Proulx Papers 1935-2010 (Bulk 1980-2007)." The catalogue alone –which I was able to download directly from the NY Library website– consists of 211 pages, which catalogs in detail a lot more material than just documents. Carefully organized in 344 boxes, this interesting and massive collection includes an endless array of not just manuscripts but a considerable amount of extra material, some of which has been used in her unequivocal process of research: drafts, computer printouts, computer disks, cassettes, personal correspondence, unused drafts, economic statements, audio cassettes, contracts with publishers and producers, notebooks, house plans, her awards, fliers and programs for miscellaneous author events, fliers, vases, press clippings, cover mock-ups and sketches, promotional posters, paintings, screenplays, and –among an array of other material– thousands of research files.

“The pattern of research was established for me by now (a slow drift through the territory under examination taking notes, photographs, reading regional papers, books, hiking the terrain, studying maps and where the local money comes from” (Proulx, *online biography*). As a Wyoming resident, she traveled thoroughly to research for *Wyoming Stories*, which “demonstrate the depth to which she has come to understand her new home and its history (Rood 9). To write *That Old Ace in the Hole*, she traveled to the Texas panhandle a number of times, eventually getting her second residence.

These permanent wanderings clearly illustrate the connection between research and nomadism, and this might be the right moment to explore that link, not in order to provide a theoretical framework for this investigation, but to connect her compulsion for research with the habit of traveling back and forth to the places that she writes about, and to situate her in the perspective of her relationship with region. Even though the concepts of region and regionalism are main concepts and will be discussed later in the contextual section, it is worth at this point to refer broadly to two main groups of writers that could be classified or grouped according to their nomadism or moving around, so as to illustrate Annie Proulx’s narrative technique and how her stories stem from the landscapes that she inhabits.

Traditionally, regional American writers have always written about what they know best, their environment. There are countless examples from the past: William Faulkner’s Lafayette County, Mark Twain’s Mississippi, and John Steinbeck’s Salinas, California are among the most famed. Twain claimed that the writer should only write about the place that he was from (Wonham 26) as only the native writer was able to offer a rigorous description of his intimate relationship with his country, soul, speech or thought. Literary creativity, according to Twain, depends on the subconscious accumulation of the local

knowledge: the author is more competent when observing his own people (Wonham 26). In *What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us* (1899) he referred to it with the term “absorption:” “years and years of unconscious absorption; years and years of intercourse with the life concerned; of living it, indeed; sharing personally in its shames and prides, its joys and griefs, its loves and hates” (Twain qtd. in Wonham 26). Wonham argues that Twain himself did not exactly commit to his theory, as he successfully published travel books and frequently used foreign settings in his fiction. This traditional theoretical compromise with a local perspective defines initial American regionalism in its own context, but it certainly does not seem to explain the road taken by a myriad of authors in the contemporary literature who write about specific places without committing to any of them. Sven Birkerts explains how, in the second half of the 20th century, American society shifted from cities to the outskirts and conversely writers clearly reflected that move in both their lives and their works. Birkerts argues that the necessary revision of this literary tradition is due to the “ubiquity and instantaneousness of electronic communications” (20), which has made not only people, but also writers transmute into multiregional nomads.

Very few American writers today spend their life in one place, and not being part of a community is their standard status, replicating the moving habits of their fellow nationals⁶. Richard Ford, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Paul Auster, Richard Powers and Annie Proulx are prominent and permanent examples, although some of them seem to have finally settled at an older age, like Annie Proulx herself back in New England. Among

⁶ According to data from the U. S. census Bureau, average individual in the U. S. moves residence 11.7 times in his or her lifetime, making the U. S. one of the most geographically mobile countries in the world, if compared to Europe, for instance, which is roughly 4 times in a lifetime. The reports explain it in both economic and cultural terms. I am only using this data to illustrate how mobility is part of the American ethos, from which writers are not an exception. Sources: <https://www.census.gov> and <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/10/us-geographic-mobility/504968/>

these, Birkerts distinguishes two opposite trends. One group of writers portrays a homogenous image of America, obliterating particularity and geographic rootedness, a group which would include postmodern writers DeLillo, Auster and David Foster Wallace. These generally illustrate an America with a “dissolution of the immediacies of place” (Birkerts 20) and in which places no longer seem unique, as large areas have come to feel identical. This out-of-homeness homogeneity is best depicted in Midwestern towns, suburban areas or parking lots that could very well be anywhere in America. It is a common feature that Kowalewski calls “postmodern Planet Reebok world of convenience,” also described as “the geography of nowhere” (“Contemporary” 12). Ray Suarez gives the striking example of a person who has been kidnapped but not blindfolded: if he escaped, he could tell the police very little about the surroundings precisely because of this homogeneity (qtd. in Kowalewski, “Contemporary” 12). It seems that Americans have grown numb to the uniqueness of both rural and urban landscapes, while communities have become “commodities to be purchased rather than entities to be created through collective effort” (Kowalewski, “Contemporary” 12), with look-alike suburbs and corporate superstores that are equally present in both American life and fiction, a “walmarted” America that will be referred in my analysis of Proulx’s work.

On the other hand, contemporary literary regionalism –specific writers whose work is connected to a specific region– has focused for instance on the South, New England, the Pacific and West Coast or the American West. Kowalewski reminds us how most major regions around the country now “boast” important research centers where regional literary festivals, conferences, or authors readings are held (“Contemporary” 9). The movement involves relevant publishing companies, university departments,

Hollywood actors and nationally acclaimed musicians from different genres. To top it off, guides and literary histories have been published, proving that the field is alive and well.

Annie Proulx unmistakably falls into the the first category of writers, those who are captivated by the uniqueness of a place, but who travel and move to track down their subjects, even though the analysis will show that she goes far beyond the label of regionalist writer. She has made of her nomadism a *modus operandi* as well as the physical point of departure for her fiction and claims to be a “writer of many regions” (Proulx qtd. in Edemariam). In the influential travel book *Roads: Driving America’s Greatest Highways* (2001), Proulx’s friend and Western writer Larry McMurtry⁷ distinguishes as well two interesting kinds of traveling writers. Those who travel the back roads and those who –like himself– prefer the interstates:

Annie Proulx has been known to travel as much as two thousand miles around the American west using only the *dirt* roads. These are real achievements, but achievements I have no desire to emulate. I intend to travel mainly on the great roads, the interstates. [...] It may be that Annie Proulx and William Least Heat Moon are successfully –if a little masochistically– in probing America’s heartlands. I salute them but that’s not what I want to do. (McMurtry 12-13)

A “masochism” that, in Proulx is closely allied to her research. She adds herself to the ample concept of regional writer: “Although the phrase ‘landscape writer’ does not mean much, to call someone a regional writer carries a certain weight. In one sense we mean a writer who uses and describes the physical landscape to make a fictional world *meaningful*. A regional writer is also someone whose work is identified with a specific

⁷Larry McMurtry’s friendship with Annie Proulx was relevant to become the co-author of the script for *Brokeback Mountain*, as well as his “proclaimed scourge of the mythical West (hence his suitability)” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 11).

place" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 8). That specific place may vary or stay the same. Furthermore, she points out at a relevant category that has more to do with cultural landscapes and that confronts mainstream fiction: "There is another category of regional literature –the collective work of a number of writers who represent a particular culture or ethnic ethos as opposed to the main culture. Sometimes this literature springs from a specific cultural enclave –as in John Fante, William Saroyan and Sandra Cisneros– or it may exist in scattered fragments" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 9). What is clear, according to her own words, is that she is genuinely uninterested in traditional approaches to region: "The poor cousin of landscape writing and regional writing is local color. Decorative is the keyword here the descriptions illustrate the story but do not move it along" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 9). Place, landscape or region, she believes, are central to the narrative, a fundamental piece in the composition of all her works.

In this light, Annie Proulx conforms to the type of itinerant writers who offer a response to traditional or "vulgar" distinctiveness, that is, assumptions, preconceptions, myths and overdone stereotypes on the landscape –mostly, but not only the American West– by creating "ne'er-do-well anti-heroes who are unlikely to appear in brochures from the Wyoming Visitors' Bureau" (Kowalewski, "Losing" 253). She makes this distinction very clear when recounting her travels to the Texas Panhandle. For *That Old Ace in the Hole*, she was told "the panhandle? God I just drive through there as fast as I can," in dismissive tones," what made her more interested in panhandles, and finally "decided to write a novel set in the Oklahoma and Texas handles" (Proulx, "Abiding").

Not every critic or reviewer seems to get the point when confronted with a different perspective of the American landscape, as the numerous examples in the analysis will show. Many still misread Proulx's dismissal of the rancid regionalism that

reclines on a melancholy for a landscape that never existed, which is the old preconceived myth about the American West. In her review of Richard Avedon's photographic essay *In the American West* (2005), Proulx speaks from the critics' corner of the ring, vehemently defending Avedon's work against some of those traditionally-minded Western residents who did not like the series, due to their predetermined images and ideas on the American Western landscape:

These touchy people did not see the stern beauty in the portraits. They did see the dirt and the unsmiling faces. Avedon's work was called vicious, sick, sensational, cruel, by people who did not understand anything beyond photography than that it was representational. They did not get it that they were seeing Avedon's observations rather than likenesses, art rather than tourism photos. (Proulx, "After the Gold Rush")

In the same article, she verifies that she knows the subjects very well, as it has been explained before:

Most of the people here are those who do the worst and hardest work, the common labouring hands of the country. They are as they came from work, encrusted with the detritus of their jobs. We see a menu-card of ages and shapes, the subjects' scars, lank, greasy hair, tattoos, fluffy girlie hair. Many are scraped and scratched, one-armed and mangled, if not by job-related accidents, then by tough lives in tough places. (Proulx, "After the Gold Rush")

Proulx defends here the local that she experiences first-hand, not what she just sees as a keen observer but as a resident who discerns both the hardship and the dignity. She closes the same piece on Avedon underscoring again not the unseen but the rejected: "Very little has changed today. Flames of resentment flare when the region is portrayed

as anything but down-home, clean, decent, pioneer-spirited whatever. As one elderly rancher put it a few years ago, “reality has never been much use out here.” Avedon’s images will be powerful a century after John Wayne has become as quaint as a butter firkin” (Proulx, “After the Gold Rush”). She writes that openly dismissing prejudiced clichés that still exist among a part of the mainly white-Anglo population of the American West.

Annie Proulx has traveled extensively inside and outside the United States – Vermont, the Middle East, Newfoundland, the Texas Panhandle or Wyoming, in addition to Europe– and has attempted to filter the singularity and the concept of awareness and sense of place of different communities in her stories. In a 1999 interview with Ellen Kanner, Proulx described herself as a “professional outsider” (Proulx qtd. in Kanner) to explain some of the intricacies of her writing method, while maintaining that writers should not write about what they know, but experience life before they commence to write, which in my view is her idea of what a writer should be: a wide-open-eyed roving nomad. Richard Lacayo singles Proulx out as a different type of nomad: “Not content to be confined in one place, she’s that odd literary bird, an itinerant regionalist, a writer who moves from one locale to another but in each setting nests until she makes it her own” (Lacayo), and compares her to James Michener in terms of predisposed mobility. At an evening reading in 1999, she was asked whether she moved to any of the numerous communities that she wrote about in *Accordion Crimes*, her answer was clear: “Why would I have to do that? No, I didn’t. It’s enough to visit and use your eyes and ears, to observe very sharply” (Proulx qtd. in Morris).

Her trips to Newfoundland prior to *The Shipping News* are another relevant example of her itinerancy as a part of her research. Sara Rimer, who interviewed Proulx

in her Vermont home in 1994 for *The New York Times*, explains how Proulx traveled to Newfoundland at least nine times, “camping or bunking in bed and breakfasts. She hung out in kitchens and boatyards, listening and getting a feel for the place,” where “meeting people was as easy as breathing, and she never felt shy about hanging around” (Rimer). Another part of being a professional outsider is, in her own words, that she is “at an age where I can be invisible. Nobody notices older women. It’s assumed that they’re just there (Rimer). This habit of not being seen is something for which she has a liking:

This is great, this is great! Especially when your main desire in life is to find out things and overhear. I can sit in a diner or a cruddy little restaurant halfway across the country, and there will be people in the booth next to me, and because I’m a woman of a certain age they’ll say anything as if no one were there. People will say absolutely outrageous, incredible things. I once overheard people talking about killing someone. (Proulx qtd. in Rimer)

To research for *Postcards*, she went back and forth across America, stopping in all the states where the protagonist worked or stayed. She told Sybil Steinberg that “that was my road book” (Proulx qtd. in Steinberg 58) of invisible eavesdropping, and it has also proved useful when traveling for research. She listened to locals in diners, bars and cafés, “absorbing the ambience of the mostly harsh environs” (Jeremy).

Her nomadic lifestyle surprises her at times, and in unexpected ways. It might suggest new turns in the story or help to complete it. While she was traveling across Wyoming and researching for *Bad Dirt*—attempting to illustrate attitudes, behaviors, and character types— she decided to write a story about homophobia, so she included “Brokeback Mountain” in the collection. She figured out that the best way to do it would be

through telling the stories of two men who loved each other but were themselves so infected with homophobia that nothing could ever happen. Then, too, I'd been going to a lot of ranches and there's always, at a ranch, some old guy, who stands back, keeps to himself, very quiet, very competent, never married, always alone, always watching the younger guys, not in a lascivious or lustful way, but just watching them. After I'd seen my tenth old guy at the back of the corral I began to wonder what it must have been like for a ranch kid who grew up in this kind of world who was gay. (Proulx qtd. in Morris)

This "professional outsider" has been invariably on the road, even though in recent years she has slowed down a little. She has a home, of course, from where she writes once she has researched and traveled. She has recently moved back East, after living in Port Townsend, Seattle, "a place that is more irritating to me than anything else" (Rock), as she admitted in an interview. Proulx does not get involved in the communities that she writes about nor does she set roots. Kanner states that she "writes from the outside looking in." Vermont first, then Wyoming and Seattle for a while have been her literary hideouts, some of the places that she might have called home, yet:

I do not become involved in the communities I'm writing about. I look. I watch. I invent. I listen. But I do not become part of that community. I can never be part of that community. I move on to the next thing. I'm literally rootless and rolling on. I have no permanent place that's mine, many writers do but I am not one of them, and I am a professional outsider. It's that simple. So there are no ceremonies and no tears of regret; there's always another place, and that's where my heart is.⁸
(Morris)

⁸ In 2006, she finally built Bird Cloud, the house that she designed in the middle of nowhere, in a land that she bought off the Nature Conservancy in Wyoming. In *Bird Cloud: A Memoir* (2011) she describes the painstaking two-year building progress of that "dream home," as well as a history of the lands where it stands, its archaeology, the weather, and, interestingly, turning the focus on herself, she explains how she came to live there "with shelves with shelves for thousands of books and long worktables on which to heap manuscripts, research materials, and maps" as Simon & Schuster describes on their official website. Source: <https://www.simonandschuster.com>

Her academic training and hours in libraries have resulted in a literary identity that Mark Asquith describes as a persisting “character creation is her own literary persona, which emerges as the product of careful mediation between author, publisher and journalists” (*Lost Frontier 2*). Perhaps is this unusual combination that provides Annie Proulx with a particular drive to a distinctive voice when submitting her vision on landscape, nature and the American West.

2.2 Annie Proulx and the Ecocritical Perspective

This section deals with the theoretical approach that this dissertation will undertake in order to carry out an in-depth exploration of the “Western” literature of Annie Proulx, namely the corpus described above. To do so, the theoretical framework that I propose stems in a way directly from her fiction, that is to say, from her focus on nature and the studies of place, specifically the American West. On the one hand, the alliance of her fiction with the natural world and the focus that she exerts, I would argue, on its malady, not only allow but somehow compel a reading from the point of view of ecocriticism. Such a perspective seems highly suitable, as it is closely related to regional perspectives and often approached in an interdisciplinary manner. Numerous authors and scholars have revised her fiction from this standpoint, thus proposing readings that align her creative imagination to non-fiction nature writers such as Barry Lopez or Wendell Berry to name a few. Dan Flores describes her as an “environmental historian” in his essay on *Red Desert: The History of a Place* (197), in which he praises her “recognition, even love [...] and possibly some kind of conservation” (Flores 199) towards the place. Together

with her regular presence in scholarly work, more commercial revisions of her work – press reviews, publisher releases– underscore the natural dimension of her narrative.

I will start by introducing the field of ecocriticism in a general way, with a brief chronological history, followed by a full description of the ecocritical tools to be used in the corpus analysis. That point will specifically deal with the instrumental concepts for this investigation, namely Scott Slovic’s ideas of “conjunction” and “disjunction” (Slovic, *Seeking* 137), crossed with the concepts of “pilgrims” and “improvers” that Barry Lopez refers to, based on how characters enter the distinct landscapes –I alluded to them above. They essentially refer to how individuals enter the landscapes, and how, in exchange, the landscape –urban, rural, natural, imaginary– turns back on them according to their degree and type of attachment.

To begin, I believe that it is mandatory to establish some context on ecocriticism, the first aspect of my critical framework to be considered for the purpose of this dissertation, even though, today, in the context of its numerous aspects, subdisciplines and ramifications, ecocriticism is not an easy field to embrace. Terms such as “ecological perception,” “natural awareness” or “environmental justice” permeate a field of study that has boomed and joined the critical canon since the 1990s. It might thus be a more realistic endeavor to describe a common motivation or underlying concept that unites them all. Following Loretta Johnson (in her didactic bibliographic essay “Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism,” from 2009) the field started out more as a practice –“what ecocritics do” (Johnson 7)– than as a set of common guidelines that ecocritics should follow. The field has branched and rebranched out in various shapes and fashions. It has expanded exponentially and globally to become interdisciplinary

and establish itself as an inherent part of environmental humanities as well as literary studies. R o agrees that “ecocriticism explores the role of the natural world in different forms of artistic expression, predominantly in literature, bringing new attention to a long tradition of nature writing in America. It focuses on the representation of the human interrelatedness with the land and with other lifeforms, often through an interdisciplinary approach” (R o 152).

To get here, the field has been the object of constant discussion and revision, and it has navigated throughout most fields of research, with which it has created inseparable bonds, such as with natural sciences or architecture. Associations on ecocriticism have taken shape, both local and international. English departments have strongly welcomed the field and opened specialist positions. Conferences on ecocriticism are held regularly throughout the globe, and papers traversing the field are presented in conferences with such different fields as medical science, construction or human resources. To start with, then, it might be a more realistic endeavor to accept that common practice or motivation or underlying concept that unites them all rather than finding a definition that will not persuade everyone.

It is nearly commonly agreed that the shared node that holds together the matrix of environmental studies could be the recurrent common awareness of the multiple diseases that afflict the planet today. The approach is essentially political, in the sense that it refers to *any* praxis humans adopt towards the environment, defined as what surrounds us. One could add that ecocriticism mostly shares some kind of concern about or at least awareness –back to this concept later– of nature. Nature, though, “can be anything” as Buell and other ecocritics suggest (L. Johnson 8), promoting open dialogue with all kinds of fields and flowing together naturally.

The term “ecocriticism” appeared initially in a scholarly text in an essay by William Rueckert who broadly stated that ecocriticism comprised the “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (107). Rueckert’s simple but broad concept was further developed by scholars by adding “the cultural dimensions of humans’ relationship to the environment” (L. Johnson 8) and somehow literary ecocriticism was born. Major writers were studied, with a focus on environmental issues to show a warning on the environmental crisis. By adding the humans’ relationship to nature, a crucial element was involved: that of nature as a changing process, with humans as part of it. This first surge of ecocritics still believed that the “innate” connection of humans and nature could still be positive. They “tended to equate environment with nature; to focus on literary renditions of the natural world in poetry, fiction and non-fiction as means of evoking and *promoting* contact with it” (Buell et al. 419, emphasis added). In the 21st century, ecocritical literary studies commenced to pay attention to urban landscapes such as cities and industrial areas, steering away from the solely “biocentric and/or individual-experience-oriented ethics and aesthetics” (Buell et al. 419) and moving towards positions of environmental justice, moving from “unbuilt to built environments, from wilderness to urban landscapes, and ultimately all space including ‘nonspace’” (L. Johnson 8), the latter understood as any space. Most authors include political praxis in the study of the environment.

In the outline of the 20th century, Cheryll A. Glotfelty identified ecocriticism as “the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems. We are finally there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow

species in our headlong race to apocalypse” (xx). In 2011, Lawrence Buell outlined "ecocriticism" as "[a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell et. al 430). Ecocritical practice certainly involves some kind of positioning towards the environment. There is an almost inevitable uncertainty about what the term actually covers: Buell argues that "if one thinks of it [...] as a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions, then the neologism becomes a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field" (430). Estok regards Buell's definition as valid, as it continues both in the increasingly interdisciplinary tradition of inclusiveness and the making of connections, while maintaining an ethical stand for effecting change (Estok 204). It is a common concern, ample in its definition and universally understood as a warning standpoint. This is precisely the realm where the critique of modernity exerted by ecocriticism lies, which makes it part of the problem.

According to Heise, ecocriticism attempts to go beyond the conceptual dichotomies that Modernity, the Enlightenment, and science were thought to have imposed on Western culture –“the separation of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture”–, therefore “to define the human subject not so much in relation to the human others that subjecthood had traditionally excluded as in relation to the nonhuman world” (Heise 507). Ecocriticism also aims this criticism of modernity at its assumption of knowing the world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploiting it economically, and thereby ultimately

creating a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled “progress.” Heise nearly rephrases Glotfelty when she complains that “this domination strips nature of any value than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis of subsistence” (Heise 506). She also agrees that such command deprives human existence of the meaning it had acquired from living in and with nature, and that it uproots and alienates individuals and communities (Heise 506).

Ecocritical scholarship in general envisions nature today not as an opposite or an alternative but as entwined with and indivisible from contemporary living and interacting, not just in the conceptual discourse but “in the material shape in which we experiment it today,” and the aim to reach an authentic relation is a consequence of modernization (Heise 508). It addresses today's issues transcending the natural world. It keeps on cross-pollinating fields of study as it seems to be finally accepted within the canon. As said before, ecocriticism has made its way well into the part of the major area of environmental humanities, which explores and addresses “the anthropogenic factors contributing to increasingly extreme weather events and linked social disparities at risk,” as Julie Size summarizes when quoting Adamson (Size 58). Finally, the field is here to stay, fortunately, and its role will keep on being debated and resonant with a grasp on “all expressive media, including visual, musical and cinematic as well as more purely instrumental forms of expression such as scholarly articles and the conventions of legislative documents, reports from nongovernmental organizations, and the like” (Buell et al. 417), hopefully transcending scholar use and intellectual approach.

In his introduction to *Ecocriticism of the Global South*⁹ (2015) Slovic reminds us how the field has been “institutionally and epistemologically centered in the United States and the United Kingdom, while many of the actual ecological and social concerns that inspire such discourse are grounded in provincial realities” (Slovic, *Global South* 1). This ironic disagreement is slowly solved by the emergence of the subfield of postcolonial ecocriticism, which has put its focus on the ecosocial degradation in developing countries.

We must not forget that the discipline is not free of detractors. It is worth mentioning that a number of authors, such as Frederick Buell—a cousin of Lawrence—, hold a pessimistic vision, complaining that the work of the field is focused on a culture that “not only ignores ecological limits but which blindly dwells in the apocalyptic future we once feared” (Gorman 639), using the term “ecoapocalypse.” In any case, as stated, the field of study embodies a shared focus, comprehensive in its definition and widely recognized as a position of caution.

Few will disagree that Annie Proulx’s fiction explores landscape, human beings and the relations between the two, and that her fiction asks us how we perceive them. Perception appears, then, as a prime factor in any natural endeavor, as it will be developed in this section. Even though her fiction has been commonly studied within the framework of the literature of the American West, it would not be realistic to study it

⁹ The book comprises a collection of essays focusing on an area of the world described and defined as “The Global South,” a term originated from German chancellor Willy Brandt, who in 1980 proposed a distinction between the more developed regions and the less developed regions, between “North and “South.” The division line was referred to as the Brandt Line, which “advocated economic development of Third World societies to the south of thirtieth parallel, which separates North and Central America, passes above Africa and India, but does not include Australia and New Zealand, which are considered de facto members of the North. Both “rich” and “poor” nations today fall on either side of the Brandt Line” (Slovic, *Global South* 2). The book focuses on a diversity of voices and perspectives that exists south of the Brandt Line, and which the authors define as “Global South,” a geopolitical concept invented to replace the term “Third World,” to struggle “imperial global domination” and to act as “a springboard for critical imaginations of environmental consciousness and race” (Slovic, *Global South* 3).

from an approach that remains distant from the literature of place, due to her active engagement with and perception of landscapes –her research, habitat, essays, reviews– and the clear wake-up call which her work carries over. Her fiction, few will disagree, keeps on reminding us that we are living in “the age of environmental limits” and our destruction and extermination are only accelerating our unceasing journey to apocalypse (Glotfelty, “Bioregional” 20). Her last published work, *Barkskins* (2016), plays out as a bleak turn of the century outcome where there is little room for steering. Proulx’s clear style in this novel seems to be aimed at pulling the reader’s empathy to commit to the novel’s ecological message and trying to help revert “the rapacious treatment of the earth” (Clark) before it is too late. Hunt reminds us too how, as her works “seem increasingly to attest, (they) lead to environmental ethos” (Hunt, “Insistence” 5). Her worn out –not only– Western landscapes often overwhelm reason and scrutinize where we stand, trying to measure the gap between humans and nature, forcing us to re-evaluate and redefine our compromised attempt on “the enjoyable pursuit of reinhabiting the earth” (Glotfelty, “Bioregional” 19).

In the biographical notes, I have already established Proulx’s claim that everything that she writes starts with or stems from landscape. This is probably her most quoted assertion in both literary studies and reviews and one that visibly defines her choice of main subject. This apparently simple statement involves a complexity and awareness of the land that goes further than an external aesthetic appreciation for the landscape –scenery– or the “moral undertones” that Mark Asquith refers to in his revision of the three volumes of *Wyoming Stories*: “For Proulx landscape is not just something her characters move through, it is something they experience” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 29), an element that moves the story forward.

This encounter shapes the characters' identity, due to their strong relationship with their natural surroundings.

For Proulx, the landscape is obviously not just something through which her characters move; rather, it is what they experience, an element that "moves the story forward," an encounter that shapes the characters' identity. She defines landscape as "the sum of accumulated changes wrought by the inhabitants and their marks on the land" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 14), a statement that implies her paying attention to both the natural and the human, in which "rural people [...] are *of* landscape, their lives ruled by place" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 14). This allusion to the "rules" of the land suggests that attention and awareness are essential.

Annie Proulx has claimed to be "something of a geographic determinist" (Proulx, *Missouri*), even though this "something" plainly comes to suggest that she is just not. More often than not, Proulx's fiction has been read from a deterministic point of view, following her own provocative statement. Deterministic approaches are mostly regarded as a one-way interaction between landscape and humans, but not the other way around, and they often focus on the outturn on humans and their lack of free will, and tend to disregard at times the backlash of humans on landscape, as a consequence of the tensions that arise. The "yearning for power and control over one's own environment and circumstances, however fleeting and illusory this may finally be" (Smith) is attuned with how Weltzien explains her determinism when examining *Wyoming Stories*, stating that "in facing the spectacle of landscape, we are admonished to take a biocentric view of the world, at least Proulx's Wyoming" ("Annie Proulx" 110). His analysis focuses on landscape alone, a vision that he

considers “her confinement of landscape fiction to the first half of the 20th century myopic” (Weltzien, “Annie Proulx” 99) in Proulx’s stories. Weltzien insists that her geographical determinism –“environmental forces (landscape and weather) larger than individuals trace the trajectories of their lives, marking and reducing choices” (Weltzien, “Annie Proulx” 101)– results in poor character development: “her devotion of landscape of necessity shrinks and distorts her evocation of character” (Weltzien, “Annie Proulx” 101). This seems a little reductionist, as it misses the point of characters’ choice when entering landscape, as he seems to concede: “accommodation rather than resistance becomes the path to survival” (Weltzien, “Annie Proulx” 101). The quote remotely suggests the notions of conjunction and disjunction referred to before. Proulx’s has also been invoked as “pessimistic determinism” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 133) or often examined in a naturalistic mode – where determinism is a central element–, with the argument that Proulx shares traits with the naturalistic literary approach (Svanholm Misje 17).

Hunt, however, considers Proulx’s work in more dynamic terms when he recognizes some engagement with a type of determinism that does not just fit traditional notions, but a more active one: “our discourse often demonstrates our desire to deny the power of biological or *economic* determinism. Yet our behaviour often bespeaks a grudging recognition that such forces are real enough” (Hunt, “Insistence” 4). This is a different type of determinism, away from the Turnerian concept of determinism –the white male hero at the mercy of the land as he makes his way West. Proulx’s revision of her so-called determinism is based on elements of constant change and permanent tension, on a postmodern reading of landscape: “Today it is almost impossible to write about landscape without reference to

economics, politics, and human manipulation of the environment” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 20). This is the reading that I propose here, a political –social, economic–, dynamic and postmodern reading, one that more correctly depicts an accurate “relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 13) and that goes both ways, landscape on humans and humans on landscape.

“Geography, geology climate, weather, the deep past, immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them” (Proulx, *Missouri*). It is always there, behind every page, behind the story plot. In her concept of landscape, she includes the word “meaningful.” Purpose is the word here. Her stories share a translucent appeal to action and intentness as careful consideration should be paid to the irreversible. Proulx herself often stresses on the relationship between nature reading and natural sciences as she points attention to the “vast chasm” between urban and rural populations that is reflected in contemporary literature:

Today most Americans live in fairly dense population centers and regard the sparsely populated regions of the country as empty. They define the hinterlands *only* in terms of utility: scenic vistas of tourism and outdoor adventure trips; sites for seasonal vacation homes; the locus raw stuff of extractive industries such as timber and coal; good places for nuclear testing and missile silos, and now, for the storage of nuclear waste. (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 7-8, emphasis added)

These attitudes come from perception rather than experience, from the way we understand and *perceive* landscapes: “Fiction reflects our perception of ourselves in our time, our general human and individual position in the universe” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 8). We do not only perceive space, but use that perception to understand our

intervention in it: “If landscape as space modified to suit orders our perceptions, it may partially explain why place description in fiction can draw the reader into the story” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 13). In the afterword to the 2000 edition of Thomas Savage’s *The Power of the Dog* (1967), Proulx refers to this trait when comparing the two protagonist brothers, Phil and George. One of the many readings of the novel proposes that the book “is a multiple-layered reference to a striking landscape feature that Phil Burbank can see but his brother, George, cannot. In fact, Phil uses this distant formation of rock and slope that resembles a running dog as a kind of test -those who cannot see it are lacking in intelligence and perception. For himself it is a proof of his sharp and special sensitivity” (Proulx, “Afterword” 283).

To explore this idea of perception, a text that in my opinion deserves careful consideration is Laura Sewall’s “The Skill of Ecological Perception” (1995), where she illustrates how this idea of perception can lead to ecological awareness. She describes how our senses are the fundamental paths of connection between ourselves and the world, and argues that the deadening of our senses is at the core of the environmental crisis. Sewall presents five perceptual practices that will help us to “come to our senses” and to overcome the “collective myopia” to which she refers when quoting David Abram: “The ecological crisis may be the result of a recent and collective perceptual disorder in our species, a unique form of myopia which it now forces us to correct” (Sewall 202). Sewall introduces the concept of the ecological self as opposed to the traditional concept of identity in which “inner and outer worlds become an arbitrary distinction” (203). She argues that the ecological self experiences a “permeability and fluidity of boundaries [...] with the whole of the non-human world” (Sewall 203) and suggests intentional

practice to carry out reconnection and achieve ecological perception. She defines it as “the perception of dynamic relationships” with the external world, both human and non-human (204)¹⁰. Annie Proulx refers directly to these practices when addressing such issues as the disconnect between humans and characters, when confronted with the lack of conjunction with nature, and, as a writer, she refers to the role of literature in that sense: “The novel should take us, as readers, to a vantage point from which we can confront our human condition, where we can glimpse something of what we are. A novel should somehow enlarge our capacity to see ourselves as living entities in the jammed and complex contemporary world” (Morris). These concepts and arguments –connection with and disconnection from nature and the modes of perception in achieving ecological awareness– will be examined across the corpus of this dissertation. Proulx’s Wyoming literature will show –I argue– that the awareness statement that Proulx conveys through fiction is not only identical to those made by these theorists, but also analogous to the ideas of fellow nature writers such as Barry Lopez, Proulx’s personal friend for whom she wrote a review on the back cover of *Light Action in the Caribbean*¹¹. Her bond with the literature of place is even more obvious when she compares it to the responsibility with landscape that fiction

¹⁰ Sewall suggests the following exercises: ‘There are five perceptual practices that I have identified as both modifiable by experience and directly relevant for perceiving our ecological conditions. These practices include (1) learning to attend, or to be mindful, within the visual domain; (2) learning to perceive relationships, context, and interfaces; (3) developing perceptual flexibility across spatial and temporal scales; (4) learning to re-perceive depth, and (5) the intentional use of imagination (Sewall 204).

¹¹ Proulx is close to quite a few nature writers, among which Barry Lopez she considered a personal friend, and for whom he wrote the back cover of *Light Action in the Caribbean*: “This is a collection of subtle and mysterious stories, maps of an animistic world where travelers move beyond the reality of the senses toward spiritual recognition. The reader cannot leave Lopez’s fictional territory unchanged” (Proulx, back cover of *Light Action in the Caribbean*, by Barry Lopez). Proulx underlines the “responsibilities of the storyteller” that Lopez often refers to when explaining his duty as a nature writer (Shapiro). She has recently published *Fen, Bog and Swamp* (2022), a nature book telling the story of wetlands around the world and warning us about their destruction, by explaining their essential role in preserving the environment.

writers seemingly elude: “Fiction meanwhile has taken a narrower path, exploring the personal interior landscape and the family. What is *out there* seems increasingly irrelevant” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 12).

This connection that the literature of Proulx holds with the idea and practice of awareness matches Scott Slovic’s claims that instead of the traditional and careful attentiveness to the non-human that we see in nature writing, emphasis should be put on inwardness. As Glotfelty observes, Slovic stresses on the fact that nature writers have most often looked inside. Following Wordsworth affection for the English Lake Country and Thoreau’s bond to Walden Woods, nature writers such as Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez have turned to nature in order to “induce elevated states of consciousness within themselves, and in their accounts of the phenomenon of awareness they are as much literary psychologists as they are natural historians” (Glotfelty, “Introduction” xxxii). In Slovic’s view, writers should look at nature writing as a means of examining their own psychology. In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, he suggests that much nature writing can be seen as “a kind of private murmuring in pursuit of the intensification and verification of experience” (Slovic 172). Nature writing is more about the experience of nature than about nature itself. This study of representative authors of nature writing –Thoreau, Berry, Abbey, Lopez– is more about perception than about experience itself. This awareness tool may help readers to think through complex and uncertain situations with practical examples and to shy away from mere theoretical indoctrination. It draws attention to how we understand the non-human world. It is more a psychological approach, connected to the senses, rather than a moral one: awareness, consciousness and

understanding.

This approach has been criticized by pragmatic ecocriticism, as it does not go so far as to make decisions and take action (Werner 46). Slovic studies how some authors visualize the world as exterior and interior landscapes, and examines the influence of the exterior landscapes on interior ones. Ultimately, he suggests that nature writing is in fact the mind studying itself in its responses to nature. This stress on proprioception, referred to by Barry Lopez and indirectly by ecopsychology Sewall, Roszak— is the key to gaining attentiveness and ultimately intimacy. Estrangement from nature is mental illness; Slovic refers to the syndrome “disjunction” and its antonym “conjunction,” two key concepts that I am borrowing as tools of analysis in this dissertation (Slovic, *Seeking* 137). In the same article, Scott Slovic summarizes the aim of Barry Lopez’s nature writing as follows: “To overcome the absurdity —the meaninglessness and destructiveness— of man’s estrangement from the natural world” (Slovic, *Seeking* 6). As mentioned above, Slovic describes the condition “disjunction” as a severance of humans from land, and its opposite “conjunction” as a state of belonging within landscape, “modern variations of Thoreau’s two opposing modes of response to nature” (Slovic, *Seeking* 6). We are encouraged to aim for conjunction, in order to gain awareness and connection.

I argue that Proulx’s fiction is filled with characters that mostly fit one of the definitions. The way in which these individuals approach and relate to landscape —a town, ranch, desert, room or simply in their own mind— conditions greatly their degree of success or failure. In her fiction, the conceptual representation of landscapes “contains human populations split along an axis determined by the roles people take on

within those landscapes” (Voie, “Drinking”¹² 41). This division reminds us of the two opposing approaches that Tredinnick, in *The Land’s Wild Music*, singles out in the writings of Barry Lopez. He states that “what counts is how you come: as a pilgrim or an improver, to learn or to manipulate, to surrender or to possess” (Tredinnick 76). These contrasting roles –pilgrim or improver– explain these opposing relationships with landscape. A pilgrim attitude is required to achieve conjunction; an improver attitude will result in disjunction. These two very different mentalities signify different relationships with landscape, where choosing one of the roles is compulsory (Tredinnick 137). The concepts of conjunction and disjunction, personified in pilgrims and improvers, are two key standpoints from which I analyze Proulx’s Western corpus.

Intrinsically embedded within the study of natural landscapes and regions in literature is the concept of sense of place. Besides, as the chapter moves forward to the second field of study –the American West– one should follow, I believe, Cheryll A. Glotfelty’s guideline: “Investigating the literature of place in the American West immediately raises the conundrum of how we imagine place” (“Bioregional” 3). Defining place or simply trying to summarize a common approach could in itself constitute the sole object of an investigation. The idea of sense of place could be broadly referred to as what Kowalewski calls “a sense of belonging and human attachment” (“Losing” 17) to a particular landscape or environment. It goes further than just background color or “local seasoning,” and it is also related to the importance of place in people’s lives. Low and Altman first used the term “place attachment” to refer to the bonding experience of humans to place, which includes different kinds

¹² Voie uses as well the concepts of pilgrim/conjunction and improver/disjunction to analyze some of Proulx’s work, mostly in the realm of nature writing, and using a single framework approach.

of elements: emotion (affect, emotion and feeling), cognition (thought, knowledge and belief), and practice (action and behavior) (Low and Altman 3-5). Later, Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) suggested that place attachment is a constituent of a wider concept called “sense of place,” which would include place identity and place dependence. Other concepts used to describe humans’ attachments to their home environments and communities include “rootedness” and “insidedness” (Kyle and Chick 210). Tuan suggests that rootedness implies “being at home in an unself-conscious way” (4), where much of the landscape is taken for granted. Place-identity concerns not only rural or in-nature habitats, but also urban or densely human-populated landscapes. Finally, Kowalewski argues that human behavior and ethical deliberation take place within the context of local communities. As a consequence, “individuals and communities come into consciousness *through*, not apart from, the natural environments they inhabit” (“Contemporary” 16).

However, one has to take into account what Mahoney and Katz emphasize in terms of constant transformation: a postmodernist notion of place-sense implies that “the region is a dynamic and relative construction” (xii). This idea replicates exactly Campbell’s concept of “affective spacetime of regionality” (*Affective* 2) that I am using to examine Proulx’s Western corpus. The notion implies the reading that I have proposed as a conceptual framework. Asquith agrees with the idea, as he writes that in Proulx’s West

landscape is transformed from something static and ‘out there’ to a palimpsest revealing a legacy of human interaction. Such a conception demands a less selective, but more dynamic view of landscape that blurs the distinctions between beauty and squalor, in the process reminding the reader of the environment is the product of cultural expectation. (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 56).

Campbell, in these same terms, reads region as a dynamic and ever-changing process, and thinks of it “not [...] as circular, established and rooted, only pointing back on itself inwardly, but as having lines of connection beyond itself” (*Affective* 201). The idea establishes a postmodern view of place (the West, for example) that challenges and deconstructs a fixed conception of the American West, a point fully discussed in the next section, devoted to Annie Proulx’s relationship with the American West.

Connected to this idea is the ever-present use of the notion of time, which plays out as a witness of the constant landscape transfiguration as well as the characters’ response to it, even though Proulx scolds her colleagues who do not use it in nature’s best interest:

It is a writer’s thought that nothing we see has meaning unless we understand how it was in the past –the element of time, the slow accretion of change the seeming immutability of rural land forms [...] Curiously this dynamic feature of landscape is missing in most contemporary fiction; writers present us with a static description of the world through which the characters move, only occasionally relieved by flashbacks or flash-forwards. (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 18-19)

Hunt agrees to such a reading by highlighting precisely her attention to nature in her treatment of the West: “What I find particularly exciting about Proulx’s work is the way in which she achieves a form of critical regionalism through a practice of narrative ecology” (“Ecology” 184). This “narrative ecology” is, in Hunt’s words, what makes her fiction “post-Western:” “Proulx achieves a critical regionalism by incorporating, recycling, and revising regional narratives into a contemporary postmodern form by means of [...] narrative ecology” (Hunt, “Ecology” 184). That is, “the very real relationship between our stories and our landscapes” (Hunt, “Ecology” 184). That Proulx

incorporates historical elements –time as a key factor in the process of landscape of her narrative technique– is not unexpected at this point, as the section on her Annales-based training research has proved.

This concept of time is an ever-present driving force throughout most of her fiction, as the analysis displays. In *Barkskins* (2016), for example, she addresses the issue from page one. Despite not being included in the corpus of this dissertation, it is worth noting that in *Barkskins*, the notion of changing landscape across time is the issue. Proulx defends the nearly 800-page long novel by stating that the only way to represent the long-term effect of humans on forests was by starting with the first woodcutters in the 18th century and ending the story in the 21st century. That makes a clear stand for the global environmental issue of deforestation. She had previously expanded time and space vastly in *Accordion Crimes*¹³ (1996), where the story spans from around 1890 to 1996. In a surprisingly¹⁴ quite plain style, *Barkskins* tells the epic tale of two families of immigrants. Proulx addresses the issue through the story of two characters and their descendants who come to New France –Canada– in the 17th century as woodcutters. René Sel and Charles Duquet, amazed by the impressive and apparently endless forest in the New World, approach it in two different ways. Through the story of the Sels and

¹³ *Accordion Crimes* tells the story of the 20th century United States through the owners of an old Sicilian accordion that passes from hand to hand, decade after decade, depicting most nationalities of immigrants present in America. The misfortunes of that old instrument: it gets stolen, goes out of tune, is scorned by specialists, and eventually loses its powerful sound. However, it holds quite a long-staying power when compared to its many owners, most of whom go through misery and eventually horrific or violent deaths. Proulx makes a point by stating a metaphor that equals the American Dream with agony for immigrants of all sorts: “America is a place of lies and bitter disappointment [...]. It promises everything but eats you alive” (Proulx, *Accordion Crimes* 52). Proulx explained how she “was interested in the American character, unlike that of any other country –aggressive, protean, identity-shifting, mutable, restless and mobile. I wondered if the American penchant for self-invention was somehow related to the seminal immigrant experience, in which one had to renounce the past” (Proulx, *Missouri*).

¹⁴ Annie Proulx’s use of language, her style and different levels, registers, researched accents and observation seems to delude a bit here. Her style has been mentioned on the introduction to her work, with a specific stress on research, non-linguistic elements and the extremely careful use of diction. I argue that the intentional simplicity of style in *Barkskins* is aimed at readers’ awareness and seeks directness of message. Even though not analyzed in the course of this dissertation, references to it will be made, if necessary.

the Duquets, covering from the 17th century to the present time, Proulx stresses on Americans' disjunction from the land, their misconception of and disregard for natural environments and, ultimately, the disconnection from human landscapes as well. Their individual approach to the natural world stands out as a lesson not learned. This replication of the pattern comes to show what their utilitarian interaction with landscape means: unconscious destruction of natural resources. With a plain and bare style, Proulx points her finger at us and demands action in front of this global severance of humans from land that nature writers would regard as meaningless, absurd and destructive.

This section has established Annie Proulx's relationship with landscape and nature writing, as well as a transparent and determined relationship with place and its influence on the imagination. I have exposed this with an emphasis on how her fictional spaces fit in a revision from an ecocritical viewpoint, a field that has evolved to political and transversal positions that reach most study fields and beyond, putting the stress on urgent awareness and immediate action. Annie Proulx insists on the idea of perception. I am borrowing the concepts of "conjunction" with and "disjunction" from nature to examine Proulx's Western corpus and establish how her Western narratives can be classified as fiction of disjunction and fiction of conjunction. Together with this, I am using Neil Campbell's concept of "affective critical regionality," a concept that matches Proulx's notion of that West as a dynamic, ever-changing process in continuous variation, and that opposes to a West of mythical straight lines but intertwined lines instead, understood as a deconstructing challenge that fits in the definition of "post-West." This post-modern interpretation, I suggest, fits Annie Proulx's conception of the region.

2.3 Proulx's Post-West

In this section, I develop the second interpretive paradigm to be interwoven with ecocriticism. The studies of the American West stem from a branch of literary studies well-established today in the canon of literary criticism. The obvious connections and interrelatedness of both fields provide scope for a joint venture to be undertaken. This inextricable –in my opinion– union makes the prose of Annie Proulx singularly suitable for the reading here proposed. As mentioned above, when defining the corpus of this dissertation, the subject matter of this work has been purposefully chosen so as to specifically relate both fields. While attention to landscape appears in most of her work, it is in her “Western” novels where the frame narrows down to help define the corpus¹⁵ of this dissertation. Section 2.4 is devoted to justifying the choice of that corpus.

In the same way as with ecocriticism, Proulx's fiction is constantly considered within the studies of the American West, and her commitment and personal relation to the region would make its oblivion unlikely, as many of her writings, interviews and articles confirm. Asquith, for instance, calls her “unashamedly western” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 2), and Richard Lacayo observes that “she can handle an ax and a canoe. Her hair looks as if she cut herself with a hunting knife” (Lacayo). The West and its complexity, then, and how it resonates in the literature of Annie Proulx will be sieved in this double but joint mode. In this section, then, after a brief revision of the American West as a region, I move on to consider the concepts of place and region. The original idea of regionalism and its intricacies –around the idea of conservative, fixed and immovable

¹⁵ The fiction proposed in the present corpus -developed in subsection 2.4 from the present section- includes the novels *Postcards* (1992) and *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), and the three volumes of short stories set in Wyoming: *Wyoming Stories 1: Close Range* (1999), *Wyoming Stories 2: Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Wyoming Stories 3: Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008).

spaces— will be dealt with together with its evolution into the concept of regionality, a reading that suggests a more complex process rather than a static idea. Not only through Proulx’s opinions but clearly in her works too, her characters inhabit or interact with a region that is ever-changing, dynamic and critical, as we will see, away from those static notions of region. Finally, the section moves on to describe Neil Campbell’s term affective critical regionality, a resulting concept of reading region in “alternative ways of thinking and being” (*Affective* 3). Affective critical regionality confronts the idea of region as immovable, invariable and stationary, where regionality broadly means “challenging processes and oppositions” (Campbell, *Affective* 5), thus moving away from the rigid model of regionalism and region. Proulx herself refers to the first “American landscape novels—set in, moved by, specific and identifiable places— where landscape seemed fixed and immutable” (“Dangerous Ground” 7).

This concept of affective critical regionality is going to be key to examining Proulx’s American West, put together with the previously described Scott Slovic’s concepts of “conjunction” and “disjunction.” Her West, I argue, conforms to a notion of a different West that specifically matches these notions of active region, “open to something beyond the immediately local (those elements traditionally associated with region)” (Campbell, *Affective* 13). Proulx defends how “we may speak of rural landscape can an independent (though shrinking) entity, but it is only possible to isolate rural countryside in the mind. For everything is linked” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 10), a reading that not only matches this idea of affective critical regionality, but moves away from the concept of Western fiction in the original sense. Proulx’s idea of the West, a process of oppositions, regional and international, recognizable and ever-changing, with attention

to the local but to the global as well, can be read from a contemporary outlook that might better fit the term “post-Western.”

“Post-Western” is a concept that needs to be clarified. It is opposed to traditional Western as it takes into account aspects that do not include pre-established or romanticized views on the West. Instead, it accounts for multiple layers and shifts that permeate every aspect of region. In *Postwestern Cultures*, Susan Kollin recalls that Post-Western studies as a field of literary studies dates back to the 1970s, when the scholar focus was put on movies “that were restructuring the Western” and today “it requires us to travel critically in many directions, between past and present and between regions and nations. Such travels move us back and forth in time and between the local and the global” (Kollin xvi).

Prior to the textual analysis, then, Proulx’s sense of “post-West” has to be established, connected to the reading of affective critical regionality, and inseparable from her vital connection to the land. Thus, even though both West and landscape resonate in every page of her writing, one way or another, embracing social, economic and cultural themes, I ascertain that her view must not be considered “Western” in the traditional sense, as some scholars have often approached it. From a methodological perspective, I have to say that eventually the analysis will put forward an implicit understanding of both landscape and the West in terms of how the main characters can be explored from a literary perspective.

So far, we have considered landscape from the viewpoint of ecocriticism, where it equals environment –natural, human, urban. However, in order to provide a full consideration of the term, it needs to be examined within the framework of studies of place, where landscape is related to region and its particulars. Region has been

traditionally a forceful element in American fiction that has been used by writers and scholars alike in a ranging number of ways throughout literary history, and the American West is undoubtedly one of the most represented, both in literature and in the contemporary arts –music, cinema, the visual arts.

One of the main features of Western literature is characterized “by a regardful perspective on the environment and by a search for community with natural surroundings” (Río 150). This detachment from traditional views on the West has been gradual, as environmental awareness has grown among Western writers. The “West of the Western” was an ethnically pure space “free from technology and assertive women, where they were free to create identities in accordance with the hypermasculine role model provided by the cowboy” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 10). This concept is long gone from literary production today, although it most certainly lives in people’s imagination, serving different purposes. Some might feel nostalgic about it, others might view it as a point of contrast to precisely run away from its limitations and establish a dialogue with the new complex and global reality

The term –landscape– has also been related to rural culture and away from economic and cultural centers. Proulx herself defines it “loosely” as “a word [...] to describe the geography of a particular region” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 8), a general way to connect region with distinctive landscape. Today, the current intellectual conception regards landscape as a globally interconnected set of spaces taking into account “the complexities, the stunning intricate linkages, of the natural world with humans in it” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 13). In every literary landscape, such as the endlessly depicted American West, the reader will find elements that are immediately understandable: “Those elements include boundaries, roads and paths, plazas and open

public gathering places, sacred places, the forest, open grasslands, various habitats. Every reader instantly recognizes these ancient, globally common elements in the fictional landscape” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 13). Literary landscapes are rural yes, but human as well, urban, often intersecting and not always with clear boundaries. Human agency, we have seen, is part of the landscape, as well as time: “Landscape is the sum of accumulated changes wrought by the inhabitants and their marks on the land” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 14). This is the point of departure of this section, yet prior to analyzing and establishing what Proulx’s West is about, let us dwell on the idea – imaginary, literal, physical– of the American West.

The American West is probably the space in the world that has been more illustrated yet often “misrepresented” (Ibarraran xv) in all fields of art, from movies to music, art, photography and, needless to say, literature. Its fixed stereotypes and conventional representations of characters that have populated it throughout history have not helped an accurate definition. The field, though, has paralleled those artistic representations very accurately and attentively. In “The Cowboy Was Never Alone,” an introduction to a volume of essays on the American West, Amaia Ibarraran summarizes that popular assumption:

Once the movement West was completed and the idea had emerged, its worldwide expansion commenced and was implanted in the imagination of the inhabitants of the U.S. and other continents. The definition that equated the West with a savage, wild, rural, male, white territory was then created, and its influence expanded all over until contemporary times. (Ibarraran xv)

In this early fiction, writers considered the West as a white-male-dominated territory that needed to be tamed, conquered and possessed, a vast immensity waiting to be

taken and seized. Frederick Jackson Turner was the first theorist who established the theory of the moving frontier –the so-called “frontier thesis”– which stated that the American West had a key role in the shaping of the American character and identity as well as in the promotion of democracy (Massip). Turner described the area as “free land” (Turner qtd. in Massip) and the process of possessing it led to what would be known a century later as the myth of the West, led by white-male pioneers, described by Proulx as the “Turnerian combat between virgin land and strong-willed pioneers” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 7).

This view met great success and the literary production that followed reflected this ideal. This early literary production contemplated Western landscapes, in the words of Annie Proulx, as dependent on a

simple response to a challenge: ‘In their works the landscape was almost always frontier and hostile –*malpais*, chasmed, unknown, inhabited by dangerous tribes with deep understanding of the terrain and place. The survival of the white protagonist [...] depended on nick-of-time luck, ability to withstand physical hardship, or the help of wise man or woman characters. Almost never did the protagonist display *any sense of belonging to or understanding of* the country through which he journeyed, nor he did try to learn much about it. (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 15, emphasis added)

The point was, then, to take and occupy, to fill and evict, with no connection or affective link whatsoever with the new territory. This white-male dominated West ignored any displays of native ethnicities, race, or gender altogether, and so was represented and understood for decades. Those initial positions and ideas often disengaged from that sense of place or understanding: “The concept commences in the geography, the land, the space, it continues with the diaspora, the migration, the movement. It goes on with

the settlement, the conflict and the final taking hold. Ultimately, the booming, the extraction of the ground on where they stood” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 19). Literary research today has departed from this traditional and fixed concept of the West as it is exposed in the paragraph(s) that follow.

The Western Literature Association (WLA) was established in 1967 to focus on and expand scholar interest in the culture of the American West. Although it is amply considered the flagship in the field, it does not navigate it alone. Many other associations and scholar groups have appeared under its wing. On its website¹⁶ an opening statement clarifies that the WLA

has served to publish scholarship and promote work in the field; it has gathered together scholars, artists, environmentalists, and community leaders who value the West’s literary and cultural contributions to American and world cultures; it has recognized those who have made a major contribution to western literature and western studies; and it has fostered student learning and career advancement in education.

Throughout the vast work appeared since its formation, the American West has been defined, redefined, identified, historicized, theorized, deconstructed, and built again on endless occasions. The studies of the American West permeate today many fields of literary studies such as ecocriticism, gender studies, comparative literature or feminist studies, and some scholars rely on the “transnational” transfer that the area holds: “The regional-international nexus is crucial and constituent to much ongoing transnational work governing the global West” (Weltzien, “American West” 49), stressing on the idea

¹⁶ The WLA holds a website –www.westernlit.org– where they announce their annual conference, and maintain links with faculties around the world with the aim of promoting, discussing and expanding the study of the American West in literature. The association regularly publishes a journal on Western Literature as well, and some of its members regularly attend conferences outside the U.S.

that the American West accounts for the many individual –national– Wests out there. It is interesting to point out here that at the 1992 WLA conference in Reno, Nevada, a new organization originated, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Finally, Río suggests that it was “no accident that ASLE originated in Nevada (as) ecological issues became a fundamental concern in this state and its literature in the last decades of the twentieth century” (152).

The question of “ok, but what *is* the American West?” arises every step of the way in the advance of this field of literary studies. To top it off, concepts such as “New West,” “Post-West,” or “No-West” have appeared to show only that the West is “a work in progress,” as Martin Simonson recounts when introducing the collection of essays on the American West *A Contested West*. In it, he outlines this field of study as “a subject vaster than the territory it encompasses” (Simonson ix). Writer Rick Bass adds the commonly felt concept of place sensing that leads to region: “The thing –the identity of the West– cannot be proven, then. But it can be sensed: roughly bounded, perhaps if not bordered” (v). Bass articulates this no-definition of the West by adding the human factor, or at least the human sensing. Without it, it cannot be called place. Yet, the need for the field is imperative. Angel Chaparro insists that “the West needs to be watched, represented and discussed again; the West needs a way in the middle; the West needs to be questioned again” (17). It is not linear, or circular, but organic, dynamic and ever-changing, like the landscape, the people and the interconnectedness that it represents, a much contemporary concept that stands away from traditional and mythic forms. There is “something about the West” that transcends explanation. Rick Bass attempts to pinpoint it:

Call it *spirit* or call it *essence*, no matter; some quality exists, some fantastic combination of light and aridity and scent and spaciousness, resonant upon the land and in motion with the land, Coriolis-like. And it was and still is perhaps the conjunction and coincidence of new experiences by the humans in a newly made (geologically speaking) landscape that accentuated this quality of Westernness. (v).

The literary West has been addressed cautiously by regionalism, often and traditionally understood as a fixed concept. Regionalism has attempted to provide a framework from which to study the West, emerging today with considerations that had been dismissed in earlier conceptions. Katz & Mahoney explain how the region appears as a

repackaged, more-aggressive endeavor to make a claim for the role of place and space -as opposed to gender, race ethnicity, class, demography or other cultural or physical distinctions- in the effort to understand ourselves and what it means to be human. What distinguishes regionalism from these other efforts at self-understanding is its focus on locating oneself in the space lived in, inhabited, made home, or traveled through. This emphasis is itself rooted in man's fundamental interaction with nature the land, climate, art, flora and fauna, and the physical environment. (ix)

This essential human interaction with the physical space defines a dynamic approach that authors such as Kollin acknowledge as a "cultural work performed by regionalism" (Kollin xvii), warning that "regionalism has the potential to offer an acritical turn to the past, a retreat from modernity and multiculturalism, which thus calls for a rigorous examination of its failure to decenter national metanarratives" (Kollin xvii). Quoting Tsu, "regionalism should be assessed not solely as a nostalgic response to nationalism but also as *effect* and *product* of that very nationalism, indeed, as being constituted by but likewise producing the larger national and global spaces in which it dwells" (Kollin xvii).

Regionalism attempts to give a place “meaning and borders” (Katz & Mahoney x), implying that humans have created it by putting together a number of components. This “giving meaning and borders” suggests a human control—or the attempt—over the land, the environment, the region. The discipline sets to underline conflicts between competing identities rather than offer a history or definition of a place, and it is often based on “unscientific” criteria to describe it: “the political, legal, symbolic, economic, and symbolic marks with which various groups of humans establish their territorial boundaries, under the assumption that these shape the region as much or more than patterns of rainfall” (Katz & Mahoney xii). This contemporary—often tagged as postmodern— notion of regionalism holds a dynamic pulse, far from the fixed, immovable, idea of regions such as the American West. In that West, cowboy heroes were at the mercy of the place, geographically determined and they assumed roles of honor and loyalty that defined character and reshaped identity. This trend has “typically defined a region by apparently neutral or objective criteria and then given this environment credit for molding human activity and perception in certain ways” (Katz & Mahoney xiii). This deterministic traditional vision of regionalism suggests that place molds character and shapes behavior, like the Western landscape shaped the character of the frontier, understood by the narrative of the early 20th century as “shaping the national -American, added- character” (Katz & Mahoney xii). It is a monochrome, white, male and reductionist West in today’s view, as it disregards embedded cultures, gender issues or the politics of place. Annie Proulx notes that this static memory of the old and far West still attracts newcomers: “The contemporary frontier’s vast distances are attracting a new wave of Pioneers and [...] the retirees moving to it sunny low-tax realm are still attracted to the ideas and values of the mythic west” (Proulx qtd. in Katz &

Mahoney xiv), what suggests that the old Far West dream cannot be lightly dismissed. It is an attitude to the West that she often depicts in some of her characters. In the same light, Asquith invokes Campbell when describing the American West as a “dynamic environment which acknowledges that nostalgia for the Old West and the lives lived by contemporary Westerners are not fixed in a relationship of historical influence, but bleed into each other” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 2). This dialogue between the mythic and today’s West, Asquith notes, leaves the region in an interesting “free-floating” state, that accounts for making sense of “an urban West of trailer parks, methane mines, Korean cowboy shirts and coarse fishing, but it also leaves it dangerously unmoored” (*Lost Frontier* 2), making it imperative to identify a place that can be called “the West.”

The fixed idea of place-region –only who inhabits a region can fully understand it, together with its preconceived stereotypes– was put away by regionalism as the 20th century progressed and the concept of sense of place entered the discipline, adopting the notion that not just residents but outsiders were to be taken into consideration: “from concentration on a sensibility only available to residents, particularly those who seem deeply rooted in the land itself, ability of ever more mobile people, who live somewhere for a while or pass through” (Katz & Mahoney xii). Proulx reminds us of how the Interstate Highway Act (1956) and the booming of the car industry also had a dramatic impact on the perception of the West. From then on

our perception of landscape and the parts that make up a landscape changed violently and forever. From inside the automobile, the landscape was transformed into a swiftly streaming mass of soft color, whether thick tunnels of eastern maple and oak, the pale soil and spiky herbage of the southwest, the khaki-colored plains, or the massy conifers of the northwest rainforest. In a landscape always receding or approaching, individual trees, small animals, and lesser streams disappeared in the blur. The pictorial, the framed but vague windshield

view replaced the particular and the specific. (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 18)

This "reframing" of the West carried along a revision and redefinition of the idea of region, taking into account more dynamic and not-so-traditionally-Western references within the territory, not just the old fixed romanticized pictures. In the foreword to the photographic essay *The New West* (1974) by Robert Adams, John Szarkowski discusses the then-new aesthetics of the West, inhabited, urban and transformed, accepting the role of humans as a permanent and changing one, contradictory and dynamic:

Adam's pictures describe with precision and fastidious justice some of the mortal and venial sins that we have committed against our land in recent decades that the gaggle of plywood ranch houses at the foot of the mountain, fenced in by the trailer parks acid neon and extruded plastic off the highway is an affront even to our modest expectations. But his pictures also show us that these settlements expressed human aspirations, and that they are therefore not uninteresting. (Adams viii).

The pictures show indeed a new West if compared to the old mythic wide and dry open spaces; spaces being transformed, people, houses, cars, gas stations, motels, roads and animals (few). This unending revamping of the West is just proof of how alive the West is in terms of redefinition of borders and blurred limits, but also in terms of inflicting those "venial sins" in the landscape.

The West has been imagined and represented since its cultural conceptual existence, starting off with preconceptions of place, as Río calls it "a fundamental concept when applied to the American West" (21) and cites Lutwack's three basic ideals –"America as a garden, a wilderness and a place of treasure" (Río 22)– to explain what that idea is based on. These build-up stereotypes of Western expansion remain a vision

that has not only been dismissed by contemporary historians but also reviewed with the inclusion of “neglected or suppressed” stories of the region (Río 22). This literary West has also put its focus on urban areas –usually fictionalized as “both desirable and threatening” (Río 30)– underscoring the “complexities” of the new Western cities in their interrelatedness between city and its inhabitants, expanding subjects and settings (Río 185). In short, the Western literary field now pays finally attention to pushing issues such as race, gender, feminism, immigration, class or ethnicity, thus rising credibility and truthfulness.

That the West is a “peculiar” territory widely understood: now the audience is global, which adds to the deterritorialization of the view, moving from a national to a transnational perspective. A number of female writers add to expanding the genre – “making it a more feminized territory” (Río 26)– thus opening it up for gender and feminist readings. This new visibility of Western women writers, of which Annie Proulx is one of its most prominent names, projects a new sensibility and occupies a “different West” in Comer’s terms (*Landscapes* 10), even though we cannot talk about a “cohesive or distinctive” literary trend (*Landscapes* 10). Rather, it is just the confirmation of a completely different West from the one deeply associated with masculinity, one that arises from Mexican, Spanish, or Asian flows, just to name a few, which together conform “an alternative geographic imaginary as well as history and sensibility come into being” (Comer, *Landscapes* 10). This contemporary West de-nationalizes the Turnerian American West, signature of “Americanism” that the Western narratives traditionally represented. Instead, they bring to surface sociocultural tensions, global economics, environmental issues and dynamic relations between humans and nature. A new trend in increasing nature writing based on the American West has been at work for some

decades with the aim of focusing on region but “without elaborate fictionalizing apparatus” (Johnson qtd. in Río 29). Many new contemporary Western writers share this focus on environment, moving away from traditional Western literature based on local color, “less mystified” and questioning our views on nature and society, and ultimately encouraging us “to intervene in environmental problems, including the definition of those problems, with more political savvy” (Comer, *Landscapes* 13). This is distinctly the West that Annie Proulx projects in her narratives, and one that exposes “the dynamism of spatial relations and the ways that other kinds of relations (i.e., between nonhuman and human nature, between races, between men and women) are represented and contested *in space*” (Comer, *Landscapes* 14).

Comer reminds us how this literary West has too often considered and used landscape as “the most telling signature of the western landscape” (*Landscapes* 11). It is inevitable to refer or relate to landscape as a defining part of the Western when theorizing on the West. The idea of the region that I am using is one that puts together people, movement, relations and time, a political concept of region that is essentially dynamic: “Landscape [...] is a brimming-full *social* topography that creates and enacts the various cultural assumptions and power struggles of the age” (Comer, *Landscapes* 13), so considering the Western landscape as a dynamic actor “enables us not only to evaluate the ways that landscape embodies social conflicts over time but to be alerted to landscape itself as a social player, a protagonist, a form of cultural practice” (Comer, *Landscapes* 13). This dynamic concept is closely related to Neil Campbell’s idea of affective critical regionality that I am using as a tool to examine the corpus of this dissertation.

The concept of regionalism has evolved with the addition of the idea of “critical”

to it, meaning by that “a way of diagnosing the new configurations of meaning, time, and space occasioned by global restructuring and new technologies –it is a political/cultural imagination and a mode of embodiment whose keywords and ethical domains are under construction” (Comer, “Place” 156). The term implies a rethinking of regionalism that comes from a fluidity of borders that allows for cultural, social and leaning on mobility and difference. It is, therefore, “not a synonym for transnational analysis but a method of critical or global study attuned both to comparative big picture analyses and linked to the deep local” (Comer, “Place” 156). This attention to the global but to the local as well dismisses local color, an all-American “cultural signpost” in “not truly landscape novels” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 10). Regional concepts of place have thus given way to dynamic conceptions of space that take into account not just geographic elements:

Landscape is geography, geology, archaeology, astrophysics, agronomy, agriculture, the violent character of the atmosphere, climate, black squirrels and wild oats, folded rock, bulldozers; it is jet trails and barbed wire, government land, dry stream beds; it is politics, desert wildfire, introduced species, abandoned vehicles, roads, ghost towns, nuclear test grounds, swamps, a bakery shop, mine tailings, bridges, the dogs, landscape is rural, urban, suburban, semirural, small town village it is outboards and bedroom communities, it is a remote ranch. (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 10)

The compelling quotation signals all the physical, perceptual and human elements that take part in the dynamic process of a region. This constantly transformed West, “post-West” or “West in progress” as I would call it, clearly calls into question that “predetermined entity with static borders and boundaries” (Kollin xi) and invites us to

consider the various Wests out there, more likely as the sum of a new globally imagined West. Or, as Martin and Harding state, “rather than taking the West as a unified area calling for formal definition, we view it as a space that is unstable, opportunistic, open-ended and ultimately unpredictable” (61), a notion that necessarily implies movement, continuity and mutual exchange. This is my interpretation of what a post-Western reading entails, and it is the perspective that I propose to examine the corpus of this dissertation. Proulx’s previous long quote also invokes the tensions and reciprocal influences on and from the West, and suggests how to approach the region from the multi-layered and dynamic standpoint that I wish to follow: “A study of western regionalism ultimately requires us to travel *critically in many directions*, between past and present and between regions and nations. Such travels move us back and forth in time, between the local and the global” (Kollin xvii, emphasis added). This view, Kollin explains invoking Lutz, is allied with a concept of critical regionalism, by which the global and the local relate in economic, technological or social terms, thus defining the relation between the region and the rest of the world (xviii).

Kollin also addresses “the highly charged and continually shifting meanings” (xiii) of the West, calling into question that fixed positioning –from its history, its material culture, and its status as a “pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern space” (Kollin xiii), better understood “not as a static but as a fluid entity,” remapping it in heterogeneous and interconnected ways. As said before, it is a contemporary local and global space, regional and international, recognizable and ever-changing, where “the cowboy is a fleeting cultural symbol of the American West –but not one that has entirely disappeared” (Kopp 390), thus not fully dismissing those traditional ideas, while putting into question their value today. That regional past centered on white-male cowboy glory

is confronted by new multicultural and gendered symbols to better understand and express Western identity. Neil Campbell states that “post-Westerns are concerned with the afterlife of the classic Western and the regional mythos and with their consequences and reverberations within the contemporary world” (*Post-Westerns* 332). Framed theoretically as “critical regionalism” (a term coined by architect and theorist Kenneth Frampton in 1983), Kollin calls for a post-Western reading that conceives a fluid regional identity, and that rethinks Western identity, something that, I argue, the post-Western narratives of Annie Proulx contribute to doing.

Thinking post-Western and fluidity, interconnectedness and steering away from rigid paradigms of space, takes me to consider and define Neil Campbell’s concept of “affective critical regionality” (*Affective* 4). As stated above, I am borrowing this significant concept to examine Annie Proulx’s Western corpus together with the ecocritical ideas of “conjunction” and “disjunction” discussed above. Campbell’s recent theoretical work on region introduces a concept that confronts this idea of fixed, traditional assumptions on the territory –West, for my purposes. Critical studies on the West have evolved from regionalism into critical regionalism, defined by Alofsin in 1980 as “an architecture that both follows local traditions and transforms them. Something that belongs to the region and transcends it” (Alofsin qtd. in Campbell, *Affective* 26). Stemming from that idea, Campbell’s concept of regionality “as an active, agitating presence, a *becoming* that deviates from the standard model of regionalism and is, therefore, not an ‘order-word’” (*Affective* 25). In *Affective Critical Regionality* he explains how the concept “resists understanding region as straight lines, neat borders, simple rootedness, or fixed points, and instead engages with “other kinds of encounter and invention [...] to better participate in and articulate the affective spacetime of

regionality” (Campbell 2). The concept confronts regionalism as a static idea, rooted and unmovable, in the same way in which American West studies have read it so far. He rethinks regionalism as a forward-moving process, a “state of continuous variation” (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Campbell, *Affective* 3). Regionalism has so far been a point of view to try to explain and analyze the American West from which in recent years scholars have moved, getting into critical regionalism, breaking up with traditional assumptions on the American West, but still performing an “outside looking in” approach. This recoinage of the term into affective critical regionality is more in tune with, as Comer describes it, “a method of critical or global study attuned both to comparative big picture analyses and linked to the big local” (Comer, “Place” 156). Such a reading takes into account “flows across borders,” meaning an interaction between the local and the global, thus implying a mobility and porosity of spaces that are hard to refute today. Rethinking this produces a reading of the American West as a territory without borders –as it has always been– and a “way of diagnosing” a region in a more political way, taking into account items such as mobility, economy, race, gender, and many more. The “genealogy” of the term was first developed by Campbell himself in *Rhizomatic West* where he established a Deluzian reading of the term. Regions, Comer argues following Tatum, Campbell and Giles, read “local or regional cultural economies and relations to people to place as relatively deterritorialized from specific geographical sites” (Comer, “Place” 158).

However, Campbell’s concept of regionality does not fully dismiss traditional or fixed concepts– “one cannot dismiss these elements as insignificant” (*Affective* 197) as they are a fragment of the multi-relational idea of regionality: “they remain part of an assemblage of scored refrains that relationally and actively are thrown together in and

as regionality” (*Affective* 197). The key point is that regionality is understood as a process, an active one, a series of two-way relations, connections, a matrix of relatedness, an action of becoming. He calls these processes “regioning” (Campbell, *Affective* 5), stressing on the idea of constant movement. Regionality pays equal attention to the local yet Campbell acknowledges –and I follow– a crucial shift in his previous concept of “region,” moving from a “circular and enclosed” region to a political and active one. He adopts Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the political possibilities of a region understood as a breakup of the circular assumption of region. His latest work on the subject engages with “Guattari’s desire to interrupt the self-perpetuating *turning circle* with tangled lines of difference presents the political possibilities of regionality as an energized sense of care –a ‘new gentleness’– of responsibility, attunement, and mutuality” (Campbell, *Affective* 205). It is on this idea of mutuality where regionality moves away from regionalism. At the same time, it is precisely at this active political crossover where, I argue, region intersects with ecology in order to be grasped in a transversal way. This idea, rather than a traditional assumption for a minority of nature-lovers, assumes that ecology needs to branch out in at least three ways, following Guattari: environment, society and the subject (Campbell, *Affective* 206). Annie Proulx actively engages in this practice through her literary West: her ecological practice, as seen above, is mostly political, as she underscores those three arguments in an active correlated fashion. Understanding the American West from this double perspective, “it becomes activated, alive, an ‘incompletion’, open and responding to other perspectives as if its edges are no longer bounded and contained, but rather touched by and connected with force fields beyond it” (Campbell, *Affective* 197).

Another concept attached to Campbell's regionality is the notion of "affective." Affective landscapes have been largely studied by Kathleen Stewart, who broadly devises them as "moments of affective engagement that allow for a glimpse of social frictions and interactions, in ordinary moments and events tied to a place—a strategy for engaging the possibilities for different ways a place might mean for different people" (Cook, "Small Towns" 26). Campbell refers to an open and dynamic concept of place, whose relations come from Stewart's concept of "ordinary affects, an animate circuit that conducts a force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures. They are a kind of contact zone where the overdeterminations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies and flows of power literally take place" (Cook, "Small Towns" 27). This is the precise point where Campbell draws attention to the idea of motion, and where he proceeds to "critically engaging affect in our consideration of region" (Campbell, *Affective* 198). Regionality is thus affective in the sense that it "radiates, connects, encounters, lives, and relates as forms of *being* and *becoming*: 'not colored but, as Cézanne said, coloring'" (Campbell, *Affective* 14). He also quotes Canizaro when the latter refers to the "constancy and change of the local environment" to "encourage awareness of local climate and the changing of the seasons [...] (and) open up the possibility of shared purpose, in which the concerns of *here* are understood as linked to *there*: ecologically, economically, and socially" (Canizaro qtd. in Campbell, *Affective* 6). This political vision of changing region is highly attuned to the intention of this work. Proulx's engagement and attention to region—I argue—replicates this pattern accurately. And it is within these parameters that her work will be dissected in the course of this study. Campbell himself, an influential theorist in the field, suggests the concept as a "methodology, a critical practice" (*Affective* 6). The processual concept of region—regionality—is a constant dynamic that

reverberates in Proulx's West, which "resists understanding region as straight lines, neat borders, simple rootedness, or fixed points, and instead engages with 'other kinds of encounter and invention' (ibid.) to better participate in and articulate the affective spacetime of regionality" (Campbell, *Affective* 2). Pilgrims and improvers in Proulx's universe take part and are filtered through this affective process –conjunction, disjunction, widely discussed– and are an inescapable part of the axis that Campbell promotes in the process of affective critical regionality:

A 'redistribution of the sensible' working actively to stretch the taken-for-granted assumptions and close-worlds of regionalism; (2) the radical potential of the 'minor', local, small-scale, and fugitive to erupt into and disrupt regionalism's smooth-running, established 'languages'; and (3) a hopeful, human relatedness emerging from a recognition and appreciation of difference, connection, and responsibility through contingency, precarity and vulnerability—of seeing one's self in others, asserting the potential of a 'people to come', and interrupting 'the self-conscious account of ourselves.' (Campbell, *Affective* 4)

The three practices are illustrated in the last part of the analysis, in chapter 5, specifically in the section devoted to the trilogy of *Wyoming Stories*. Each practice is illustrated in a subsection, where a few selected short stories are analyzed under each reading.

In short, this section has attempted to expose Annie Proulx's double reading as a nature-minded writer and as a Western author, the two approaches that I will undertake in the analysis chapters of this dissertation. On the one hand, it has been fully exposed that her writing holds a strong grip on ecological awareness and concern about the natural world, expressed not just through her literary landscapes, peoples and the interconnections within, but also by leading a personal life that has always been close to experiencing the natural world. The way in which humans relate to the landscape, their

attitudes in terms of connecting to the land or not –analyzed through Scott Slovic’s concepts of conjunction and disjunction– determine their degree of success in the way they experience landscape. Nature acts back on them, not in a deterministic fashion, as we have stated, but as a consequence of their encounter and interaction with it. My argument is that her Western fiction can broadly be divided into narratives of conjunction and narratives of disjunction, as I will establish with the analysis of the corpus.

On the other hand, the section has also aimed at establishing Annie Proulx as a post-Western writer, in the sense that her conception of the American West is far detached from fixed and reduced notions of the West. It rather takes into account a radically new vision. Her approach to the West –and region in general– in her literature is closely allied with Neil Campbell’s concept of affective critical regionality. As the analysis will show, Proulx depicts a New West that is dynamic, alive; a new West where the local and the global interact and in which time and place are crucial elements to establish these connections. This is the argument that this dissertation attempts to prove in the examination of the Western corpus, establishing the political message on dynamic interconnections or “intersecting with the world” (Campbell, *Affective* 40). Annie Proulx’s perspective on a new American West contributes to Campbell’s reformulation.

2.4 The Western Corpus

This section provides argumentation for my choice of a specific corpus for this dissertation. The analysis is based on the novels *Postcards* (1992) and *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002) and the selected stories from the three volumes on Wyoming, *Close Range*

(1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008), all of them works by Annie Proulx. I argue that they should be considered as her fiction of the West, due to their geographical emphasis on the region, its history and its people, and so they have been generally considered by the academia.

Postcards, however, does not render a “pure” Western setting, as it follows the pattern of a road movie or a move-West narrative, as I explain below. In general, the stories encompassed in these books are set in a large area of the Midwest, the Texas Panhandle, and Wyoming. At this point in the structure, it has been stated how Proulx’s narrative fits transversally quite a few of the categories in literary studies, although she has mainly been studied within the framework of the American West.

In fact, I see three main reasons why the chosen works fit this dissertation: the fact that Annie Proulx herself is a Westerner; the undeniable Western approach applied by the academia and critics alike when studying her, based mainly on the unequivocal Western setting that she has explored in her fiction; and the universality of the Western landscape that she so vehemently projects and aims to protect. Consequently, in order to justify my choice of a specific corpus, here I expand on these characteristics. However, I also refer to how the settings in those works justify and account for a Western reading –or “post-Western,” as seen above– and call for such an analysis. I do that by offering a brief contextualized account of each of the narratives.

The first argument by which I have come to consider these works within the very specific framework of the American West is simply Annie Proulx’s personal standpoint as a Westerner. Even though she is not a region native, she is often referred to as the kind of passer-by that stays for a while and moves on. We have seen in the biographical section, when dealing with her method of research and writing, the way in which she

worked *behind the scenes*, in a way, calling herself “a professional outsider” (Proulx. qtd. in Kanner). After having completed a fairly amount of literature on the West, traveling in the region back and forth, she finally established herself there in 1994. As she stated in her online biography¹⁷, referring to the time when she was a writer in residency at the Ucross Foundation in northern Wyoming, during the writing of *Postcards*, at a time when she had already spent a considerable amount of time in the West:

Although I had travelled in Wyoming before, this was my first stay of any duration in the state and much about the place moved me deeply. I had always considered myself a roving citizen of the northern tier of the continent, but now I resolved to make Wyoming my permanent base when I could. That did not happen until 1994. (Proulx, *online biography*)

The fact that Proulx even wrote a book on the painstaking process of establishing her dream home literally in the middle of nowhere, in Wyoming, *Bird Cloud* (2011), explains how she seeks deeper knowledge or a way to pay even closer attention to the landscape, a moral and emotional connection at a few levels –natural, human, cultural. This moving there seems to contradict her own appreciation of being both a nomad and an outsider. This paragraph opens *Bird Cloud*:

The blue-white road twists like an overturned snake showing its belly. The ditches alongside are the same grey noncolor as the dust that coats the sage and rabbitbrush, the banks slopping crumbles of powdery soil that say “not far away from here were once volcanoes.” It is impossible not to think about those old ash-spewing volcanoes when moving

¹⁷ Annie Proulx used to maintain an official website -www.annieproulx.com- that has been closed now for some time. In it, together with all her bibliographical references, books to be published, information about her infrequent public appearances, etc., there was a brief but revealing autobiography where she offered an account of both her personal and her literary life. It covered all her personal and literary whereabouts all the way through 2006 approximately, when she was in the middle –among other projects– of writing the texts for *Red Desert: A History of a Place* (2008), a photographic essay on that area of central and southwestern Wyoming by photographer Martin Stupich.

through Wyoming. The sagebrush seems nearly black and beaten low by the ceaseless wind. Why would anyone live here, I think. I live here.
(Proulx, *Bird Cloud 2*)

Her intense reading of the land is made clear here, the same attention that she demands of her –improver– characters, as the posterior analysis will set forth. The quotation expresses Proulx’s historian side and reading of the region as a process. She combines in the same paragraph the consequences of human interaction with the millennial landscapes that were the natural ancestors of the contemporary landscape. That “Bird Cloud” experience, however, ended up with her leaving Wyoming after fourteen years there. She left and sold the property as the winters proved too harsh and the road to her home was constantly blocked. In a way, she did not achieve the conjunction with the place that she had expected, which ironically places her next to some of her ill-fated characters. When asked about the reasons for leaving, she mentions practicality: “I don’t know. I’ve asked myself that a thousand times. There was a lot of driving, hours and hours of driving, to get decent groceries and get anything done, to see the dentist blah blah blah. I do miss it, every part of it” (Proulx qtd. in Rock).

Proulx’s “Westernness” is widely acknowledged, even though it has been a permanent object of controversy when scholars try to refer to the West that she represents or depicts, both as a writer and as a –former– resident. In 1999, Nicci Gerrard described her as “a frontier woman. Her face is weather-worn, life-worn, as if she has spent years walking on hard earth against bitter winds.” Asquith goes further when he considers her a product of her creative imagination: “To some extent, Proulx’s most enduring character creation is her won persona, which emerges as the product of a careful mediation between author, publisher and journalists. That character, as befits

the author of three volumes of Wyoming short stories, is unashamedly western” (*Lost Frontier* 2). Elizabeth Abele, when decoding Proulx’s Western fiction, highlights how her lived and experienced West equals her research training or her open-air learnings. She says that “Proulx not only draws on her present residence in Wyoming but, as importantly, draws on her lifetime connection to the outdoor, as well as her training in history and economics” (Abele 115). This link with the West is recurrently present in most reviews and research works, and trying to summarize them would be unachievable, yet an inescapable argument to circumscribe the corpus to the four works just mentioned above. It is the evident fact that Proulx’s fiction, both analyzed as global or as single units, has repeatedly been considered within the scope of the literature of the American West, due to its obvious geographical setting.

In *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx*, edited by Alex Hunt, a series of scholars discuss relevant aspects of all her works, holding the focus on the geographical scope of her fiction. There is a common agreement that Wyoming is the main character of many of her stories: “a common readerly impression (is) that Wyoming itself emerges as the protagonist in this fiction” (Weltzien, “Annie Proulx” 100). Abele stresses the fact that by moving from the Northeast to the West –just like *Loyal Blood*, the protagonist of *Postcards*– she automatically changed her subject, attracted by the apparent inevitable pull of the region: “It seems somehow inevitable that a novelist like Annie Proulx, whose first novels were so enamored of landscape, should move west to Wyoming abandoning the Northeast as both her residence and as her subject- since the landscapes of the West have so long held a powerful grip on the American imagination” (Abele 113). Although Abele considers that Proulx presents a “fresh examination of Western geography and its residents” (113), her literary grip on the region goes way deeper, as it has amplified and

diversified the American Literary West by joining “other major novelists who have elevated Western writing from pulp to belletristic status, most notably Cormac McCarthy, Rick Bass, Richard Ford, Jim Harrison, and Ron Hansen” (114). The list categorizes Proulx not only as a Western writer, but exemplifies how authors hold different relationships to the Western genre.

Even though Proulx’s recurrent use of Western settings would alone stand as a weighty justification to consider her within the scope of the American West, a third and powerful reason lies in a very simple statement made by Annie Proulx herself: “writing about the American West is just like writing about anywhere” (Proulx qt. in Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 4). The line implies, in my view, that the stories and plots set in contemporary frontiers such as Wyoming, Texas or Colorado, to mention a few, speak universally about topics, tensions, rhizomes or contemporary dilemmas that affect humanity globally, permanently. Wake up calls on nature and the environment, but also macroeconomics affecting small communities, the politics of place, perpetual languages of power, immigration, gender issues, or postmodern existentialism in front of what is to come, surface and make us look around:

It’s a big interesting world, so I just took rurality as my ground. Wyoming and Newfoundland and the outback of Australia are not that different – the landscapes are different but the economic situations and the beliefs of the people who live in the places are quite similar, because they can’t see who’s making the rules and the economic strategies that govern them, they continue to believe in the independent rural life, which is deliciously ironic and very sad. (Proulx qtd. in Edemariam)

The main topics that I applied in this dissertation, conjunction and disjunction of characters with their ever-changing landscapes, appear and intensify in *Barkskins*, her

last work of fiction on deforestation, and in her very last nonfiction book, *Fen, Bog and Swamp* (2022). They are just blatant ways of exposing how the planet's maladies lie all around, and from which the American West is just an amplifier to play it through. It is also a way of saying that the region, with its peculiarities, myths, and preconceptions is nothing but a global reflection of human ways on landscape. This "post-West" unfolded through newcomers, immigrants, globalization, meth labs, mountain bikers, retirees, ranchers, gay cowboys or spas for Hollywood superstars, is nothing but a political mirror of a permanent transition and shift in local/global spaces, as well as a measure of how we interact with and how it builds in our imagination. The abstract idea of the West is not only made up by locals, residents, writers or scholars but also by everybody who reads about it, sings about it, represents it in art or simply envisages it in any possible way. It is always different as it is "conceived of as a location, a state of mind, advertising propaganda or a label deployed by historians of the Western literature" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 4). This "post-Western" reading of region is the one that Annie Proulx suggests when she mentions that she could write about "anywhere:" regions are complex, combining the local and the universal, thus creating a fluidity of spaces. They are not "pure" nor represent any status quo. These ideas will be developed in the analysis chapters of the dissertation.

Following is a brief introduction to the five volumes that shape this dissertation. The aim is not to develop the storylines or full character analyses but rather give an advance of the interconnections between landscape, the American West, and the humans' interactions within that landscape. At the same time, the section intends to point out the relevance of some narrative elements within Proulx's Western literary universe.

2.4.1 Postcards

The first novel to be included in this corpus is the novel *Postcards* (1992), the first chronological narrative of the analysis. It was Proulx's first novel after *Heart Songs* and the critical acclaim that it received was topped with the recognition by the 1993 PEN/Faulkner Award. My choice to include it in this dissertation is based on the fact that, even though the main setting is a farm in rural Vermont, its protagonist Loyal Blood sets off on a runaway journey West that spans along four decades.

Playing out as a symbolic expedition to the West, the plotline could be read as a Western road movie where horses give way to the advent of the automobile and the American highways. The novel traces the decline of a family of farmers in Vermont, the Bloods, in post-World War II rural America. Loyal Blood is a man attached to the old ways of the land and to a lifestyle that at the time is rapidly disappearing, and his aimless journey is a metaphor for the profound changes taking place, and the constant tensions that affect the American Western landscape and those who inhabit it.

Proulx approaches landscape in a multi-layered way. Her perspective confirms that region is, indeed, a space permanently in conflict, in motion, a political space in which everything is interconnected. However, at the same time, this is also a critical space in which Loyal fails to achieve conjunction. This is a relevant point, since it establishes a powerful contrast with *That Old Ace in the Hole*, a narrative that, as I have explained before, evolves into a story of reconnection and conjunction.

As mentioned before, in *Postcards*, Proulx first narrates the decline of a rural lifestyle. In the 1940s and 1950s American farms were left untouched by the new economic impulse that seemed to propel the whole country forward. As a result of the economic decisions made by urban centers, the development of new agribusinesses –a

connection with *That Old Ace in the Hole*— and a capitalist extractionist craze across the Midwest, America’s postwar prosperity failed to make itself felt in rural areas, when “concerns cropped up over a perceived threat to the survival of the typical smaller family-size farm brought on by corporate farms and the foreign threat of the Soviet collective farms” (Stockwell 7). Second, the changing region is presented as a symbol of a new generation of improvers, one that has proved a poor steward of the land, and failed to achieve conjunction. An emerging upper-middle class has invaded the rural landscape in a manner that shows little respect and even less knowledge of the land. Ironically, these new postwar entrepreneurs, who mercilessly exploit and urbanize the land, represent a generation divorced from that land. Without a trace of sentimentality, Proulx addresses the subject of environmental awareness and draws attention to rural causes. Through the various jobs that the protagonist takes on, she highlights new and lucrative activities which directly affect the land. The footprint of this new era consists of illegal trapping, uranium mining, digging up ancient bones, illegal hunting of endangered species, intensive farming, and real estate deals.

In *Postcards*, landscape is treated as an identity where the protagonist’s loss and his search for a sense of place end in tragedy, which suggests that leaving to go West was the first mistake that he made. Loyal’s farm and his family fall apart after he leaves, a fact of which he remains unaware for the next 44 years, as he has chosen not to have any direct contact with his family. He continues to send them postcards—hence the title—from wherever he happens to be. The postcards symbolize a thin link with the home. He asks about the farm and how things are going. His handwriting gets worse as his web of attachments and critical connection with home declines. His endurance is not to persevere but to barely survive. His sense of guilt and his inability to face himself

indirectly leads to the decline of the farm and he leaves his closest relatives either dead or desperately unhappy.

The concepts of region have a multi-leveled treatment. This is, Proulx addresses landscape on other levels as well, including such aspects as a connection with millennial landscapes: digging for ancient bones which are then sold to universities and colleges across the country. Proulx also explores the relationship between landscape and the new woman –exemplified by Jewell Blood, Loyal’s mother– and the new uses for the rural landscape. The old Loyal’s pasture has turned into a trailer park, occupied by Kevin Witkin who, like Loyal decades before, has also committed rape. Proulx fits all these changes into her chronological narrative as the 20th century hastens to its close.

For my exploration of the novel, I carry out an analysis from the perspective of the sense of place and connection to landscape, highlighting the characters’ disjunction from or conjunction with it. The old family farm stands as not only a node of connection between all the members of the Blood clan but also between those and their webs of attachments. Gradually, all the family members except Jewel leave the farm, but fail to establish a home anywhere else, due to the misreading of the signs that the ever-changing region shows to all of them. Attachment to the old ways brings only disgrace, but so it does neglecting them fully: Mink, head of the clan, hangs himself in a prison cell where he was confined after burning the barn to try to get the insurance money. Jewell, the clan’s matriarch, finds freedom after the disintegration of the family farm, when she moves to a trailer park, learns to drive and finds death in nature during a mountain car ride. Dub, Loyal’s younger brother, is crippled after jumping boxcars in his teenage years and leaves Vermont to establish a home and make a fortune in Florida, from where eventually he has to escape due to investigations by tax officials. Mernelle, the youngest

daughter, stands out as the only one who seems to understand the value of the family farm as a joint against disruption. All throughout the story she complains and curses Loyal for the family malady. She is the only one who seems to survive in an environment that she has achieved to understand and find harmony with.

Proulx uses the example of the disintegration of landscape as a habitat that compels Americans to reexamine the ethical and political terms in which they stand with their familiar landscapes. Different Wests –and their conceptual distance– will be examined in *Postcards*. This multifold approximation becomes a metaphor for the profound and permanent historical changes taking place, both in the land and in those who inhabit it. Loyal undergoes a physical and mental deterioration that symbolically parallels the deterioration of natural habitats in the West, as he wanders through the Midwest in search of an old ideal of at-homeness that has long vanished. In *Postcards*, the diaspora of the Bloods through a long period of time acts as the epic of the fast metabolism of the American landscape during the second half of the 20th century and as a warning against the loss of the sense of belonging and human attachment, main elements that define human habitat in a non-human landscape, what Kowalewski calls “historical amnesia” (“Contemporary” 7), thus making it plausible, I argue, to include the novel in the Western corpus of this dissertation.

2.4.2 *That Old Ace in the Hole*

That Old Ace in the Hole (2002) is the second novel included in my Western corpus, and it agrees with the reading of Western settings and environmental fiction that this dissertation proposes. It fits Hunt’s observation that “Proulx’s work seems to be moving

toward an ethics of place based on environmentally sustainable ways of living and laboring on the land and on values of local community cooperation” (“Insistence” 5). The novel illustrates the tensions between global economics represented by a hog farm corporation from an iconic financial Western city –Denver– and the fictional rural community of Woolybucket, in Texas. It is specifically set in the Western Panhandle, a place that according to Durrans “holds a perverse attraction and from which most Americans would gladly get away from” (14), both “beloved and bedeviled” (Lacayo). Those oppositions are personified in the main character, Bob Dollar, a pig farm scout who goes through a deep transformation process from improver to pilgrim. As the story develops, Dollar will shift from disjunction –he has failed to achieve a sense of place or belonging and feels that he has not found his purpose in life– to full conjunction with the Western landscape and community that he has originally come to possess and manipulate.

Initially working undercover for Global Pork Rind, an agribusiness corporation that is trying to find land for sale to establish pig farms, he gradually gets exposed to both the natural surroundings where he is staying and the people who still stick to the same old Western ways. This will lead him to a reconstruction process of individual transformation and renewed identity: “He felt he was in fragments, in many small parts that did not join” (Proulx, *Ace* 9). The story holds a steady ironic tone on the surface but conveys a deeper reading in terms of region and sense of place as the story unfolds. Proulx follows the process that has molded the American Western ethos throughout history. The story deals with community acceptance, surrendering to the landscape, setting the focus on an area that has been in the process of being abused for decades until the depletion of its natural sources.

As Abele points out, "*That Old Ace in the Hole* is unusual for contemporary Western writing in that its recuperative goal is not for values of the Western or its residents, but for the Western landscape itself" (117). Even though the plot evolves through Bob Dollar's "green" coming of age, the ultimate protagonist has been somewhat undercover: "Proulx has crafted a biography of the landscape, a narrative that regularly interrupts Bob Dollar's picaresque narrative. The landscape is the true main character of this novel, with the centuries of residents merely supporting characters who exist to paint the portrait of their enigmatic surroundings" (Abele 117).

Proulx focuses on the whole historic and economic process of the panhandle, which resonates as a summary of the whole history of the American West. In the simplicity of the characters' dialogues, she evidences the complexity of a process that includes Native Americans, the first traders, the appearance of the railroad –a relentless "advance" that deserves careful attention–, the advent of the cowboy figure, the barbed wire and, finally, the oil. In short, a clear challenge to fix, ideal, and pastoral notions of the American West.

2.4.3 Wyoming Stories

The three volumes included in the series *Wyoming Stories* –*Close Range*, *Bad Dirt* and *Fine Just the Way It Is*– have a common explicit geographical setting, Wyoming, a symbol of the American West that suggests all the mythic symbols of the region, from cowboys to ranchers, from pioneers to rodeos. It is a discernible base that justifies their "Western" label in reviews, scholarly work and academic collections.

Proulx moved to the state in the 1990s and she wrote the three volumes during the period when she was a Wyoming resident. If Wyoming has been the land of cowboys and rodeos and a perfect scenario for the mythic representation of the American West, in these stories, the territory does not quite relate to what could have been expected when associated with the romantic American West. The stories go back and forth from the old West to the contemporary West, often depicting the tension between the two through characters that struggle to adjust to the changing quality of the region. Often these individuals are at odds with the landscape, which defines their role in that West. She ironically entitles her third volume *Fine Just the Way It Is*, what surfaces is what had been so far neglected, unseen and minimized. Reviewers use a list of adjectives that hardly responds to an idealized or pastoral depiction of the American West. Following is an illustrative comment on the themes of some of the narratives, as their plotlines are further developed in the analysis section.

In “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water,” the reader finds this specific description of Wyoming:

You stand there, braced. Cloud shadows race over the rock stacks as a projected film, casting a queasy mottled ground rash. The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild country –indigo jags of mountains, grassy plains everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky– provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut. (Proulx, *Close Range* 99)

This introduction to the first volume is a prolepsis of a region where, as Rood expresses, “against this backdrop individual human beings and even whole civilizations are negligible indeed, and the only human approach to such overwhelming forces is a work

of fiction” (153). Each of the volumes holds a different technique and approach to the Wyoming landscape and its people. With these “distinctive features (...) it is possible to chart Proulx’s relationship with her adoptive state and her stylistic development” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 19). In *Wyoming Stories*, the Western myth and a hostile landscape define a permanent relationship of tensions between the people of the region and the old ideal that they hold inside, exposed to the global and the new, the marginal or the neglected: “They may be idealistic pioneers, bemused old ranchers, displaced Indians, confused cowboys, or Trailer Rednecks, but they are united by their subordination to a crushing myth carved out by people’s struggle with a hostile landscape” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 27).

Close Range

Close Range is the first volume of stories set in Wyoming, which, as Proulx expresses in the page of acknowledgments, has its origin in an invitation from the Nature Conservancy to contribute with a story to a collection of short fiction. Landscape and ecology were the points of departure as the stories were to be inspired by a visit to a few Nature Conservancy preserves, where she spent several days absorbing and perceiving the landscape up close (Proulx at John Adams 1999). Published as a volume in 1999, the title exclaims a duality between the openness of Western spaces and the immediacy of the landscapes: it is wide and ample, but it is also here, nearby. Proulx seems to say that it is closer than we think. Asquith points out that “as the title of her first collection makes clear, she is rejecting the long lines that have produced a mythologized West” (*Lost Frontier* 12). From the cover, then, she reminds us that the West is at the same time far –historically– but close, both in space and in time –full of interconnections and tensions

waiting to be solved. The close and open spaces in the stories affect how “we think and feel about ourselves” (Campbell, “From Story” 206), thus making it political and universal and showing, quoting Larry McMurtry, “how it overflows the bounds of genre in any way” (McMurtry qt. in Campbell, “From Story” 206).

In this first volume of short stories, “Brokeback Mountain” is by far the most discussed piece, both in critical and scholarly reviews alike. Often associated –and mixed up– with its representation in Ang Lee’s adaption for the big screen, the text challenges traditional Western boundaries, and Ennis and Jack’s homosexual love story reveals issues of masculinity, family values, and love that stand away from the Western pastoral. Campbell defines the movie adaptation as a “post-Western” (“From Story” 206), pointing out that Ang Lee is “consciously working both *with* and against the mythic frame of the genre, deliberately invoking and critiquing many of its guiding values while pointing the audience *beyond* classic Western ideology” (Campbell, “From Story” 206). I argue that Proulx suggests this reading, not exclusively in “Brokeback Mountain,” but in the whole volume of stories, as my subsequent literary analysis attempts to show.

In “A Lonely Coast” tells the story of a group of women who have suffered violent marriages although they are “living life to the full” (Proulx, *Close Range* 192), portraying the life of a very small community and the list of bad choices that those women make. Proulx’s “post-West” holds a fate oblivious to compassion in “The Governors of Wyoming,” a tale written in the present tense about the tensions between the old and the new West on the use of the land and its environmental consequences. Unemployment and lack of opportunity are central to the short narrative “Job History,” an ironic title for a narrative where there is no job to be found. Isolation, necrophilia, and death tint the Wyoming landscape in the one-page story “55 Miles to the Gas Pump,” in

which Rancher Croom's wife discovers the dead bodies of missing women in their attic. "The Blood Bay" is a folk-tale-based humorous story of three cowboys set in the cold Wyoming winter of 1886. Mero is the protagonist of "The Half-Skinned Steer," a narrative in the collection that underlines the memory and history of a place, through the story of a rancher that at 80 drives back to Wyoming for his brother's funeral, finding an unrecognizable space of permanent mutation and interchange that eventually leads him to disaster. The world of rodeo life and bull riding takes a sharp turn in "The Mud Below," which deals with violence, rape, and unfitting individuality. It tells the story of Diamond Felts, an unromanticized bull rider with family issues, whose identity plays out as a dark fate with those, like him, who have no prospects in life, in a background of economic struggle and failure to connect to family life. "Pair a Spurs" is set around a few Wyoming ranches in the 1990s and deals with the mad cow disease in the late 1990s and its effect on Wyoming's economy, exposing the complex relationships between men and women in a context of economic hardship, as Y2K approaches, in a humorous tone.

Stylistically, in *Close Range*, Proulx makes use of an often called "gritty" realism, interwoven at times with some magical realism. The cowboys and ranchers from this first volume go through stories of desperation, hard times, and unlikely happy endings, set in that West far from romanticized notions. The eleven stories expose issues that range from disjunctive and marginal cowboy life, environment, and greedy extractionism to tensions between the rural and the urban, painted in movie-like settings often closer to David Lynch's *Lost Highway* or Chloé Zhao's *The Rider* than to Ford's *Fort Apache* or even Clint Eastwood's *The Unforgiven*. The collection, contrary to what quite a few reviewers and scholars resist to discern, continues to draw on similar issues in *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2*.

Bad Dirt

After publishing some of the stories in *The New Yorker* and one in *The Paris Review*, those same stories and eleven more were compiled under the title *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2* (2004). Five of them are set in the fictional town of Elk Tooth. Proulx revisits Wyoming in stories that depict characters struggling with circumstances –the Western human and natural landscape– well beyond their control, most of them after they moved to Wyoming.

Some of the stories are about those who are either seeking authentic “bad dirt,” while others explain the hardship of those who already live in it. The title might suggest that the soil is not fertile, the ground is unsafe, or the setting is insecure. If compared to *Close Range*, the collection holds a compact unity in terms of theme and characterization, yet it follows a similar approach in terms of themes or views on the American West. Proulx shows sympathy for several –often classified as eccentric– characters fighting for connection and who seem at odds with their surroundings. The temporal setting stretches all across the 20th century through the late 1990s. Proulx wrote the stories when she was already a resident in Centennial, Wyoming, meaning that the collection is the work of a “Westerner” writing about the West.

The five stories that are set in the fictional Wyoming town of Elk Tooth deal with social attachment/detachment as a transversal theme, establishing the role of a small community in a greater space or region. In “The Contest,” the residents of Elk Tooth, in their efforts to combat isolation, engage in a hilarious beard-growing contest or suddenly decide to build hot tubs for themselves in “The Summer of the Hot Tubs.” In “The Hellhole,” magic realism performs an exercise on ecology and social justice. The

landscape takes the role of a main character in the form of a patch in a roadside park area that swallows illegal hunters, which eventually relieves park warden Creel Zmundzinski: "It saved a lot of paperwork" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 10). "Florida Rental" explains how local bartender Amanda Gribb fights invading cows in her trailer park garden by bringing alligators from Florida to take care of the problem.

Rural setting and harshness await urbanites Mitchell and Eugene Fair in "Men Crawling Out of Trees," whom the new environment fails to keep together. Their inability to make it into an idealized but hostile place seems not to entitle them to stay so they get back to their original New England home. "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick" is another tale of disconnection that tells the story of rancher Gilbert Wolfscale, who struggles to hang onto his old family place as he fails to attune to modern life, after marrying, divorcing, facing improvers, the incarceration of his ex-wife and finding out about the homosexuality of one of his sons, a major cause of mortification in the corseted masculine old ways of the American West. "Dump Junk" establishes tensions between past and present through the irony of the "treasures" that a brother and a sister find in their parents' junk after they have both passed away. They find a "magical" kettle that grants wishes. In "The Wamsutter Wolf," Buddy Millar travels the "bad dirt" roads of Wyoming and avoids any contact with the main highways, potential symbols of the fast-growing new-modern ways of contemporary life. These back roads take him back to Wyoming, only to find a "post-Westernized" trailer park town, ironically located next to Interstate 80. All these narratives will be dealt with extensively in the examination as they contribute to the Western edge of Annie Proulx's literary production that I have defined before.

Fine Just the Way It Is

Following the pattern of the previous two collections, the American West depicted in the third collection of Wyoming stories, *Fine Just the Way It Is*, follows characters and communities at a time and place in history in which they are struggling to move on without being stuck in the old concepts of the West. One more time, the playful title holds a direct reference to the American West and its place in the common imagination. The colloquial expression in the title can be interpreted as an invocation of the contrast between that old, mythic West that was, and the new, modern West that is. The American West cannot be thoroughly understood without taking into account the dynamics of place, and how regions have to be conceived as ever-changing territories.

The short stories in this third volume can be grouped into stories about Wyoming's past, ranging from the Stone Age to the 21st century, the booming coal and gas times of the present, all the way through the late 19th and the early 20th century pioneer times. Written in 2008, this last collection absorbs the nuances and global disruptions that moving into the 21st century meant for the American West, not always appreciated by reviewers and critics, at times failing to discern the region's tensions and focusing on the outcome, as I examine in chapter 5, devoted to the analysis of this collection.

Newcomers with new ideas about the old West have sprinkled Wyoming—like the “spandex pioneers” from “Testimony of a Donkey. Extractionism and severe disjunction are at play here as the plots move across the 1990s. Family, ancestry, sexual abuse, and the ubiquitous lack of work opportunities configure a West that has long lost its old flavor but that still dwells in the mind or imagination of some individuals. “Them Old Cowboy Songs,” set at the end of the 19th century, is another story of failure and disconnection, where a teen married couple escapes their troubled families and erroneously attempts

to settle in the Wyoming mountains. When their only effort left to succeed is to barely survive, their idealized Western dream collapses dramatically, for both of them.

Connected themes are presented in “The Great Divide,” a story that takes place between the 1920s and the 1940s. The West here proves lethal –both literally and metaphorically– to those trying ranching, farming, or mining. Set in the Continental Divide area of Wyoming, this natural division works symbolically as the big division between Hi, the protagonist, and his surroundings, but also “the great divide that separated men’s and women’s knowledge of sexual matters” (Proulx, *Fine* 108). Proulx’s sympathy for who might have been the stewards of the land, conjunctive to it, is displayed in “Deep Blood Greasy Bowl,” a story set back twenty-five thousand years ago in the area that is now Wyoming, which very realistically describes the hunting of a buffalo by a Native tribe by making it fall over a cliff. The story takes us back to a remote “pre-West,” set against the changes that future history is about to bring along. In “A Family Man,” an elderly man approaching the end of his life relates his father’s family secrets: he had three other families with children having the same names. The story contrasts old ancestry with modern contemporary “improvements” such as gas drilling and road expansion. “Tits-Up in a Ditch,” army slang referring to potentially bad outcomes, foreshadows the fate of four generations of characters from which an abandoned daughter, Dakotah, uneducated and unwillingly raised by her grandparents, receives no kind of care in her childhood but somehow survives, joining the military as the only way of fleeing the small Wyoming town that has ignored her since she was born. Issues such as the lack of education in rural settings as an inevitable way to disconnection, or the brutal neglect of children read as social maladies deeply rooted in these conflicted spaces. Ultimately, *Fine Just the Way It Is* presents a West that takes

into account migratory shifts and the neglected in the history and pre-history of the West, with the focus on the interplay between characters and landscape as well as the role of small communities facing the changes that global economics are forcing them into.

The trilogy of *Wyoming Stories* does not hand over the sublime Western landscape of John Ford's movie pictures but "the *Bad Dirt* of absolute indifference" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 12) and to which very few characters achieve to connect. Proulx's comprehension of the region is in direct conflict with a conception based on a straight single movement. Asquith borrows Campbell's concept of the "rhizomatic West" – developed in the previous chapter– when he points out that "this means rejecting the West as a space conceived in terms of linear growth out of rootedness (symbolized by a tree) and seeing it instead as a 'complex space of migratory, hybrid cultures that extends both within and without the region (symbolized by the complex underground horizontal root system, the rhizome)'" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 13). How much of that old West remains in this postmodern world, as Asquith assumes, and how this hybridity plays out in these narratives will be as well a significant part of my examination.

This trilogy of short stories comprises an interesting opportunity to explore Annie Proulx's exploration of the American West, as she neglects systematically that linear and straight horse-ridden Old West; instead, she outlines an American West that comes closer to that dynamic space that Neil Campbell perceives when he understands place as "something *in process* and therefore fully dynamic and alive" (*Affective* 30), and which I use as an analyzing tool for the most relevant stories.

In short, the volumes that I propose for this dissertation, I argue, specifically depict Annie Proulx's vision of the West, both in terms of landscape, its people, and the ongoing

process of the region. The justification of the corpus has gone further into detail regarding the upcoming analysis, something that I found relevant. As I have just explained, not just through the geographical setting but also through the approach with which I am framing my literary analysis, I have tried to clarify the justification for my corpus selection. Even though the approach to Annie Proulx's literature by scholars already supports my selection, I argue that what strongly validates this corpus is the hybrid theoretical approach from both an ecocritical, post-Western, and affective critical regionality viewpoint.

Chapter 3. Postcards: Blood on the Stone Wall

Got caught up in a breakaway dream
Destination city of New Orleans
Cheap motels and big-rig swells
Crossing bridges for eternity.
Headed west for a two week stand
And saw the poets of work-a-day glasses
Las Cruces is a part of you now
Desert bird sings songs of laughter
Still out there with the coffee stain
And puttin' miles on shoes
Can't escape the smell of cigarettes
Still livin' out these American late-night blues
Best to clear the mind
With a Mexicali radio station
Keep an eye out for the border patrol
Checkin' for drugs and so-called aliens
Highways and dreams forever together
In the minds of the free and the innocent
Always a future in a travelers hands
Starting fires on the river and madness

—Son Volt, *Highways and Cigarettes*

Following is the first part of the corpus analysis. This chapter deals with *Postcards*, Annie Proulx's first novel, published in 1992, a narrative that, I argue, exemplifies the process of disjunction from nature. In contrast, *That Old Ace in the Hole* is a novel about conjunction with the landscape, the one analyzed in the following chapter. If we can broadly affirm that, from an ecocritical point of view, Annie Proulx's literature is either about conjunction with landscape or disjunction and severance from it, I argue that *Postcards* falls into the second category.

The fact that my corpus includes a novel with a main Vermont setting as an example of Western literature –Vermont is considered a symbol of Eastern landscape fiction– is based on the fact that, I argue, the region can be read as a reappraisal of a ranch and its life in the American West. Proulx challenges old pastoral ideas of farm life and transposes the East and West to offer a critical vision of a region that can be read – as the analysis will show– as critical affective regionality. Kent C. Ryden supports this idea: “While offering an incisive critique of the region as embraced by American culture, it transcends that spatial specificity and emerges as the site where she inaugurates what becomes her characteristic stance towards geographical spaces and their ascribed meanings” (“Corpse” 82). These “ascribed meanings” in the East replicate the ones in the West: spaces are dynamic and interactive, eluding ready-made meanings, expectations that are generally held due to fix ideas about spaces. Just like with the West, with New England’s Vermont Proulx writes “*against* the weight of New England regional identity” and points out “the absurdity of the assumptions that characters have brought to Vermont” (Ryden, “Corpse” 83). That *Postcards* was her first novel “served as a kind of rehearsal for Proulx’s recent work” (Ryden, “Corpse” 82), which implies that the rural Vermont setting is proleptic of her subsequent Western spaces in following novels. Last, and going back to my corpus justification, where I pointed out the universality of Proulx’s West when she states that “writing about the American West is like writing about the American East of wherever” (Proulx qtd. in Cox), Ryden also agrees that “in reading Proulx on New England, one is prepared to read Proulx on the rest of the world” (“Corpse” 82). The second –and “moveable”– setting in the novel is established early on in the narrative. Proulx directs his runaway protagonist westward, a reminder of old-time mythic expansion, yet a different reappraisal: “West, that was the direction” (Proulx,

Postcards 24); in short, a Western. Yet, I argue that this 40-year journey of Loyal Blood reads as a post-Western –a concept fully dealt with in the previous chapter– in the sense that it demystifies the traditional idea of what “moving West” means, as the analysis and examples will show, as it deals not only with contemporary conflicts and processes that stand in the opposite side of traditional assumptions. The further Loyal Blood is from his Vermont home, the bigger and more extreme his disjunction from the land, going from estrangement to estrangement, to finally find loneliness, misery, and disconnection from all previous attachments.

Prior to my analysis, a concise section deals with a key metanarrative element in *Postcards*, namely, a collection of printed postcards that appear at the beginning of each chapter. Both individually and as a whole, they serve multiple narrative functions that go beyond the conventional use of the epistolary. Annie Proulx makes an intentional use of these postcards, which at times carry a parallel narrative along the framework of the novel and make the reader an active participant from the first page.

My analysis follows, as stated in the previous chapter, a two-sided examining framework. The novel is examined from an ecocritical point of view, focusing on how extreme disjunction from landscape ends up in ecological disaster, not just in economic terms, but in terms of moral and personal decline. As explained in chapter 2, I am borrowing Scott Slovic’s concepts of “conjunction” and “disjunction” to examine how characters approach and interact with landscapes –natural, human, imagined– in the novel, and at the same time how the ever-changing landscape performs agency and interacts with them as well. Their degree of success or failure in the endeavor categorizes them as –borrowing Barry Lopez’s terms– “pilgrims” or “improvers.”

I argue that *Postcards* is a narrative about disjunction from nature, not only by the example of Loyal the protagonist, but also by the people who stay behind. Loyal's quest for home is a process of disruption and eventual disjunction with the land, nature, society, the landscape, place, home. Memory, time and family history stand out as a weight on Loyal's shoulders that prevents them from connecting with the land, home, in an irreversible process of decline parallel to the one that the land that unwelcomes him suffers. All of them –the Blood family members and the newcomers that come to populate this rural Vermont area– go through this process of extreme severance from the land or else they come to it as improvers, all of which leads to ecological disaster.

The other layer of the examination of *Postcards* is a reading of the text as affective critical regionality, a concept developed by Neil Campbell and widely discussed and explained in the methodology section, specifically focused on the dynamic space that the Bloods farm is. This dimension of the analysis is fully aligned with the post-Western reading of *Postcards* previously mentioned. Even though it is already explained in the introduction, I am going back to specifying my post-Western reading of the novel as I consider that Proulx's idea of the West is understood under that ever-changing vision. My examination shows that the process of disjunction that Loyal Blood, the protagonist, goes through in *Postcards* –as well as other characters' processes of disjunction– helps explain region as an example of affective critical regionality. As Campbell suggests, regions –the American West in particular –and other areas of the Midwest in general– can be defined as affective spaces, places that are alive, dynamic and in constant change. The Bloods farm in Vermont, a central space around which the whole dynamics of the narrative expands, I argue, can be regarded as an affective critical space. Following Neil

Campbell's notion of "affective critical regionality," the examination focuses on the Bloods farm.

This point of view is supported by critics such as Ryden, who reads *Postcards* in similar terms: "What becomes unmasked on closer inspection is a place that is deeply troubled, extremely complicated, and continually whipsawed by contingency and bad luck" ("Corpse" 76). The concept of critical, we have seen, refers to the multi-layered and complex idea of region, one that accounts for tensions that challenge ready-made meanings or old preconceptions –the mythic West. This reading suggests that regions are challenged, in constant movement, thus becoming heterogeneous without losing their idiosyncrasy. The farm –read a ranch– as a symbol or affective space plays out as a dynamic space that challenges old ways and readings of region. In *Postcards*, global economics across the 20th century define the fate of small communities turning them into critical spaces, and as such it will be analyzed, being a central concept in the whole of this dissertation.

3.1 The Writing of *Postcards* and its Reception

Postcards, Annie Proulx's first novel, was published in 1992 and earned her the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction in 1993, given to a female writer for the first time. It was written during a residency of six weeks at the Ucross Foundation in Clearmont, northern Wyoming, right across the Big Horn Mountains (Rood 7). At that time, Proulx had already been signed by Scribner as her publishing company. After an initial shock at the prospect of writing a novel, she surprised herself at how fast she adapted: "(I) had not a clue about writing a novel, or even the faintest desire. I thought of myself as a short story writer.

Period, period, period [...] I sat down, and within half an hour, the whole of *Postcards* was in my head” (Rimer). As usual, she did “considerable research for this across the country novel” (Rood 7) and the reception of both critics and the general public was very enthusiastic, underscoring both the depth of her story and her “mesmerizing” style, a word found in quite several reviews. Praise such as coming close to “writing the Great American Novel” (Bradley), “we had better from now on listen to her voice” (Busch) or “the bitter lives of its men and women, are portrayed with memorable effect in this remarkable first novel” (Mackay) are just a few examples. She was paralleled with classics both by American and British critics. Asquith reminds us, though, how some critics had an issue with the fragmentary style that the narrative employs, “at the expense of the gradual unfolding of broader themes” (*Annie* 98), mentioning how some of them disapproved of the confusing plot, the overcrowding short sentences or the often-misunderstood use of metaphors. Asquith quotes Henry Porter of *The Guardian* who implies that those critical reviewers “have failed to keep pace with cultural shifts” (Asquith, *Annie* 100) as they misread the use that American writers make of language, as “its lack of clausal formality and present tense terseness seem appropriate to describe the world in the late 20th century” while the English prose’s heritage seems “to be trapped in an age of gentility” (Porter qtd. in Asquith, *Annie* 100).

Postcards is a narrative that spans four decades of American history through a myriad of characters and landscapes and that, in Proulx’s own words, “set her approach to fiction forever [through] the examination of the lives of individuals against the geography and longue durée of events, that it, that time and place are major determining factors in human life” (Proulx, *online biography*). Proulx got the inspiration for the novel in some 1930s Vermont marshal’s reports that include “a number of dismal accounts of

farmers burning down their houses and barns for insurance money” (Proulx qtd. In Rood 40) to what she added quite a bit of research on creating her protagonist, Loyal Blood, who “leaped complete and whole formed from a 1930s Vermont state prison mugshot” on one of “a small stack of postcards sent out by the Windsor Prison warden’s office in the 1930s to alert various sheriffs around the state to escapees” (Proulx qtd. in Rood 40). The novel’s main setting is a double one that runs parallel throughout the narrative. On the one hand, the fixed main setting is a rural Vermont farm –which plays out both as a real and imagined setting– and a second one that could be described as a “moving” setting (or setting “in motion”), namely the different places that protagonist Loyal Blood inhabits –both physically and emotionally– all the years that he is on the run.

In short, the narrative has a complex structure characterized by multiple diegetic spaces, which required extensive research from Annie Proulx. Despite being her debut novel, it received significant acclaim reception from both critics and readers, culminating in the PEN/Faulkner award, as I have mentioned above. Given the intricacy and interplay of various characters and events, I find it necessary to provide a clarifying plotline section to ensure a clear and coherent analysis.

3.2 From a Farm in Vermont to the Garden of Eden

What follows is an account of the main plotlines in *Postcards*, which I consider relevant for the subsequent analysis, as I just stated above. The large number of subplots in the novel –a common feature to all of Proulx’s narratives– makes it at times fragmented on the outside. Even though that endeavor might still have turned out somehow extensive,

I find myself limited to restrict its length due to the relevance of the complex interconnections and intersections between characters, spaces and relations. The fact that quite a few of the plotlines are simultaneous in both time and space increases the difficulty in summarizing them.

Postcards is the account of the lives of the Bloods, a farming family of Cream Hill, Vermont. This account covers a period of 44 years, and the existence of a big number of characters around those lives and places. Its plot sets in motion when Loyal, the eldest son, sets off on a forty-four-year runaway journey after raping and accidentally killing his fiancée Billy in one of his fields –“by his quick temper” (Rood 40) –in the first scene of the story. The third-person narrative follows Loyal on the road –in “exile” (Proulx, *Postcards* 186)– for four decades, oblivious to what is going on with the family farm and his family. During that time, he undergoes misfortunes and estrangements that drive him further away from the family farm and his natural landscape. From that point on, the narrative follows the events, changes and misfortunes in the lives of each member of the family, narrating Loyal’s life on the run and the lives of those that stay behind. In parallel, it chronicles the social and economic changes in the American landscape throughout the second half of the 20th century and how those changes transform their individuals.

The story opens with the scene where Loyal has just raped and accidentally killed Billy next to a stone wall around the farm. He then buries her corpse in a fox den and, panicking, that same night he tells his family that he and Billy are leaving to start anew somewhere else. Billy, who had always despised the farm and envisioned a cosmopolitan life away from the country, ironically, never gets out of there and literally becomes part of the land’s soil: “Billy, always yapping about moving away,

getting out, making a new start, was staying on the farm” (Proulx, *Postcards* 12). Loyal, on the other hand, who had only dreamed of working and improving the family farm and had never wanted to leave Vermont before, runs away –burying his hopes with it (Busch)– and never settles anywhere or makes it back to the family farm. Following the irony, he drives West, pursuing Billy’s dream: “West, that was the direction. That was where Billy thought there was something. Not another farm. She wanted a place with roadhouses, some kind of War work, good money in the factories if she could find a job that didn’t bust her nails, save some dough for a start, go out Saturday night” (Proulx, *Postcards* 24).

Loyal sets off in his brother’s 1936 Chevy Coach from central Vermont into New York State along the Adirondacks. He does not know where to go as “It wasn’t the idea that he could go anywhere, but the idea that he had to go somewhere, and it didn’t make any difference where” (Proulx, *Postcards* 24), which suggests the idea of a fugitive, yet he experiences a sense of freedom: “the further away the better he could breathe” (Proulx, *Postcards* 26). He stops at a roadside café for coffee and a sandwich, ending up in the back in a sexual encounter with the female keeper. Loyal is suddenly unable to perform as he chokes and cannot breathe, a kind of attack that he will experience from now on each time that he is faced with the experience of sex –“post-Billy attacks” (Rood 43)–, becoming sexually dysfunctional for the rest of his life. On leaving the café he takes a bunch of postcards¹⁸ with him that become his

¹⁸ The postcards in the novel function as a metanarrative element. There is a printed postcard at the beginning of each chapter, written by either one of the central characters or are simply unsolicited postcards sent by a company, corporation, etc. A section below examines the central role of these postcards in the narrative and what implications they have both on the reader and in the sequence of events. These postcards parallel the story and fill in with missing information on both the characters and the plot, and they stand out as the only link that Loyal establishes with the family and the original farm landscape of his Vermont farm during the 44 years that he is on the run. They represent connection to a fix place in his mind -the family farm- while he is constantly on the move. Among other meanings, the postcards are a physical proof of Loyal’s slow process of constant disjunction and they stand for a parallel fictional narrative the he writes himself. More in “The Postcards in *Postcards*” section.

one-way communication with his family, as he never includes a return address.

During the winter of 1944-45, Loyal has found a job at an aircraft factory in Chicago, and saved six hundred dollars to buy a small farm, but a hitchhiking sailor that he picks up steals his money. In the springtime, crossing Minnesota, he picks up two other hitchhikers, a soldier and a strange Indian. The soldier steals most of his money and, later, the Indian leaves him half-scalped and takes the rest of the money and Loyal's car, all during a tornado storm. The Indian leaves a notebook¹⁹, his only steady companion for the upcoming forty years on the road. This is only the first one of a never-ending series of estrangements and misfortunes that will haunt Loyal until the moment of his death.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Loyal is working in the Mary Mugg, a dangerous gold mine in Colorado where the workers are mostly "outlaws and cripples" (Proulx, *Postcards* 83). When the mine collapses with him inside, Loyal thinks that the end has come, what triggers images of his farm. He remembers the final moments of Billy's life, and how he felt her curse on him, which forced him out of his family farm and into the process of severance from his familiar landscape, the process of ripping out his sense of at-homeness. He is the only one that survives the accident in the mine.

Loyal gradually starts thinking of going back to rural life, finding himself a new farm once he earns some money again. He decides to take up an activity in the open and starts prospecting for uranium, at a moment when big polluting businesses with expensive equipment take over the work of individuals who, like Loyal, work

¹⁹ "The Indian Book" appears in the form of chapters in the novel, depicting what Loyal writes. They work as a more real account of his thoughts than what he writes in the postcards to the family. Loyal makes a different use of it as the story goes, going from a nature journal -the Indian had drawings of plants and animals- to an improver notebook where he registers practical information.

with a Geiger counter as the prices for uranium are going down. One day Loyal finds fossilized bones, probably from a dinosaur, and sells them to “Donald the Bone Man,” a peculiar character that deals with selling them to colleges and institutions. Loyal becomes a specialist at it, due to his former skills as a trapper, and he is hired by a dinosaur hunter, Bullet Wulff, with whom he hunts for bones in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It is 1965 and Loyal connects with a university student fascinated by dinosaur tracks, and who has the interesting theory that scientists might have been wrong about the anatomy of one of the dinosaurs. They both plan to work together the following summer, but the student dies before.

Loyal meets Ben Rainwater around 1966, an eccentric, self-acknowledged alcoholic, well-known but not respected scientist and amateur astrologist, who is the only person that establishes some kind of intimacy with Loyal. He provides him with a kind of home environment, and they both engage in building an observatory together. Loyal becomes his best friend and confidant and drags him home when Ben falls down, drunk, as he does most evenings. Ben is also the only one who senses the weight on Loyal’s shoulders and the latter’s inability to connect: “There’s something haywire about you. There’s something truly fucked up about you. I don’t know what it is, but I can smell it. You’re accident-prone. You suffer losses. You’re far-off center” (Proulx, *Postcards* 172). He is also the only one to whom Loyal nearly confesses the crime when trying to explain his inability for sex

Two years later, he sees himself in a mirror and realizes his physical decay and his uprooted status: “Fifty-one years old. The prospecting, the barroom nights, the summers digging with Bullet, the climbs up to the passes in the mountains, moving through the breast-high rabbit brush, his way had been that of an *exile* for a long

time” (Proulx, *Postcards* 186, emphasis added). He feels somehow forced to settle. He buys a farm in North Dakota with the money that he has been saving for years, trying to keep “the tremulous balance of his life” (Proulx, *Postcards* 187). It is a quite different place from the one that he had imagined to own (M. E. Johnson 29), which is why he has trouble referring to it as a farm: “He couldn’t think of it as his farm, and called it ‘the place.’ That’s what it was, a place” (Proulx, *Postcards* 188). His place contrasts with the utilitarian farming exploitation of his mechanized neighbors, the Shears. They try to instruct Loyal about how essential machinery is to monetize the land optimally.

In October 1969, after a summer drought, Loyal settles but does not seem to adjust. Initially, he appears to come to terms with the region, following that old feeling of “curing the trouble with earth” (Proulx, *Postcards* 187). He has fixed up the dull farmhouse –“an uneasy house” (Proulx, *Postcards* 189)– and managed to put in his first bean field, as if he is slowly regaining a measure of harmony with his surroundings, but peaceful times do not last long. One day a McDonald’s employee who was trying to burn a pile of tumbleweed in the middle of a windstorm provokes a fire that spreads rapidly around the area. Suddenly, the wind changes direction and the fire destroys Loyal’s bean field and uninsured farmhouse. Estrangement is here again: “Down to a truck and a dog. Not even a change of clothes” (Proulx, *Postcards* 202).

The following year, homeless and on the road again, Loyal uses his old familiarity with the land and he decides to make a living from trapping. For six seasons, he lives in a wagon, setting his traps for coyotes. He becomes acquainted with the Sagines, a couple who owns a large piece of land and develops a deep

sympathy for Loyal. In 1979, after trapping on his own for a while, he goes to the Sagines' ranch and learns that Jack has died. Starr –his widow– suggests that Loyal should move in with her in the ranch, as her lover. The possibility of the longed-for home comes within reach: “I feel like I’ve got the liveliest part of my life still ahead. I could stay on the ranch, Loyal, but not alone. A man is needed.’ She couldn’t say it much clearer” (Proulx, *Postcards* 264). But once more Loyal rejects the offer of a home. It is not “his farm,” so he continues his aimless journey, earning a living from trapping. The place does not seem to provide him with what Tuan refers to as a sense of coherence of inner life with the outer world (Tuan’s qtd. in Wendy and Katz xiv). His uprootedness is visible again when he sees a newspaper picture of a Basque family and wonders what it would have been like to have a family of his own: “This is what it comes down to, the study of photographs of strangers” (Proulx, *Postcards* 266).

Loyal is approached at a hunter’s bar full of hunters by two characters that mock the little money that he makes on trapping. The place has a funny strong smell that he is unable to identify at first, as the two men offer him to hunt bears for their gallbladders²⁰. This new illegal line of hunting is about to exterminate the black bear, as a government official predicts: “We will see the end of bears in our lifetime” (Proulx, *Postcards* 257).

At the turn of the 1980s Loyal is suffering from severe lung problems, and he is almost constantly sick, living hand to mouth. His physical decline parallels his

²⁰ The international bear bile trade has been an ongoing ecologic issue since the 1970s and it is still actively ongoing. According to a report by the World Animal Protection, this illegal activity is in demand throughout Asia but also in other parts of the world. This association reports that a high percentage of traditional medicine stores in Japan, the U.S. and the UK sold bear bile, often imported illegally from China and Russia. Source: <https://www.worldanimalprotection.us>

inability to settle down, and the handwriting in his postcards becomes both messy and austere. Now a drifter, his next move is Colorado. His living space has symbolically been reduced to the trailer attached to his truck. He has become a full-time nomad, an image that mirrors a large section of American society during the 1980s, for whom landscape had become homogenized.

Later, he gets a job as a foreman for a company of potato pickers, only to discover that the employer first exploits the migrant workers and then kills and buries them, so he does not have to pay them. On finding the dead bodies he also comes across what he thinks that it is a huge and valuable dinosaur bone, yet in turn is a fulgurite. He tries to cash it in at a university, but he is only reminded that “this is just not the way it’s done, old-timer” (Proulx, *Postcards* 294). A scientist explains to him that it is a fulgurite, a fossilized formation caused by lightning, which is in fact valuable. He decides to take it to someone who used to buy bones in Utah or Montana –it was Wyoming actually–, but his worn-out sense of direction misleads him to Minnesota, as all roads look the same to him.

Loyal lives in his truck, which is in bad shape, like himself. At this point, his intimate space has been confined to a truck bench seat, which contrasts sharply with the vast spaces around him that he cannot call home. Ill and confused, he is driving in an unknown direction when the truck breaks down: “Worn out, worn down, used up. That’s all folks” (Proulx, *Postcards* 298). He buries the fulgurite hoping to find it later. Wandering through the fields with his remaining possessions –a bedroll and a few old tools– he momentarily feels the land and seems to regain his senses.

By now, Loyal’s health has deteriorated as he suffers from lung disease and

has a persistent cough. He has lived nomadically for years and now settles somewhere in Colorado next to a young hippy couple, who live on a farm. He works at a sawmill and still longs for land, and he tries to work a borrowed piece of land. His domestic space is now reduced to a wagon attached to his old pickup truck. Loyal is an old man telling stories about trapping and being on the road to the young couple who are not always interested or who do not understand.

In his last journey, on foot, he scrabbles around for food outside a restaurant in Minneapolis. His mind develops an awkward familiarity with the landscape around him, and he dances and sings. He has a homely vision of himself, an outburst of at-homeness in a moment of hopelessness. Loyal dies lying in a field, with a vision of the farm wall where he killed and buried Billy. Ironically, no one back home in Vermont has ever questioned the story that he had told on leaving, as Billy's body was never reported or identified as such.

Parallel to Loyal's wanderings throughout the West, *Postcards* pays close attention to the experiences of those "left behind" at the family farm. Loyal is unaware of the destiny and misfortunes that his relatives suffer, all related to their interactions and dynamic processes established with and around the family farm.

Mink, Loyal's father, is stubborn, short-tempered –as his name suggests, "a quick-tempered member of the weasel family" (Asquith, *Annie* 32)– and violent by nature. He enrages at Loyal's departure, trying to stop his departure by hammering the door to the frame, as he is aware that he will not be able to maintain the farm on his own. Once Loyal leaves, he shoots Loyal's more productive Holstein cows in an act of fury and revenge. He is tied to the old ways of the farm; that is why he had never been interested in Loyal's ideas or in adjusting the farm to the new times as

he fails to understand the impact of industrialism and the necessity of electrification –a key issue during this period. The endeavor of keeping the farm is ill-fated from the beginning, with only the help of his other son Dub, who is crippled by a boxcar jumping accident. He predicts it on his brother’s departure: “Hey, you leave, Loyal [...] you’re finishin’ off this farm” (Proulx, *Postcards* 11).

Just a few years after Loyal’s departure, Mink has not been able to run the farm and save it from its decline and he has refused to sell it. He refuses to hear from his son by not reading the postcards that he keeps on sending, thus cutting him off from the Blood circle, his “circle of blood.” He has nine sick cows left. He decides to set the barn on fire with the cows inside, so that he can claim the two-thousand dollars of insurance money²¹ and pay the family’s debts. Initially, the insurance company pays his claim, but a young investigator discovers the misdemeanor, and both father and son are thrown into jail, where Mink hangs himself, a very symbolic ending of a traditional way of life.

The story of Jewell, the matriarch, can be explained in terms of getting away from the domestic oppression of traditional family life. Her name suggests that she is the most valuable part of the family. After Mink’s death, she has to come out of financial trouble. In the 1960s, facing the decline of the family farm, she is forced to sell it –paradoxically the price of her freedom is the selling and disintegration of the family farm– just to move to a trailer with views over the old farm. She manages to “escape without leaving home” (Martikainen 181) and starts exploring familiar areas

²¹ As stated in the introduction to the novel’s process of writing, this is the original historical fact that helped Proulx put the story together, in her own words. American farms in the post-Depression/pre-modern era could not cope with the costs of adjusting their needs to the new times to increase their productivity, so many farmers engaged in extreme measures. Proulx explains it: “I bought a box of books, among these books were two or three slender little bound reports from the office of the State Fire Marshal during the Depression years of the 1930s. This was a time I learned when many desperate farmers set fire to their own barns and houses for the insurance money, which often amounted to only 75 or \$100” (Proulx at John Adams 1996).

around the community. Jewell gets a job in a cannery, where she works with other women, and knits garments for a ski shop. She learns to drive and gets herself a Volkswagen “beetle” and comes to enjoy the comforts of modern life, such as electricity and plumbing –commodities that she was never able to have at the old family farm. She is physically alone but does not feel lonely. At the same time, Jewell notices the surroundings and she still takes care of her old gardens behind her old farmhouse.

However, she is not completely in tune with what the new society has to offer: she goes back to canning her own vegetables as she does not like the taste of the frozen ones, and she misses the taste of her own raised chicken meat against the meat that she now buys at a store: ““Mernelle, you remember the hens we raised were so good. I can just taste one of these big roasters, go seven or eight pounds [...] Make your mouth water just to smell it”” (Proulx, *Postcards* 175). Keeping a balance between the old and the new life, at 69, in 1972, she starts showing signs of inconsistencies and her driving becomes erratic (Rood 56). One cloudy morning she ventures on a country excursion to Mount Washington, New Hampshire, with the idea of driving the new toll highway and admiring the views. During her drive, it starts to rain heavily and, failing to find her way back, she ventures into a dirt road where she gets lost and end ups with her beetle hanging off a rock. Trying to free the car with a branch, she dies of an aneurysm in a pass full of prickly shrubs and her body is never found. Rood suggests that Jewell’s “downfall is at least partially the result of her seduction by a modern life that she only partially understands” (57), which happened when she was enjoying her apparent freedom and adjustment to the new times: “She fought her way forward, seven, eight feet, her heart hammering, so

intent on reaching the other side of the gully she felt only astonishment when the fatal aneurism halted her journey. Her hand clenched wild raspberry canes, relaxed” (Proulx, *Postcards* 219).

Dub, the Bloods’ youngest son, has no interest in the farm and lacks the attachment that Loyal feels. Interestingly, Dub’s character transformation goes from disconnection to prosperity. After losing an arm jumping boxcars in his youth, he is no longer useful on the farm. He longs for a different life and dreams of learning to improve his personal situation somewhere far from Vermont. Only after Loyal’s departure Dub feels part of the farm, working hand in hand with his quick-tempered father until –as seen above– he helps him burn down the barn for the insurance money, and like Mink, he goes to prison. Once released from prison, he applies for a number of jobs –electric milking farm operator, piano tuner, electrician, grain salesman–, but he is repeatedly turned down as soon as they see a hook in place of his hand. It is November 1953 and, in a postcard, he informs his family that he is not returning to the family farm, promising “will send money if I strike it rich” (Proulx, *Postcards* 134).

Divorced from Myrtle and father of a son that he will never see, Dub moves to Florida in 1960, where he works during the day and attends real-estate school at night: “This a garden of Eden, even with all those Cubans coming in to get away from Castro” (Proulx, *Postcards* 139), he tells in his next postcard. He gradually attains prosperity in the real-estate business; he has no other interest than making money and, after a couple of years, he marries Pala, a money-starved Cuban American woman who, like him, has no morality when it comes to economic transactions. With a complete disregard for any natural areas or ecosystems, together they earn

millions in real estate deals, selling Florida land, especially in a shady transaction of selling swamp land to Disney World for further development that will destroy ecosystems and erase species. Dub and Pala are audited by the IRS in 1979, which makes their earnings decrease substantially. This setback and the Miami riots in 1984, make them leave their beloved Miami and head out for Houston, where Pala plans on starting a travel agency, while Dub, now retired, will carry on with his newly acquired hobby of growing orchids, a plant that, like him, needs no connection with the soil. Even though Dub is in regular contact with Mernelle –he sends packages and gifts back home–, he fails to show up at funerals or ever visit his mother –as seen before– as he has no interest in ever going back Northeast. He ends up rootless and completely disconnected from his family.

Mernelle, the only daughter in the family, is not interested in farming, just like her brother Dub, and she longs for a life away from it. She is the one always waiting for the mail, the first recipient, in hopes of receiving some kind of letter that sets her free. She is not excited about the familiarity of Loyal's postcards, though she keeps track of her own: "There was a postcard for her, the third piece of mail in her life. She counted them" (Proulx, *Postcards* 37). She wishes to become a middle-class wife like the ones that she reads about in magazines or at times sees on television rather than becoming a country matriarch type like her mother. Even though Mernelle replicates her housewife-mother's pattern, she does not have Jewell's longing for independence, even though her mother reminds her about the importance of that freedom, a liberation that she had never experienced: "You better learn to drive a car Mernelle soon's you can so you don't get stuck on a farm. I wanted to learn years ago, but your father said no, still won't have it, no, doesn't like the idea of his

wife drivin' around" (Proulx, *Postcards* 65).

Mernelle's life is defined by her loneliness, as she is desperate to make connections with the "outer world" of the farm. Martikainen observes how her "looking out the window speaks of escape, a chance to get away from these surroundings that have trapped her for so long" (184), yet ironically, she will never leave Vermont. She reaches out to get a pen-pal friend –seen in the postcards section–, Juniata Caliota, an immigrant girl with whom she becomes friends and whose success in terms of raising a family in a happy home strongly contrasts Mernelle's own solitude and inability to attain what her friend has achieved.

Mernelle meets and finally marries Ray McWay through a newspaper campaign for bachelors to find a husband or wife, and the two of them adjust to the rapid transformation and conflicting changes that take place around them. The two become a traditional 1950s middle-class couple, of dinners and television evenings, but she has no further family in Vermont. Mernelle's only contact with the world outside is also through postcards, fix images that represent her own immobility. At home, she is the only one also that keeps contact with Dub in Florida and her mother, whom she visits regularly. Mernelle represents the end of the line for the Blood clan, as she and Ray cannot have children: "This family has got a habit of disappearing. Every one of this family is gone except me. And I'm the end of it" (Proulx, *Postcards* 225). She is the only survivor –both in real and symbolic terms– of the Blood clan, representing thus the end of it, as I have previously stated. Her sterility has made her unable to keep the family name as it has "echoed the sterility of her own life" (Rood 55). However, her partial success can be measured in readjusting in terms of "absence of pain," just like the character of Quoyle in *The*

Shipping News.²² She has been the passive witness of the deep transformations in the world around her, and she has stayed oblivious to the conflicting relations around the farm. All she ever wanted was a better place.

At this point, I do not consider it relevant to dwell on any further sub-plotlines in *Postcards*, as these will be explained as soon as a new character is analyzed, such as the newcomers to the farm after the Blood family disappears, or whoever relates to each of the central characters. Each time a new character from *Postcards* is mentioned in the analysis his/her context and role in the story will be duly clarified. Otherwise, this section –intended originally for brevity– might expand into unreal proportions that drive the focus away from the matter originally intended.

3.3 The Postcards of *Postcards*: an Essential Metanarrative Frame

This purposefully-brief section is intended to offer a general view of a metanarrative element in *Postcards*, namely, printed postcards, which both individually and as a whole provide the novel with several narrative functions that transcend the common use of the traditional literary epistolary. Annie Proulx makes an intentional –and confessed– use of these postcards, which makes the reader an active participant from the first page. Following is a brief description of the postcards that appear in the novel and how they affect the story, the characters and, eventually, how they often become a parallel and independent narrative.

²² In *The Shipping News*, protagonist Quoye, succeeds in surviving. This is Proulx's concept of success, measured in terms of lack of pain, as her own pessimistic reflection of real life: "The 'happy ending' is not really a happy ending unless you define happiness as an absence of pain [...] But that's what most people's lives are like anyway. Have you ever met any happy people? [...] Anybody who says that they're happy is lying" (Proulx qtd. in Edemariam).

Annie Proulx introduced metanarrative elements for the first time early in her writing career: in *Postcards*, her first novel, a device directly linked to her method of research, as explained in the previous sections. If one pays attention to her research method –dealt with extensively in the introduction– it is not a coincidence that Loyal Blood, the protagonist, “leaped complete and whole formed from a 1930s Vermont state prison mug shot on one of a small stack of postcards sent out by the Windsor Prison’s warden office” (Doten). Showing the collection of pictures to Patti Doten of *The Boston Globe* at the novel’s publication, Proulx urged her to “look at the desolate and disturbing looks on their faces. They are finished faces. They are faces with no chances” Loyal’s face. “It is the postcards” she admits, “that started me writing my book” (Doten), providing this metalinguistic device with a greater deal of significance than what some reviewers might have suggested. Frederick Busch, for instance, dismisses them as the postcards “flavor the broth,” overlooking their narrative role, and Sabine Durrant ingeniously states that “the facts are lost in the post” as the postcards “conceal the truth,” not acknowledging here the significant role of the reader, to be discussed below. The title could at least have been just a good hint to calibrate their role.

Proulx would replicate this technique in her next two novels, the critically acclaimed *The Shipping News* (1993) and *Accordion Crimes* (1996). *The Ashley Book of Knots*, *The Mariner’s Dictionary*, and *Quipus and Witches’ Knots* –practical volumes for seamen and fishermen to learn knots and most sea chores– were Proulx’s night table companions while she was writing *The Shipping News*²³, and what gave her inspiration to open the chapters with the drawing of a knot and its description, as we have seen in

²³ *The Shipping News* is set in Newfoundland, a rugged Canadian island home of fishermen and fisheries, with a community deeply involved in all aspects of life at sea. Hence the relevance of *The Ashley Book of Knots* as a metanarrative element. A movie picture version starring Julianne Moore and Kevin Spacey was made in 2001, which received mixed reviews from critics, although it was definitely not of the likes of Annie Proulx.

the introduction. In it, I also referred to *Accordion Crimes*, an epic novel covering one century of European immigrants across the United States through the ownership of an old Italian accordion. There Proulx used a printed image of a different model of accordion to open each section that had as well a clear narrative function. In *Postcards*, the postcards all appear at the beginning of each chapter with the exception of chapter 19, which includes an extra postcard inserted in the middle. These elements make the reader an immediate participant as they feature a part of the narrative parallel to the story, an established relationship between the author and the reader. Both accordions and knots function narratively but maybe not as explicitly as the postcards in *Postcards*, for different reasons. In the case of *Postcards*, Proulx explains how the use of those postcards allowed her “to enlist the aid of the reader in filling the blanks. The reader writes most of the story” (Proulx qtd. in Bray).

Maria Löschnigg and Rebecca Schuh, in their essay collection under the title *The Epistolary Renaissance* (2018), claim a revival of letter postcards narratives in today’s fiction, mostly due to electronic digital globalization, where the internet has acted as a catalyst (2), thus they occupy “a special place in epistolary culture forging connections between letter writing and digital communication” (Brindle 119). Even though the genre deserves enough attention and epistolary criticism, it is today approached under new focuses, an analysis through that field of study does not fit in this dissertation, as printed picture postcards appear only in *Postcards*, from all the texts in the corpus. The use of postcards indeed holds a relevant role in the short story “Brokeback Mountain” (in *Close Range*) although their use remains textual and thus they cannot be considered a metanarrative feature. In fact, Proulx could stand out as a precursor of this comeback of the epistolary as 1992 –the date of the novel’s publishing date– was still far away from

the advent of the internet and its global dramatic consequences. The postcards in the novel, then, will be dealt with as a metanarrative element that Proulx uses as part of her research process in the building of the story –characters, landscape, settings– with the help of the reader, and not in the context of any other field of studies external to the critical framework of this dissertation, as it might not add anything significant in terms of conclusions.

In *Postcards*, this epistolary use is multi-purpose as it does not only help the reader understand sections of the story but it also assists in predicting or filling in some blanks in the narrative, just like Proulx instructed and as we will see below. The title could even suggest that the story is somehow *about* the postcards, or at least it works out as a reminder to the reader to pay close attention to them. They follow the narrative from 1944 –the first one– through 1988 –the latest–, even though they are not organized in chronological order, as a few older postcards appear later. Forty-nine of the fifty-eight chapters are prefaced by a postcard, except for chapter 19, which has an extra one inserted in the middle, providing the narrative with a sense of organization –even though they alone tell a fragmented story. A number of them are handwritten by characters that might be centrally or indirectly related to the story, while other printed postcards come from agricultural agents, the IRS, farming equipment companies, or corporate communications. Asquith remarks that “they add to the novel’s sense of verisimilitude” (Asquith, *Annie* 27), in the sense that the different handwritings make them original, believable and genuine. In a broader sense, they add to the sense of community of Cream Hill, Vermont, as they all spin around those changes that the area and its inhabitants are going through over nearly five decades, and with a “scruffy handwritten presentation suggesting that these are genuine artifacts written by the real people with

lives outside the focus of the narrative” (Asquith, *Annie* 27). Besides, not all but many of these “genuine artifacts” are addressed to the Blood family farm address, central to the story. Kym Brindle suggests that the postcards have a double function as they first “subvert iconographic ideas of an American landscape tamed and reduced to national images or romanticized pastoral settings and, secondly [...] they visually organize a fragmented tale of travel and separation” (107-108), both functions expressed in Loyal’s texts. The farm that she refers to repeatedly is indeed a romanticized frame of the Vermont farm that disappears as fast and steady as Loyal distances from it. On the other hand, his is indeed a journey of distancing and severance that exposes the quasi-synchronic decline of both the farm and his own.

The epistolary postcards, with their parallel narrative, invite the reader to follow Proulx’s idea of filling in and to “make connections” (Asquith, *Annie* 27), that is, to enter and wander in the narrative, connecting chapter titles with text. At times the unsaid or omitted is precisely what makes it relevant. Brindle reminds us how “elisions and omissions are also essential characteristics of postcard communication, with limited space offering a ready excuse for those who prefer to say little” (110), as it seems to be the case with Loyal in most of his cards, some of which even show leftover space underneath his already sparse sentences. Often the texts in the postcards are proleptic, as they often anticipate or hint at misfortunes that will occur in the lives of the characters or else inform about incidents that the characters will never be aware of. They also prepare the reader for events to come or relations that will be formed or broken down, and they fill in the blanks with information on the fate of some characters as well as their physical condition. For instance, Loyal’s handwriting changes from legible at the beginning of the narrative to scruffy and at times with incorrect syntax by the end of the

story. At first, Loyal signs his postcards as “son Loyal,” but soon the signature changes into “Loyal” to later be signed with the detached “L.B.” for the next forty-three years. This recession in his identity correlates with his physical and mental decline and his fragile health at the end of the novel, a process that his postcards steadily depict.

Loyal is indeed on a journey of detachment and disjunction and the postcards convey the feeling of travel from the moment the plot sets in motion, as they are “almost instinctively imagined as by-products of travel” (Gifford qtd. in Brindle 107). Proulx, she argues, “associates postal culture with the tradition of the road narrative,” where postcards provide an easy, cheap and fast way of communication, along with the need of being economical with the language and using a specific kind of writing (Brindle 108). Furthermore, they possess the quality of haste and speed, suggesting the new pace at which the nation is changing, faster than most characters around the Bloods farm can keep up with.

There are probably many ways to group the postcards. Asquith divides them into two groups, considering their relevance in the narrative: several postcards that would act as “catalysts,” setting in motion some of the events in the chapter, and a second group of postcards written after the events have taken place that “to some extent preempt the contents while offering oblique, sometimes coldly objective summaries that transform out reading experience” (Asquith, *Annie* 27). An example of a catalyst postcard could be the one that opens chapter 30, written by Loyal when applying for a job as a building assistant, an occupation that he will take up. Likewise, his leaving that same job is equally predicted in the anonymous postcard from chapter 30, which suggests that Loyal should be fired. A postcard in the second category could be the one that opens chapter 32. It is a letter from Dub, Loyal’s brother, established in Florida, where he

announces that he will marry a woman named Pala. The reader at this point does not know her, so the postcard places the reader in an advantageous position to read between the lines of their business conversation and how the affection between the two develops.

Transversally, and out of this distribution, I consider Loyal's postcards a group in themselves, not only because they are the only ones that include specific information on Loyal's wanderings across America but, most importantly, because they comprise a single fictional narrative about himself and his girlfriend Billy whereabouts. This account is a double one: first, the one that he creates for his family –a fictional tale about his life– and, second, an idealized story about the imagined destiny of the family farm, equally false. Loyal develops an imaginary narrative of possible events that only take place in his mind and materializes in his handwritten postcards. In fact, Loyal's first postcard –he signs eleven postcards although there is another one unsigned with his handwriting– appears in chapter 6 and it is dated January 1945. As Asquith observes, this creates a sort of alibi for his crime, in a fiction “sanctioned by the officialdom of the stamp” (Asquith, *Annie* 29). “Billy not with me anymore. She is gone with a big booger from the Ozarks. What we planned was never meant to be” (Proulx, *Postcards* 51) Loyal writes at one point, liberating himself of the burden of making up stories about her. Significantly, his missives are the only way that he has to hold on to his family while delivering that false account of his life. His postcards suggest the belief that the family is still together living and working the family farm. Oblivious to all the changes and misfortunes that its members have gone through, Loyal sends instructions on how to deal with the cows or inquiries about how the farm is going, oblivious to the dramatic change of Cream Hill microcosmos: “Dear folks. Hope all is well on the farm and that you

are all are well" (Proulx, *Postcards* 256), he still writes in September 1979, more than thirty years after leaving. In the very last one, dated 1988, he sends: "Hope all well + farm do good" (Proulx, *Postcards* 299). More and more his postcards become vague and at one point they start lacking a return address. Asquith suggests that Loyal is "disinterested in dialogue, wither with his own emotions or the opinion of others (Asquith, *Annie* 29). The tone of the postcards is cold, showing at times only a little affection for his mother Jewell. When his sister Mernelle gets one of his first postcards she does not show any emotion of surprise as she knows it is only "another bear postcard for Jewell, written in Loyal's handwriting, so small it was a nuisance to read it" (Proulx, *Postcards* 37). Rather, she is frustrated as the postcards deepen her feeling of alienation and distance.

At the same time, Loyal never gets a response back from the family—he either does not send a forwarding address or simply is on the move and no mail finds him— and his postcards are the only ones that do not seem to be part of any epistolary exchange, as his mother expresses in frustration: "'How come he don't put no return address on these things,' asked Jewell, turning the postcard over and frowning at the bear. 'How does he expect us to answer him? How are we supposed to tell him anything that's went on?'" (Proulx, *Postcards* 39). Right at the beginning of the story, after fleeing the farm, he stops at the roadside café and he takes a stack of "seventy or eighty postcards all showing the same thick-bodied bear with a red snout coming out of the black trees" (Proulx, *Postcards* 30). The bear, an object of hunting, parallels Loyal's life, as he feels that he is being hunted—he is haunted by memories and loss. Brindle suggests how not only the postcards but the image of the bear was stolen: "Captured on film by an amateur photographer, the bear, as a postcard image, signifies careless consumer sentiment—the natural world unsympathetically hijacked by a greedy, unthinking tourist gaze" (115).

Interestingly, the story of the bear on the card is explained in another postcard dated 1926 that tells how the bear disappeared as a consequence of modernization, dying by electrocution: “Mister Quins, we have the same problems agian with pole 18 on the re-20 line, race and me found another bear dead at the bottom of the pole, something is drawing them to this pole, can you put the engeners on it it, d. frye” (Proulx, *Postcards* 33). The bear is drawn away from his natural habitat, just like Loyal is. The connotations that the image carries along parallel Loyal’s wanderings along the West, until ultimately, symbolically, he becomes a bear himself, scraping for food in containers: “The old bum inching away again. A phlegmy cough that went on and on. ‘He’s been in the garbage,’ she said. ‘I wish the city would scrape up the drunks and bums and dump them up in the swamp. Solve the homeless problems for good’” (Proulx, *Postcards* 304). In short, Loyal’s eleven postcards outline a narrative in themselves, that is, his forty-something years of unfortunate wandering across the West and away from home or, to borrow Kim Brindle’s phrase, “a simple (if deceptive path) through an unhappy life in exile” (114). Ironically, his writings hardly show the chaos on the road that he is permanently going through – burnt farms, mine accidents, illness– in the same way as he stays unaware of the disasters at home: the loss of the farm land, Mink’s suicide, her mother’s death, or Mernelle’s lost baby.

The first printed postcard in the narrative sets the plot into motion, even before the reader takes hold of the actual text. It is an unsolicited commercial postcard from a company that installs electric fences in farms, introducing straight away the transformation of rural America. This one in particular triggers the ongoing story of the Blood farm not being modernized to operate. Loyal, due to his running away, was the only one that envisioned the need to adjust the farmstead to the new changing times.

Read in retrospect, this first postcard predicts the subsequent decline and disaster, not just of the physical farm but of the whole household.

The reality of the life that Loyal reveals in his postcards contrasts with the one that he experiences along the way, of which the narrator informs us. Along his eleven postcards –plus an unsigned one– there is a change in the narrative tone. Loyal’s plans fade rapidly, and his original idea of finding another farm disappears from the narrative and the text turns into an objective account of his whereabouts, as he is “condemned to a restless geographic odyssey with no planned destination” (Brindle 113). The cards work best as a sequential narrative tale of his self-exile, even though they are the only –yet imaginary– link with home, the family farm and the family members. What he writes in his postcards reveals the irony in his quest: he never knows what happened to the farm, the family members, or if his crime was ever discovered.

These metanarrative elements are significant in terms of character correspondence and characterization. In fact, every member of the Blood family writes at least one postcard at one point. Mink, the father, shows his temper and rage, signing with his full name. He answers close to violently when offered new methods of insemination for his cows: “Don’t come out my farm no more with your insemination racket. Do it the old fashion with a Bull. Minkton M. Blood” (Proulx, *Postcards* 14). On the Blood farm, they stick to the old traditional ways of farming, one of the main reasons why they cannot keep up with the times. Asquith connects this postcard to Loyal’s rape of Billy: “On the Blood farm they inseminate the old way, as Loyal has proven on the hillside” (*Annie* 30). Mink’s second postcard, addressed to the Weeping Water Farm Insurance Company, hastily claims the insurance money for the burnt farm –which he and his son Dub generated–: “Dear Sirs, after paying ins. For 20 yrs. MY BARN Burned

down this A.M. From A. LANterN tipped over in the HAY ACCIDENTAL. Please send CHECK As We Need it. Yrs. Minkton M. Blood” (Proulx, *Postcards* 104). The hastiness in writing the letter makes the company suspicious and Mink ultimately ends up in jail, where he hangs himself. This letter is especially relevant in terms of research method of writing as it is based on some of the historical facts around which Proulx built *Postcards*.

Mernelle’s postcards possess a different tone. Hers is a story of survival yet loneliness, and the fact that she fills up the whole space of the postcards suggests the despair in communicating and reaching out. Being the only one that has survived the tragic events of the Blood family, she ends up married, yet alone and isolated. Her lack of voice in the family is represented by the fact that the reader only gets the replies to some of the postcards that she writes. From an early age, Mernelle has desperately longed for some kind of a pen pal friend, an eagerness that gets her in touch with abusive sergeant Frederick Hale, which “reminds us of the dangers of young girls outside their community” (Asquith, *Annie* 31), and with a poor immigrant girl, Juniatta Calliota, whose life, dreams and illusions contrast with Mernelle’s failure to do away with her own loneliness. Symbolically, she finds a husband through this process of letter-writing, only to find herself alone as she and her husband are unable to bear children.

Jewell’s only two postcards are written with the help of Mernelle. They are intended for her two sons, Loyal and Dub. The postcard that he writes for Loyal is addressed to a General Delivery in Colorado, but gets returned –“ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN”(Proulx, *Postcards* 110)–. In it she urges Loyal to get back to Vermont: “Come home...Come home soon” (Proulx, *Postcards* 110). She significantly signs “Ma,” still holding on to her role in the family. She uses the same signature in the postcard for Dub,

now a rich real estate dealer in Florida, thanking him for a box of fruit that he had sent them.

Dub's postcards from Florida show evidence of a voluntary detachment from farm and family. His ambitious and selfish nature shows through every card that he writes. Once he leaves Vermont, he never gets back to the family farm, not even for his mother's funeral or his brother-in-law's. Instead, he sends a money check to fix "the iron railings around the plot" (Proulx, *Postcards* 247) or dismisses his absence with a banal "he was a good man" (Proulx, *Postcards* 290) and he fills the rest of the postcard with his problems with the tax administration.

There is a specific set of postcards that deserve special attention. I am referring to a group of unsolicited postcards, printed, not handwritten, that act as an ironic yet dramatic focus on the lives and events of some of the characters. Their syntax and tone are all but impersonal, yet they function –as mentioned above– as informative and proleptical in the sense that the reader is aware of what might happen to some of the central characters. Actually, both the first and last postcards of the novel are of this type. In this group, there is, for example, a postcard to Loyal's brother Dub from the IRS showing how the government is aware of his financial irregularities: "Persons being audited must bring all financial records pertaining to the period of examination" (Proulx, *Postcards* 259). Another postcard of this type is a car dealer ad sent to Jewell –"it may be that we may have just the car you want" (Proulx, *Postcards* 214)–, which predicts her death in a car accident; or the one to Loyal from a doctor's office, trying to schedule an appointment, which suggests the fragility of his health by the end of the novel: "Oct. 1982. Dear Mr. Blood, Dr. Pinetsky would like to speak to you about your lung X-rays. Please call this office to schedule an appointment at your earliest convenience" (Proulx,

Postcards 271). The postcard suggests the severe condition of Loyal's lungs –he dies from it–, which Loyal himself mentions in his very last postcard: "Trouble with *bronchitis* the last year or 2" (Proulx, *Postcards* 299, emphasis added).

Some postcards of this type coldly portray the sign of the new times in the form of how the landscape is exploited and dramatically transformed. Ronnie Nipple, a former farmer neighbor and childhood friend of Loyal, has turned into a real estate developer and he sells farmland by the lot. He takes advantage of the neighbors using them as his business target: "If you are thinking about Selling your place why not deal with a Neighbor who can get you the Best Price?" (Proulx, *Postcards* 71). It is not by chance that he is the one that sells the lands around the Bloods farmhouse to Frank Witkin, a Boston dermatologist. The last postcard from the book is again a printed ad to Witkin: "CONGRATULATIONS! You have won a glorious all-expense trip to HOUSTON TEXAS, ABSOLUTELY FREE!" (Proulx, *Postcards* 305)

According to Asquith, as readers, we get one side of the communication, even though the letters were not intended for the reader, who gets a half-glimpse of private matters "by prying eyes" (*Annie* 29), and at times it is relevant information that the characters do not receive. This form of epistolary narrative is a "very public form of communication" (Asquith, *Annie* 29) if compared to the private letter form. The writer is aware that anyone holding the letter in his hand is liable to read it –like the mentioned Loyal's alibi– and thus its content is always conditioned by precisely this democratic character. One has to bear in mind, though, that the little information that the postcards put forward requires close attention in the act of filling the blanks. As Brindle reminds us, "they promote a style of reading that may generate misreading on very little information" (114) and their fragmented narrative character calls for subjective reading.

At the beginning of the novel, Loyal captures a static vision of the farm that stays with him like a postcard image. He “fixes” the familiar landscape in his memory with a final glance at the farm, a snapshot that will remain in his mind until the moment of his death. The farm turns into a postcard that very moment, as its description is a metaphor for the moment when a photographer sets his focus and then fixes the image on the roll of film:

The place was as fixed as a picture on a postcard, the house and the barn like black ships in an ocean of fields, the sky a membrane holding the final light, and there were the blurred kitchen windows and up behind the buildings the field, the rich twenty-acre field propped open toward the south like a Bible, the crease of water vein almost exactly in the center of the ten-acre pages. (Proulx, *Postcards* 12)

It is also relevant to state that Loyal’s postcards also parallel his physical and mental decline throughout the novel. His handwriting gets worse and the messages that he sends are shorter. His unchanged memory of the farm, which stays like a framed picture in his mind throughout the whole narrative, parallels the static notion of time in the postcards that he sends –“it stands still” (Asquith, *Annie* 29).

This section has shown how the postcards in *Postcards* occupy a central place in the story. As a metanarrative element, they inform not only about the characters but also make the reader aware of upcoming events and misfortunes in the lives of the characters. Their brevity exposes an extra-textual meaning, “derived from picture and place” (Brindle 118), as they carry a message not only in the written text but in the address, the sender and the picture printed on them. The plight of the Bloods can be traced in the whole collection of postcards that occupy every chapter’s opening, and the process of Loyal’s personal severance, alienation and geographic distance from the

family farm is reinforced by this epistolary narrative. To use Brindle's words, "in a rough-and-ready western world that comprehensively debunks the Western mythology of the cowboy, the frontier, and pioneer spirit, personal relationships are typified by the restricted formality of postcard epistolary transaction" (119-120). That is what Proulx intends to do with the reader from the beginning, as she claims: put him to work to connect the blanks, the spaces and the time lapses provoked by the postal exchange.

Within the context of this work, this examination of the plotlines through Proulx's use of the metanarrative contributes to clarity and understanding, thereby proving useful for my upcoming analysis. The relationships and secondary narratives that they introduce chart Loyal's movements and encounters throughout the American West, a real chronicle of his journey to complete disjunction with the landscape. At the same time, they offer an insight into the parallel narratives that interrupt or add up to the stories of all family members.

3.4 Pilgrims and Improvers

As thoroughly explained in the critical framework chapter, the section of the analysis that follows focuses on *Postcards*. For my purposes, the interpretive concepts to be used are related to ecological awareness and how individuals relate to their surrounding landscapes. The concepts of conjunction and disjunction, linked to –and achieved by– improvers –who exploit, extract and transform– and pilgrims –who absorb and submit– have been thoroughly developed in the critical framework. I borrow these two opposing approaches from Mark Tredinnick, who states that "what counts is how you come: as a pilgrim or an improver, to learn or to manipulate, to

surrender or to possess” (76). I argue that *Postcards* is a narrative of severe disjunction due to an improver mindset, in a post-Western landscape, as explained in the previous section.

Postcards depicts the journey from conjunction to disjunction of its protagonist Loyal Blood, plus it exposes how a number of individuals display these two very different mentalities, signifying different relationships with the landscape. Some relate to and understand the non-human world, where some use, take advantage of, and abuse the land, whereas others observe it and to an extent merge with it –not many. This approach, connected to the senses, is based on awareness, consciousness and understanding, and we have seen how Laura Sewall states how perception can contribute to ecological awareness. She adds that the ecological self experiences a “permeability and fluidity of boundaries [...] with the whole of the non-human world” (Sewall 203), and she suggests intentional practice to carry out reconnection and achieve ecological perception. She defines it as “the perception of dynamic relationships with the external world, both human and non-human” (Sewall 204). We have read how Proulx refers to the role of literature in confronting our human condition in that sense (Morris).

These are the concepts and arguments –connection with and disconnection from nature– to be utilized in this analysis and used as interpretive paradigms for evaluating the roles that the characters in *Postcards* play in their surroundings. The way in which individuals approach, interact with, and relate to the Western landscape – regardless of it being town, ranch, desert, forest, or farm– determines greatly their degree of success or failure. Some surrender, merge, perceive and observe, while others extract, manipulate and possess. Two contrasting roles that explain these antonymous

relationships with landscape.

As stated, I am using the concepts of conjunction and disjunction, pilgrim and improver, to evaluate how Proulx's *Postcards* is a narrative about how extreme disjunction with nature can lead to ecological disaster, as the plot summary has already suggested. The reading that I am making in this section analyzes the whole journey of Loyal Blood and how a string of misalignments leads to personal destruction and complete disconnection from the natural world. At the same time, the study deals with a number of characters-improvers²⁴ whose purely economic drive transform dramatically the landscape of the American West across forty-something years of American history; small or big-scale, this alteration cannot in any way be reversed.

3.4.1. Loyal Blood: a Road to Disjunction across the West

Proulx requests close attention to an ominous landscape whose presence is strong from the very beginning of the story. In the first lines, through Loyal's eyes, the landscape impregnates symbolically or physically every single member of the Bloods: the trousers, the fingernails, Jewell's apron. We learn that Loyal's main love and attachment is the farm, plus he is in total conjunction with the place: he understands the history, perception, but at the same time he is aware of the changes that the postwar economy is bringing along and how they will impact farming, so he is ready to adjust to the times. Even though he romantically clings to an idyllic place and

²⁴ The analysis deals with the characters that I consider relevant for the purpose of my study. The ones that, one way or another, relate to the Bloods' farm in Vermont, namely the Blood family members and those who directly interact with them. Dealing in depth with the vast amount of characters in *Postcards* would be a massive task and make this section unnecessarily long.

past that no longer exist, Loyal is still realistic and plans on modernizing the old farm. Loyal first comes out as a pilgrim and literally *is* the landscape. This identity is genetic, somatic, cultural and material. Proulx blends Loyal and landscape thus establishing his pilgrim connection to the land, his interaction with it, and oneness:

His blood, urine, feces and semen, tears strands of hair, vomit, flakes of skin, his infant and childhood teeth, the chippings of finger and toenails, all the effluvia of his body were in that soil, part of that place. The work of his hands had changed the shape of the land, the weirs in the steep ditch beside the lane, the ditch itself, the smooth fields were echoes of himself in the landscape, for the laborer's vision and strengths persists after the labor is done. The air was charged with his exhalations. The deer he'd shot, the trapped fox, had died because of his intentions and commissions, and their absence in the landscape was his alteration.
(*Postcards* 77)

Asquith suggests his "loyalty" to the land as he "grows out of it, is nourished by it, and shapes it" (Asquith, *Annie* 33), calling this relationship "visceral, spiritual and political" (Asquith, *Annie* 33). He has literally altered the landscape, yet in a different way from before, from collaboration –improving the soil, cleaning up wilderness– to distortion –burying a human body that will merge with the soil. Loyal is initially fully aligned with and connected within his net of sensory attachments. Sewall's avenues of interconnection between the self and the world, that is, his sensory capacities (201) are in full practice and functioning here. Proulx launches a character not only fully aware of the familiar environment conditions but also emphasizes his care and love for what he has around him and is part of. As Stéphanie Durrans notices, it is the only description of landscape –in the whole narrative– that evokes such intimacy (18). None of the landscapes that he will experience across the American West will arouse such feeling. He has rehearsed

perception, consciousness and behavior: he first reads the landscape and he is ready to adjust the farm to the new needs. The analysis traces the chronological path that the narrative exposes, as Loyal undergoes a process of misaligning with his web of attachments as he mutates from pilgrim to improver.

As stated, Loyal's sudden departure from the family farm starts out as an irony on landscape. He imagines himself living there forever, as opposed to what Billy wanted: "he thought it was a sour joke how things had turned out. Billy, always yapping about moving away, getting out, and making a new start, was staying on the farm. He, who'd *never thought beyond the farm*, was on his way" (Proulx, *Postcards* 12, emphasis added). The big irony in terms of landscape attachment is how they both succeed in tying the other one up to the landscape that they were in disjunction with. While Loyal succeeds in "forcing" Billy to stay, Billy, who wanted to take him away from his home to start a life away from rural landscapes, also succeeds in doing so.

For five years, Loyal has been enhancing the pasture above the farm. He has replaced some of the standard Jersey cows by the more productive foreign Holsteins and he is considering bringing electricity to the place, transforming and taming the land in a pioneer mode (Asquith, *Annie* 34). When he proudly shows it to Billy, she dismisses it as "any stupid field" (Proulx, *Postcards* 13), as she is interested in the flows that the times offer, away from the old rural ways. Asquith suggests how "Loyal's horizons are limited by his need to master the land, and he ends up taking her by force, killing her in the process" (*Annie* 34). Right after Billy's rape, Loyal's accuracy of senses makes him notice the landscape that surrounds him without missing out: "the mats of junipers flowed across the field like spilled water; doghair maple crowded the stone wall wavering through the trees" (Proulx, *Postcards* 3). He

also closely and clearly feels the space around the farmhouse: “A length binder twine hung with bean plants sagged between the two porch pillars, and he could see each hemp fiber, the shadows in the falls of each desiccated leaf, the swell of the seed inside the husks. A broken pumpkin, crusted on its underher side with earth, parted like a mouth in a knowing crack” (Proulx, *Postcards* 5). Margaret E. Johnson suggests that Proulx’s metaphorical language increases that “exaggerated” deep feeling of the land (M. E. Johnson 28). Likewise, his skilled farmer ways let him put the corpse out of sight forever: “He rebuilt the wall over her, fitting the stones²⁵, copying the careless, tumbled fall of rock. A secretive reflex worked in him. When she was locked away in the wall he threw on dead leaves, tree limb and brush, raked the dragged marks and scuffed ground with a branch” (Proulx, *Postcards* 4). Loyal becomes the agent of turning Billy into part of “his” landscape, what makes it a landscape of crime. Suddenly the place turns into “a place to hide a body” losing the value that it once had for Loyal (M. E. Johnson 26). Even on leaving, this sharp attention lets him sense an animal through the corner of his eye, one that he cannot figure out until, fifteen miles later he realizes it was his dog, to which he had asked to sit there: “The dog. The dog was up in the field right where he’d told him to sit. Still waiting. Jesus Christ” (Proulx, *Postcards* 13).

This first and capital disruption has occurred within his natural home environment and abruptly disrupted the harmony. Crime and guilt are what draw him out of his natural surroundings, but also trigger an inner rebellion and an initial imbalance in his sensory system. It is appropriate here to retrieve Laura Sewall’s

²⁵ This is –among many– one more example of Proulx’s research and scientific training. She actually published a book with the title *Plan and Make Your Own Fences & Gates, Walkways, Walls & Drives* (Rood 5), whose research probably provided her with information about stone wall making so the detailed information in the description might very likely come from there.

concept of “ecological self,” as stated in the critical framework section, and directly connected with the concepts –and processes– of conjunction and disjunction. The idea is inclusive in the sense that it closes the gap between ourselves and non-human nature, and “experiences a permeability and fluidity of boundaries” (Sewall 203). Proulx confronts Loyal with his surroundings in this moment of brutal rupture, which physically and psychologically deprives him of the “empathy with family, friend, lover, community, humanity, and similarly, with the whole non-human world [...] –a recognition that to tread heavily on the earth is to tread heavily upon one’s self” (Sewall 203). Loyal’s strong sexuality –his “blood”– leads him to commit an absurd and involuntary crime, which results in an incapacity for sex. From then on, he is fearful of his own physicality, something which he does not acknowledge until many years later: “I can’t be around women” [...] There’s something. I choke –like a kind of bad asthma– if I get around them too close. If I get interested in them. You know. Because of something that happened long time ago. Something I did” (Proulx, *Postcards* 172). Proulx ties Loyal to her image up until the moment of his death, when he, too, becomes part of the landscape. Loyal understands it like a plain equation of crime and punishment, as he feels that he will have to pay “the price for getting away” (Proulx, *Postcards* 58-59), which materializes in all the setbacks and estrangements that he is about to undergo in the years to come.

We constantly learn about Loyal’s love for the farm through the conversations of his family members throughout the novel, in the form of flashbacks, their statements suggesting how the farm held the family together. He is then a pilgrim as he is in total symbiosis with the natural spaces around him, understanding the dynamic processes already underway:

Beautiful pasture, four or five years of his work to bring that field up, none of Mink's labor, his, draining the boggy place, liming and seeding to clover, plowing under the clover three years running to build up the soil, get the sourness out, then planting alfalfa and keeping it going, look at it, sweet good stuff, full of nourishment. That's what made those cows give the butterfat, nothing Mink did, but him, Loyal, the best pasture in the county. (Proulx, *Postcards* 13)

His pilgrim mindset allows him to observe, understand and merge with it. Loyal has studied agriculture, dairy management and agronomy, and has a regular subscription to *The Farm Journal*²⁶. He plans to "establish a profitable commercial dairy farm" (Rood 40) with plans of claiming pastures in surrounding areas with spreading wild woods. All this conjunction starts transforming the moment of Billy's raping. It is the first line of the novel, one that ironically suggests an actual pilgrim's movement: "Even before he got up he knew he was on his way" (Proulx, *Postcards* 3). Martikainen, in his reading of the novel in terms of journey narrative, interprets this departure as "the movement his life has now become" (177), and Juliana Menges reads him as "a journeyman" (159). This physical movement stands for a steady and irreversible process of disconnection and disjunction from the land with which he was once aligned, turning him into an improver at the expense of whatever estrangement that he is going through.

²⁶ *The Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife* was an existing long-running American Agriculture publication that started in 1877 as *The Farm Journal* and later in 1933 it merged with *The Farmer's Wife*. The magazine was sold nationwide and it focused mainly on agricultural and farming information, including general agriculture, dairy products, livestock, gardening, trade horticulture, home appliances, and even home economics, just to mention a few. As American society improved after the Second World War, a large number of advertisements were included. The old original issues have been digitized and microfilmed and most of them can be found online in their full version. It is still published today under its original name, *Farm Journal*. It is interesting to notice that in the April 1944 issue there is an article on pure breeds of cows, showing the debate farmers had during those times. Loyal has introduced the Holsteins breed to get more and better milk together with the specific pastures that he has worked on for nearly five years, as we can read in the quote. More an opinion than a finding in my research, I suspect that Annie Proulx was well aware of the farmers' new approaches to farming during and after the War regarding the introduction of new foreign breeds for better production. *Farm Journal* archives can be found at: <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=farmjournal>

From this moment on, his severance or disjunction with the family farm goes along with the deep-rooted guilt and his misaligning with a string of characters that likewise suffer and end up stranded or dead. This non-stop wandering will push him further and further away from his familiar natural environment and gradually numb his senses “by forces beyond his control” (Asquith, *Annie* 36). Asquith explains in terms of guilt how Proulx combines sexism and old notions of the West, exploring “whether the misogyny underpinning the ‘sacred’ relationship between the frontiersman and the wilderness” (Asquith, *Annie* 37). Loyal’s guilt has bodily consequences as he is unable to have sex or physically have contact with a woman without having any seizures, as he soon finds out in her first encounter at the roadside café, from which he took the postcards, materialized in “the black mucky channel that ran from his genitals to his soul began to erode” (Proulx, *Postcards* 59).

I have established how Sewall refers to a kind of spiritual practice, which includes learning to attend. She distinguishes between endogenous –unconsciously focuses on inner desires, needs and priorities– and exogenous attention –which has to do with how humans are “drawn to novelty or change within the visual field” (Sewall 204). Loyal’s primary issues shift from attachment to his lover, farm and family to escape and survival: “Nothing seemed changed except the uncanny sharpness of his vision and the tightness that gripped somewhere under his breastbone” (Proulx, *Postcards* 5). This “sharpness of vision” is the alarming consequence of an inner re-evaluation of priorities: “He saw and heard everything with brutal clarity; yet the thing that had happened up beside the wall was confused” (Proulx, *Postcards* 5). Endogenous attention has to do with a focus on the familiar, which is what orients attention toward certain stimuli. Loyal’s

endogenous attention will work in reverse, as he gets attention from what he knows but cannot see, an immutable perception of a postcard-like landscape: the old petrified image of the family farm, an image that will play against all the real, unfamiliar landscapes that he will encounter for four decades throughout the changing American West.

As he drives his brother's car away from home, Loyal does not know where to go yet. Somehow, he feels that he has to go: "West, that was the direction" (Proulx, *Postcards* 24). Proulx introduces the concept of a Western pioneer move or, perhaps, that of an outlaw on the run. Following the story's initial irony, he resolves to unconsciously follow Billy's idea away from Vermont and blend into urban landscapes. As he drives into the Adirondacks, his surrounding already feels unfamiliar: "The strangeness of the country, its empty nest, studied his breathing. There was nothing here of him, no weight of event or duty or family. Somber land, what is the inside of a bucket in the rain" (Proulx, *Postcards* 27). The particularity of the place does not comfort him; it only stresses his isolation. The Western landscape is immediately strange to him. The land is "monotonous as a lawn" and its "levelness [...] disturbs him with its easiness" (Proulx, *Postcards* 31). The process of disjunction is underway.

Going back to the concept of exogenous attention, Sewall states that it implies not only perception but also some form of learning, as it refers to noticing changes in the –ever-changing– landscape and being able to perceive threats or opportunities (204). Loyal's first interactions with landscape could be traced back to attentiveness and perception, gained during the years in Vermont. Loyal checks

his options to work near or around the land, but his first job is at an aircraft factory.²⁷ He then considers an improver/extractionist activity, logging²⁸ in the Minnesota forests, a job that he has heard of. His main aim is to “get outdoors again [...] he had to work in the open air” (Proulx, *Postcards* 51). This is when he first comes across a first generation of postwar improvers-investors, living off the land, in a different way than he had ever imagined. He meets a Taggy Ledbetter, who explains to him how easy it is to make money by investing in land: “Money’s in the lots. Gonna be a lot of servicemen comin’ back, lookin’ to build. Lot of money changin’ hands” (Proulx, *Postcards* 54). He is still too attached to his Vermont farm, which does not let him work for anyone else, in an unfamiliar landscape, one that he does not feel like his own: “He thought about pulling into a place and asking if they needed a hand, but didn’t think he could work on another man’s farm, stand there with his hat in his hands asking to be a hired man” (Proulx, *Postcards* 53).

Loyal’s process of disjunction continues when he is robbed and scalped during a tornado, a serious setback that deepens his severance with his surroundings. He looks unable to read people outside a familiar environment. His most acute sense is now vision, a non-participative perception. The description of him driving along Minnesota lacks intimacy, attachment, and it is filled with nouns of places that he sees, signs, people, a one-page-long list of visions that he is unable to attain: “Pale

²⁷ In 1944, World War II has drawn people away from farms and rural areas into urban areas to work in war industries, adding to the big migration to the cities after the Great War. This had dramatic consequences for non-urban America: empty rural areas mean less market for farm products, at a time when solar-powered food economy -draft horses, wooden fencing- gives way to a fossil-food powered economy as “cheap oil is the commodity behind the change” (Berry 172). The need of workers only increased every year of the War, and its shortage at times was due to some companies’ struggle, like Boeing, in employing “a workforce consisting only of white males” (Reed Myers 183), what partly explains the flow of young male farmers into urban centers.

²⁸ One of Annie Proulx’s recurrent examples of land extraction is logging. The theme of improvers deforesting vast areas in the American continent appears in nearly every single one of her books, both novels and collections of short stories. Her last novel, *Barkskins* (2016), as explained in the introduction, is a 700-page epic narrative following two loggers and their four generations of improver descendants endlessly deforesting vast areas, leaving today’s generations at the verge of ecological disaster.

horses in the field drifting like leaves; a woman seen through a window, her apron slipping down over her head the hairnet emerging from the neckhole, the apron faded blue, legs purple mosquito bites no stockings runover shoes; the man in the yard nailing a sign onto a post; RABBIT MEAT; a plank across Potato Creek” (Proulx, *Postcards* 62). Loyal does not take part in the landscape that surrounds these visions, just to see, as an outsider. He is not connected: his overall perception seems to fail, along with the unfamiliarity of his surroundings.

Lying half-drugged in hospital to have his scalp stitched after the robbery, Loyal remembers and strongly feels for the land back home. The memory comes as a hallucination of the conjunction that he once had: “Images of the farm like huge billboards along a nightmare highway came to him as he half-dozed, in and out of a painful sleep, and he could not turn off the road away from them” (Proulx, *Postcards* 76). His dream of hunting a partridge is very detailed, those that only someone with a bond to the land can have: “A sense of his place, of his home, flooded him. It was easy enough to follow the fence line. He recognized the far corner of the woodlot when he came to it, even in the half dark, and smelled the faint applewood smoke from the kitchen range half a mile away” (Proulx, *Postcards* 77), a vision that contrasts with the “unseen landscape” (Proulx, *Postcards* 77) outside his hospital window.

On the road, Loyal takes up an extractionist improver activity to try to keep head above water. He comes across a specimen of extractors that are even worse in terms of abusing the land than the mechanized loggers that he had met in Minnesota. Asquith suggests that his urge to work “continually forges a new relationship with landscape” (*Annie* 41). This constant change in relationship is, I

argue, a big part of the process of disjunction from a landscape to which he feels close to one that he will now often need to tame, transform or extract from, taking advantage of the fact that the postwar West is booming with opportunity and economic change. It is, in his view, the only way to survive and move on.

By working at the Mary Mugg, he literally enters the land, a subterranean unknown environment, hostile to him. His co-workers relate to the land in a different way from Loyal's. In a pioneer Western fashion, mining, they are improver extractionists that work for the money and fail to notice the natural world around them. They are metaphorically described as hard "rocky" people with "coal for hearts, granite for fists, silver-tongued and liked to see blood" (Proulx, *Postcards* 83) in a reckless hurry to extract and cash: "Well, let's make some money. We got to push it today" (Proulx, *Postcards* 86).

Deveaux, the man in charge of the miners' shifts, is a former uranium prospector who has come back to the mine "as a relief from them red mudstone beds up on the Plateau" (Proulx, *Postcards* 82), after having tried farming. He personifies the archetype of the improver that sees nothing but cash flow at the end of the use and abuse of the land. He cannot stand nature, which for him is just a means to an end. He had come to despise any job that had to do with working the land –such as farming–; the mine represents a protected environment that means having nature out of sight:

"I'd work for nothing, get out from under that sky. I seen red spots in front of my eyes all day long, squint, old eyes start water to and tear [...] Too bright, too hot, everything watching you. The wind never lets up, like a kid pullin' at your sleeve all day, 'Daddy buy me some candy.' That's what I hated about farming. I tried that for years.

You set out there all day long on the tractor or stringing fence and the wind throws trash in your face, whips your hair in your eyes, knocks your hat into the next county and laughs to see you run for it." (Proulx, *Postcards* 82)

His moving away from the farm back to the paradise of extracting parallels Loyal's journey but with a clear difference in motivation. Deveaux is a product of the mine, born into removing and obtaining from the ground, whereas Loyal is right in the middle of the process of disjunction from it, but still connected. Deveaux extracts either way, exhibiting a total disregard for the natural environment, opting for making use of his explosive specialist skills to "sleeping out uneasily with the coyotes," where he would anyway be "dreaming of the cool silences underground" (Proulx, *Postcards* 82). When Loyal joins the mine he still feels alien to this extraction world. The mine is a caricature of the new big mining operations around the country, that squeezed the land to its limits, where men were "talking the gold out of the rock with their white sunless mouths, bending of the minors to their will, making them thrash the metal out of the stone no matter if he drew blood" (Proulx, *Postcards* 83). Instead, the Mary Mugg is a remnant of an old Western pioneer past, an old mine where the ones who end up bleeding –and eventually dying– are the outcasts that work there: "The Mugg was a little operation that attracted outlaws and cripples; 30 per cent waste, gold *and* men [...] The little Mary Mugg was a cripple herself" (Proulx, *Postcards* 83). The mine is personified as an "old lady" (Proulx, *Postcards* 82) –a symbol of the end of an era– as it needs new and modern machinery to minimize the waste and risk for the miners, but whose owner does not believe in modernizing –just like Mink did with the farm. Instead, she is convinced that "the hand of God would show the truth about new machinery" (Proulx, *Postcards* 83).

Loyal and his co-workers at the mine are ready to move into the next big thing in extraction from the land, the uranium prospecting craze²⁹, an activity that Deveaux is already into. They are all dreaming of hitting the lucky strike:

“Hey, what’s the government pay for uranium anyway?”
“Heard the guaranteed maximum is seven dollars twenty-five cents a pound. How many pounds per ton depends on the strike. There’s an average of four pounds to the ton. There’s a rich Canadian strike paid out eighty pounds” (Proulx, *Postcards* 88).

Loyal gets interested in this uranium thing, as still has in his mind the idea of a farm. He has adopted improver ways to get back to the land: ““Yeah, and you get your farm. If you’re still crazy enough to want one.’ ‘I just want a little place I can work myself”” (Proulx, *Postcards* 88).

When the mine collapses, the three men get trapped and the two co-workers die. The hard rock workers literally become part of the rocky landscape, as their bodies are never recovered. Proulx insists on this idea of humans dying in disjunction with nature becoming parts of the landscape, something that Loyal fears, as he sees his death also imminent. Thinking that he too will become part of the landscape Loyal relieves the last moment of Billy before her death, blaming her for his severance from his family home:

²⁹ From 1953 until 1980 The United States was the world's primary uranium producer, aimed at the nuclear industry. The majority of the mines could be found in the Midwestern states. Proulx sheds light on yet another extraction issue prevailing in the American West, not only for its obvious effects are on humans but the due to the destructive environmental consequences of extracting it: mining uranium generates vast amounts of waste material –radioactive, drilling and ore. During the period that Loyal works at the mine, the world was taken over by the historical context of the Cold War, marked by the competitive race by world powerful countries for increasing their atomic arsenals. The powerful and violent destruction power countries have made of uranium is in focus here, where a finger is pointed at blind extractionism for the sake of -little- economic advance at the expense of the land. Humanity had just witnessed the H-bomb dropping in Japan, a coincidental time when Loyal was working at an aircraft factory. In short, Proulx’s deliberate choice of uranium prospector as a theme is not accidental. Source: <https://eh.net> (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency).

And now he knows: in her last flaring seconds of consciousness, her back arched in what he'd believed was the frenzy of passion but was her compulsive effort to throw off his killing body, in those long, long seconds Billy had focused every one of her dying atoms into cursing him. She would rot him down, misery by misery, dog him through the worst kind of life. She had already driven him from his home place, had set him among strangers in a strange situation, extinguished his chance for wife and children, caused him poverty, had set the Indian's knife at him, and now rotted his legs away in the darkness. She would twist and wrench him to the limits of anatomy. (Proulx, *Postcards* 92)

The quotation is proleptic in the sense that it predicts the string of disconnections and estrangements that Loyal is going to suffer along the road. One can go back to the quotation each time Loyal's disjunction gets more severe and find a sense in it.

Loyal knows that it is time to move on, to seek a line of work above ground, as he has nearly been literally killed by the land. The accident had been preceded in the narrative by a postcard explaining that victims of mine accidents would be ideal for a hypothermia study, which is exactly what happens. Asquith interestingly remarks how it "highlights the increasing ambivalence or large economic and academic institutions to human suffering" (*Annie* 28), a theme that will come into sight along the narrative.

After the accident at the Mary Mugg, Loyal opens the Indian's Book for the first time. It reads like a nature journal in a way, suggesting the Indian's pilgrim ways: "There were drawings of birds in faded ink, a beige much creased and dirtied as though the book had fallen open on the floor, trodden for days until someone picked it up" (Proulx, *Postcards* 95). The book signifies a chance for Loyal to become a

nature writer in the way in which the Indian was, not to let his conjunction with nature go for good. However, it does not appeal to his senses initially, and he substitutes the personal information from the Indian with his own. He takes over the role of the Indian as a writer, although his first writings are more practical than observation from nature: "Many nights that winter he wrote, sometimes only a few lines, until the wind shaking the window frame chilled his hands. Things he planned to do, song lyrics, distances traveled, what he ate and what he drank...The Indian's Book. His book" (Proulx, *Postcards* 97).

Loyal's next occupation is uranium prospector, another improver job related to extraction and to big corporations assaulting the land. The new uranium prospectors all across the West –Utah, Colorado, Wyoming (Proulx, *Postcards* 146)– form a sort of "modern-day new gold rush "(Asquith, *Annie* 42) in this area of the West. Loyal, now impregnated with these new improver ways, "learns to read the land in a new way" (Asquith, *Annie* 42) by looking at maps and finding uranium by following the clues of the Indian names. Interestingly, these native denominations all carry an ecological warning in them, as the Indians have negatively given such places names as "Poison Spring" or "Badwater Canyon" (Proulx, *Postcards* 52), after realizing how ecosystems get damaged in those areas –suggesting a possible a radioactive presence. In a Western fashion, Loyal has continued with the uprooting, captivated by the prospect of money: "He'd sorted out the subtleties of the Geiger counter's endless chipping, chipping, knocked around in the gritty bars and saloons. The electric feeling of quick money was everywhere. Christ. It excited him" (Proulx, *Postcards* 146). The chance of earning big for the first time adds to the equation:

Prospectors in from the White Bluffs look over the latest anomaly Maps, talk of trying their luck somewhere else. The towns shake with the passage of dusty, dented jeeps the exhaust systems torn out, bulldozers and back hose roll through on the semi beds. Stake trucks with burlap sacks off or stop along the roads and in the countryside the discarded cores lie in heaps on the ground [...] Big bust, maybe. (Proulx, *Postcards* 109)

Even some of the trappers with whom Loyal had worked before are changing the face of the landscape to become extractors, rather than helping to balance ecosystems, as they used to do. He compares his bad luck so far with endless stories of prospectors that got rich, some by pure chance:

Then there was this truck driver started working an old abandoned copper claim with his brother-in-law, The Happy Jack, and damned if they didn't get into uranium ore worth millions. Another guy was on his way to fix somebody's stock tank and got a flat tire. While he was fixing it, he just turned on his Geiger counter. You guessed it. There's a string of stories like that. It's out there. Some get rich. (Proulx, *Postcards* 152)

Loyal does not read this environment in the same terms as he used to read the familiar landscapes, focusing more on the economic rewards he might obtain. Unfortunately, uranium prices go down and the days of the single on-foot uranium prospector are coming to an end: "The smart guys were using helicopters and planes, skimming along the mesas with fifteen-hundred-dollar scintillometers. The scratch-dirt prospector had a hard time. What the hell, he kept moving" (Proulx, *Postcards* 146).

During his prospections though, Loyal keeps on finding more and more

fossilized bones and shells, which he thinks might be worth something. He decides to move from one type of extraction to another, digging for fossilized bones, probably more lucrative. He seems more drawn to the actual act of taking the bones out than the monetary prize itself, even though he is planning to sell them: “The bones and seashells, stone tree drew him more than the idea of a big strike” (Proulx, *Postcards* 147). These fossilized bones contain quantities of uranium but it looks that Loyal is more interested in the natural identity and history of the bones: “Mister, I come across a lot of bones out there. I don’t want this to go for fucking uranium. If that’s what I wanted to do, I’d do it. It’s the bones I’m interested in” (Proulx, *Postcards* 148). At this point, Loyal is still able to read places, even though he does not inhabit them. He still seems to possess what Barry Lopez calls “attention to nuances” (“Place” 22). Since childhood, he had learned to use his senses to achieve intimacy with the land, and he knows about the geological history of landscapes. Proulx, clearly establishes a connection between millennial landscapes and actual landscapes through the invisibility and inability to perceive their surroundings by extractive improvers of all kinds.

After three years digging for bones, Loyal has been taught “the tricks of the trade” (Proulx, *Postcards* 153). The man he works for, Bullet Wulff, is completely at odds with the natural environment. He is an improver who “had a built-in compass when he was working fossil grounds” (Proulx, *Postcards* 153) but gets lost once surrounded by nature, verbalizing his total disjunction with the landscape: “I don’t know what it is, the trees throw me off, I get down in one of them damn gullies and I get turned around. The trees make it all look the same. You can’t see far” (Proulx, *Postcards* 154). Loyal has kept on learning other ways to relate to the land, as seen

above, a system on how to interpret it for extraction purposes. There seems to be no attachment or love for the landscape anymore. Now the Western rocks are only an instrument to be coined into money. He is also getting good at it, as his senses for finding the fossils improve season after season: "With Bullet he learned what kind of patience, the slow search by-eye and feel through obelisks of cream and oxblood mudstone, the crumbling peach bluffs, the white ravines, the eroding streams of milky water, violet mounds and domes in a burning heat that left him choked for something to drink besides the rubbery water in the canteen" (Proulx, *Postcards* 153). Loyal fails to recognize where this skill comes from: "His own feeling for where to look he couldn't explain. It was like trapping, part instinct for the way the animals might move through a country, part feeling for the millennial landscape, an interior knowledge that suggested where lakes and mud wallows, where sinkholes and fissures had been in that vanished world" (Proulx, *Postcards* 157). Loyal's shift from pilgrim to improver is based on this premise: although his attention remains numb, he can still perform extraction from nature, thanks to his remaining skills, which, as stated above, could be traced back to attentiveness and perception gained during his pilgrim years in Vermont.

This old acquaintance and knowledge of his surroundings make him perceive and read the landscape in a natural, inborn way. Now, digging in Utah with a university expedition, his trained knowledge surpasses that of the experts: his practical knowledge of the land is opposed to the theoretical explanations by university professors who are not attuned or responsive to the nuances. Loyal shows them how he cannot only read the tracks on the land but also how the theories on duckbill tracks might have been wrong, matching one of the students' theories:

“All the experts say that the animal just waddled along, dragging himself from one mudhole to another. But I look at those tracks and I can see the width between the track lines doesn’t match up with that idea. Looks to me like the animal’s weight was under it, the legs wasn’t hung out at the sides at all. Christ, measure the lateral distance between the tracks.” (Proulx, *Postcards* 161)

In his own way, Loyal gives them a definition of what pilgrim’s ways might be when the amazed students later hear him complain how “those experts come out here, are experts on bone identification, they know the literature, they got minds like Einstein, but they never hunted or trapped and don’t have a feel for the way animals think and move. It’s something you got to be brought up with” (Proulx, *Postcards* 162).

Loyal and one of the students that seems to view the land in a similar way – significantly named Crazy Eyes– plan to look for tracks the following fall as both their theories on bones match. At this point in the narrative, it looks like Loyal is attempting to revert his disjunction and finally take up a more respectful occupation regarding the landscape. He gets tired of digging for bones. He is more interested in reading the land, for the pleasure of it, as keen on ancient history as he is, a Proulx favorite. For him, it means “the closest he’d ever come to doing something of value” (Proulx, *Postcards* 167), yet the student dies that summer before they can start working together, and his chance to regain his pilgrim’s ways are gone: “It was the tracks that excited Loyal and without Crazy Eyes the search didn’t have a focus. He was restless, as if the news of the student’s death had triggered some migratory urge” (Proulx, *Postcards* 167). This was a kind of extraction that was meaningful to both of them as it was aimed at researching the ancient history of places, yet now he feels the impulse to move on.

This setback veers him off track, and Loyal gets in contact with Ben Rainwater, who needs an observatory helper in New Mexico. The two get close, and Rainwater reads Loyal's readiness for disjunction and his vulnerability: "I see the way you throw yourself at trouble. Punish yourself with work. How you don't get anywhere except to a different place" (Proulx, *Postcards* 172). Ben possesses an "intuitive grasp of astronomy" (Rood 45) in the same way that Loyal possesses an inborn acquaintance with the land. Proulx uses Rainwater to confront individuals with the real dimension of human beings as a part of a larger system, far beyond familiar and national landscapes. Environmental awareness here includes attention to the universe and to solar systems, where the secrets of the human mind lie:

"We are losing the sky, we have lost it. Most of the world sees nothing above but the sun, conveniently situated to give them cancerous tans and good golf days. The stinking clods are ignorant of the Magellanic cloud. They know not the horsehead nebula, the collars of Saturn like metal coils around the neck of a Benin princess, the black vast sinks of imploded matter like rain holes in outer space, the throbbing light of pulsars, atomizing suns, dwarf stars heavily beyond relief, red giant, the uncoiling galaxies. [...] The study of space unwraps the strangest and most exotic realities the human mind can ever encounter. All is strange and wondrous in that nonhuman void. This is why astronomers do not seek the company of any but their fellows, for no one else has seen the mysteries as they have. [...] They know the dim light of a star filtering through our filthy, polluted sky has been on its way to that moment for a thousand years." (Proulx, *Postcards* 171).

Rainwater is the voice that reminds Loyal of the importance of time in the process of natural and human life. Ben's ecological awareness literally sounds like an ecological manifesto: "Look into the sky and you are looking into time and nothing that you see is now it is all so remote and ancient the human mind quails and shrinks

areas as it approaches. Listen, extinction is the fate of all spaces, including ours. But before we go maybe we'll get a quick look at the blinding light" (Proulx, *Postcards* 172-173).

In the critical framework section, I referred to Barry Lopez's remark about proprioception as a key to attentiveness and a means of gaining intimacy with the landscape. Regarding this, Loyal has reversed the process, as he has moved from fine perception to ultimate disjunction, detachment and an inability for perception and living, never regaining his "sense of inclusion" (Lopez, "Place" 12). Less and less, Loyal is able to recognize the matrix that he is part of, which in Sewall's Gaian reading would mean the realization of being part of the biosphere instead of *on* a planet (212). Ben Rainwater attempts to approach Loyal in these terms when he affirms that "most of the world sees nothing above the sun" (Proulx, *Postcards* 171), but clearly fails to get the message across. Loyal does not allow himself a sensual response; he is vulnerable yet not receptive, which results in an imbalance. His inability to re-perceive (the) being part of every new landscape stems from his sense of still being part of the old one, and yet he notices some disconnection and wonders about it: "Why the hell, thought Loyal, did it always turn into a mess?" (Proulx, *Postcards* 167). Unconsciously, Rainwater seems to appeal to Loyal's vulnerability to landscape, disconnecting completely. Lopez puts it like this: "The key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy will come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe" (Lopez, "Place" 11). For Loyal, any attempt at creating intimacy is doomed when Ben's wife kicks him out of the house, due to appearances. He will never regain the "being of the place."

At this point Loyal mentally retraces his steps across the West, his whole process of disjunction up until that moment, realizing that he does not have much time left to overturn the odds: “But the old urge for the farm was like the heat of a banked fire, the time was sleeping down. 51 years old. The prospecting, the ballroom nights, the summers digging with Bullet, the climbs up to the passes in the mountains, moving through the breast-high rabbit brush, his way he had been that of an *exile* for a long time” (Proulx, *Postcards* 186). The West has not offered him yet a full opportunity to reconnect, but cast him as “an exile.” Only the time spent with Ben Rainwater, an openly environmentalist and avid reader of the universe, makes him reconsider going back to the land: “Yet, reeling through corridors of galactic ice, chill remote starlight, could not completely forget the warmth of the barn, kitchen, spark-furred heaps of peltry. Never was the mood of farm work closer than when Ben was ruined with drink, slobbering in the black swillbowls” (Proulx, *Postcards* 187). One more time, Loyal expresses in words his process of disjunction, his misalignment, his disconnection with the unfamiliar environments as “his trouble with earth” (Proulx, *Postcards* 187).

To take care of that disconnection, “to cure his trouble with earth” (Proulx, *Postcards* 187) and end somehow his “exile,” at 51, Loyal seems to settle when he finally decides to buy the North Dakota farm –as seen in the plot summary– after “a moment of epiphany” (Asquith, *Annie* 44). At this point, his physical and mental attachment to a place that does not exist anymore –a disjunctive sense of place–, which keeps him from achieving reconnection. He still dreams of an idealized farm life, with “clacking hens and a dog springing up with muddied feet [...] (and) [...] a family of silvery children and warmth in the bed, a voice in the dark instead of the

forceful stars and the Indian's silent book" (Proulx, *Postcards* 187). He cannot find a piece of land that conforms to his Vermont farm standards, so he decides on a "bony square of dirt" (Proulx, *Postcards* 188) that he is unable to call it anything but "the place" (Proulx, *Postcards* 188-189). Unconsciously resisting the sense of displacement, it looks again like he is about to come to terms with the landscape. The new unfamiliar "place" in an inhospitable part of the American West—which Loyal does not idealize in any way—is in constant opposition to his old place. He understands that this is a different soil, and he feels uneasy about buying it: "The farm a curve of the earth, a slat-sided house leaning into the wind, starved fields among the ranches and sugar beet farms. Why the hell was he buying this, he wondered" (Proulx, *Postcards* 188). Margaret E. Johnson suggests as well Loyal's non-specificity about his new lot: "reflects Loyal's inability to understand the land he now owns [...] He owns the land but does not connect to it" (M. E. Johnson 29). This "non-specificity" refers to Loyal's unfamiliarity with the new landscape.

The tension between pilgrims and improvers is exemplified in Loyal's closest neighbors, the Shears, a farming family of improvers, economically adjusted to the new times, with whom he gets acquainted. They possess expensive farm equipment—"big, quick machinery" (Proulx, *Postcards* 189). Proulx depicts old Shears as an improver farmer who is "*violently* progressive about new farm machinery" (Proulx, *Postcards* 189, emphasis added), a modern reminder of some characters from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. They instruct other neighbors to get the biggest machines and equipment available as the only way to make it in farming, in that rough patch of the American West: "Get it as big and strong as you can. That's the way it's all going, big quick machinery. You don't have all that stuff

you don't got a chance in hell of makin' it in farmin'" (Proulx, *Postcards* 189).

I consider it relevant at this point to pay attention to the symbolic role of bulldozers in the text. Bulldozers are a powerful metaphor for the erasure of past imprints on the Western landscape. They clear the land for development in the interest of progress and capital gain. One of the most significant is the one described above (Ott's), as it transforms the Bloods' land into the trailer park area, with its divisions and lots, remodeling it from a living to a dead landscape for humans to move in as the Bloods desert it, ending up in a depressing trailer park. This way of killing natural environments reappears when dermatologist Witkin bulldozes the area around the camp to have a lawn, changing the original centennial landscape into an artificial man-made one, a sign of the emerging middle class –more of it later. Machines also appear to represent the new generation of farmers who were able to adjust economically to the new times. However, those who overuse them also tend to overlook the messages that, according to Mahoney and Katz, an inhospitable environment tends to bring with it: "A harsh environment provides reassurance of the overriding importance of nature in a culture that otherwise flaunts its ability to escape nature, through means such as air conditioning or irrigation" (xxii), which is exactly what will happen to the Bloods' farmland, as we will see later. Of those, the Shears represent that obsession with machinery designed to tame the land in any desired way: "Get it with the eighteen-foot cutter bar [...] That son of a bitch can harvest anything you grow, wheat, oats, barley, flax, peas, rice, clover, alfalfa, soybean, hay lupine, sunflower, sorghum or weeds, and them two can grow anything it can harvest" (Proulx, *Postcards* 189-190).

Not quite ready to cope with the new mechanized adjustments that his Western farming landscape requires, Loyal gets an old tractor and decides to plant what he knows might do good in that soil: "He thought he'd go in for dry navy beans. The hell with sugar beets. Beans he understood" (Proulx, *Postcards* 192). Loyal does indeed understand beans, but not the soil in which he is going to plant them. He does not know the western North Dakota landscape, nor is he familiar with new developments in crop growing. He needs advice about which grain to choose, plague-resistant seeds, the machines that he ought to use, and whether he should raise cattle. Dairy farming is what he is most familiar with, but the new farm in the West has little to do with the farming environment that he was born into. Overlooking his work and the first crops, for the first time in a long time, he feels lucky: "He felt an absurd rush of pleasure and played the radio until late" (Proulx, *Postcards* 193). Even though it seems again that this time Loyal will regain conjunction, he might need external assistance to achieve it. He gets himself a dog, yet after three years he cannot get used to the dustbowl Western wind and dryness, both physical and personal, feeling isolated. The chapter exposes his disjunction through the concept of unfamiliarity. He does not have a bond with the land as he had with his Vermont landscape. Ironically, back home bulldozers are destroying his field, transforming the fixed idealized place that he holds on to as the ideal home into a trailer park.

Even the new farmhouse lacks a homely feeling: "It was not a good place to sleep at night, that metal bed, paint chipped iron, sheets trailing on the floor. An *uneasy house*. There was always a fine grit on the linoleum, soil blown from across the world, brown roils that rose from the steppes of central Asia and ended lying

on his windowsills” (Proulx, *Postcards* 189, emphasis added). The peculiar farmhouse and the unfamiliar landscape make him uncomfortable. Slowly, he tries to become involved in the process of “re-perceiving the familiar” (Buell, “Environmental” 673), regaining awareness and becoming part of a landscape that he recognizes. Proulx exposes his inability to achieve familiarization, to which Lawrence Buell refers as a somewhat complex endeavor. Clearly, Loyal’s immediate surroundings are a sign of a new habitat that he fails to “recalibrate” (Buell, “Environmental” 673).

North Dakota is a dry land of tumbleweed storms. He had not built an escape for the tumbleweeds and disaster strikes. A McDonald’s³⁰ manager across the road provokes a fire and burning tumbleweeds burn Loyal’s bean field and the farmhouse. Failing to read the Western stormy landscape –no awareness or conjunction with the land– as his “farming intuition is inappropriate for the landscape” (Asquith, *Annie* 44), Loyal is forced again into a life on the road. He is aware of his path to disjunction and the limited chances left. His situation replicates his leaving the family farm, so many years ago: “Down to a truck and a dog. Not even a change of clothes” (Proulx, *Postcards* 202). After this harsh blow, Loyal is left with nothing, right at the point when he was in a state of temporal harmony and struggling to regain an “awareness of place” (Kowalewski, “Contemporary” 16). Proulx stresses the inability to reconnect: the fixed sepia image of an old place-sensing is still alive in Loyal’s

³⁰ Proulx’s choice of a McDonald’s employee as the source of Loyal’s farm burning is far from being by chance. The “burning” scene could symbolize the combustion or burning of traditional rural landscapes of the American West by such global corporations forever. McDonald’s had already expanded across the U.S. territory with around 1500 locations by 1970 and, like many other expanding corporations, plays a key role in changing the face of the “walmarted” or American West, a homogenized view of the American landscape. Today, there are about 38,000 McDonald’s locations. McDonald’s restaurants are located in 118 countries and territories around the world, and they serve fast food to more than 69 million people every day, according to many online reports and their own website.

psyche. He sees his life at this point “like a weak chain, the links breaking one by one” (Proulx, *Postcards* 209).

Margaret E. Johnson explains the process of disjunction as a process of blending landscapes. Following M. J. Anastasio, she suggests how the individual is “forced to find substitutes, which feel familiar, but not quite right” (M. E. Johnson 30). Loyal blends his imaginary ideal landscape with the one in North Dakota. This explanation to Loyal’s disjunction in postmodern terms is explained as “Loyal truly seems to move between both real farms and the farms of his imagination and memory without feeling any ties to any” (M. E. Johnson 30). Johnson suggests as well that from now on, Loyal feels more distant from both types of spaces –imagined and real–, even though if we consider the Bloods’ farm a real space –its dramatic transformation is unknown to Loyal– we can say that he is still holding on to some of the perceptions and awareness gained in that original land.

For some time, Loyal returns to an occupation that he used to master when at the family farm: trapping. He catches coyotes³¹, symbolically a wandering and elusive animal like him, a quality that he has gained mastery over (Asquith, *Annie* 43). The detail of his trapping methods is described meticulously and with admiration in chapter 7 by his brother Dub. He praises Loyal’s expertise in building the traps, setting them up and how carefully he cleaned them and kept them scent-free at the end of the season, to have them ready and clean the following year and keeping the

³¹ Proulx exposes again a permanent humans-against-nature conflict by introducing the issue of coyote hunting, a controversial activity not only across the American West, but also in metropolitan areas. According to the Humane Society of the United States, trapping and killing coyotes will not stop the conflicts, who claims that humans have “waged a war” on coyotes. These animals have traditionally been caught and killed by using cruel methods that include poisoning, hunting dogs, shooting, killing contests using electronic luring devices or trapping. While environmentalists fight to put a ban on these cruel methods, the extraordinary adaptability of coyotes and their wary nature has allowed them to quadruple their range throughout North America. Source: <https://www.humanesociety.org>

“secrets and lurs he makes himself” (Proulx, *Postcards* 48). Loyal’s close-to-nature methods clash with those sheep ranchers that let coyotes blind on the loose and with government officials who shoot them mercilessly from helicopters. Dub is proleptic though when he states that “when a man don’t know how to do anything else, he traps” (Proulx, *Postcards* 49). The fact that he is a trapper at a time when trapping is all but disappearing as it is an illegal activity, clearly symbolizes the unattainable –and fictitious– Western pioneer dream.

As a trapper, Loyal still sees himself as a part of the natural seasonal process of species survival and nature recovery. He feels a pilgrim as, in his mind, he still thinks of himself in conjunction even though his mind is on fur and economic profit:

“Government trapper?” “Christ, no. I’m no exterminator, just do seasonal trapping, move on so I don’t make a big dent on the furbearer population. I take my share and move on. Make a living at it, such as it is. Leave the place clean, traps up, collect all my stakes, run the line with the guy that owns the land when I’m done so he can see for himself how I left things. No complaints yet.” (Proulx, *Postcards* 231)

Loyal claims that “I’m not one of those thinks the wild animals ought to be cleared right off the land” (Proulx, *Postcards* 232). With it, he brings up the old dispute between ranchers and farmers in the old West: “That’s the sheepmen. Because they don’t bother to herd no more. Just shove two thousand sheep out there and scream bloody murder if they don’t all come home” (Proulx, *Postcards* 232). The narrator suggests how the coyote population have learned to be careful after all the harassment –mentioned above– by ranchers and helicopter shooting. They adapt to the circumstances and, like Loyal, they move on to different territories when

persecuted. Loyal seems to perceive and understand the animals better than the terrain on which they both wander: “He’d listened to their yipping talk for almost thirty years, and felt he knew some of the language. He understood a coyote’s night runs to the howl stations” (Proulx, *Postcards* 233). What Loyal does not understand is the new signs of the times, as he dismisses ecologists and animal rights supporters –who put out campaigns in major American cities– as “just a few people making noise” (Proulx, *Postcards* 237), in the same way as he does not listen to advice on changing occupations: “Something to think about, Loyal [...] I think there’s gonna be trouble, I’d get in another line if I could” (Proulx, *Postcards* 237).

Loyal’s inherent knowledge and interest in the coyotes shows that he respects them in a way that ranchers or the government do not do:

“Anyway, a trapper’s an angel compared to most sheep ranchers. Sons a bitches’ll shoot or trap anything that moves. I seen coyotes with their jaws wired together, their eyes put out by sheepmen then turned them loose to die slow. You think it’s better for the coyotes to be poisoned by the government guy? Poison is a dirty wasteful end.” (Proulx *Postcards* 239).

The Sagines, a couple who listens to Loyal’s trapping stories and takes him in to work for them –“the first couple he’d ever had as friends” (Proulx, *Postcards* 240)– are the type of ranchers who seem to understand Loyal’s old ways of trapping and respecting the animals’ ecosystems. They appreciate and take interest in Loyal’s long and careful preliminaries before trapping. They are closer to a pilgrim attitude to the land, understanding and accepting Loyal’s hunting ways.

The Sagines’ ways clearly contrast with the next rancher that Loyal traps for,

Frank Cloves. He represents one of the many ranchers/landowners that are detached from their own landscape, and who populate the new (post-)West. His ancestry were railroad workers and meat-packers from back East. Frank ironically “had the best, turned out the worst” (Proulx, *Postcards* 240), as his lack of perception of landscape plagues him with bad luck. The fact that he has inherited his fortune suggests an economic relationship with the landscape. Cloves, who “had a need as strong as disease to make a show of power” (Proulx, *Postcards* 240) is also this bulldozer-lover-improver that does not care for the land and, despite his wealth, goes from misfortune to misfortune—nothing went well in his life” (Proulx, *Postcards* 245). He is a permanent abuser of the land and in permanent conflict with the landscape. He hires government trappers to try to exterminate coyotes in his property: “[he] had the government trappers all summer with traps, snares, shooting from planes, cyanide guns and poison baits. The carcasses, mostly young animals, had been dumped to rot in an old gravel pit near the creek. The survivors, Loyal thought, would know every trick in the book” (Proulx, *Postcards* 242). Cloves clearly uses the land to his own advantage, not often attuned with the needs of the land or the community. He is a new improver in an old colonist Western way, ready to tame nature to his needs and liking, usually with fatal backfiring:

Irritated at a gravel deposit that’s filled a band of the snow pool one spring, and cost the hayfield on the opposite bank to flood, he had the idea of cutting off the oxbow so the stream would run straight there. After a morning with the bulldozer the stream velocity picked up and in one week tore a new straight route that cut off five old oxbows, dumped tons of gravel on Clove’s bottomland hay fields, undercut and washed out to big willow groves. The stream below jammed and flooded out the town of Queasy. After the state paid a

call he began forced restoration work that went on for years and several hundred thousand dollars. (Proulx, *Postcards* 240)

The humorous quotation depicts an improver character type that displays a complete indifference to his natural surroundings. The chapter is a list of misfortunes and disasters happening to him and his ranch that come from his equivocal reading of the landscape. He does not understand the ecosystems or the behavioral moves of seasonal animals: “With the sheep he bought a ready-made hatred of coyotes and believed his land was infested with them in unprecedented numbers, that they came from as far away as the Dakotas and Montana to plague his animals” (Proulx, *Postcards* 241). He is seen as a comic character by his community, but not by Loyal, who thought that “he looked a little like Mussolini” (Proulx, *Postcards* 240), symbolically and oppressor of the land, an exterminator: “Cloves had had the government trappers in all summer with traps, snares, shooting from planes, cyanide guns and poison baits. The carcasses, mostly young animals, had been dumped to rot in an old gravel pit near the creek” (Proulx, *Postcards* 242).

Loyal is about to come across a new type of hunter-exterminators, of the same kind as Frank Clovis. He is warned that “hard days for trappers is coming” (Proulx, *Postcards* 237), as the trend for those old hunters is to hunt and kill bears mostly for their gallbladders—as seen in the plot summary—but for their claws too. He is offered to join the business but refuses. This new type of massive illegal hunting of bears points out at their extinction, connecting with the image of the bears in the postcards that Loyal carries around. The apparent aphrodisiac qualities of the black bear gallbladders bring in a new economic illegal activity: “Stuff the Japanese guys think will double the size of their prick and give ‘em a three-day hard-on. Sex stuff

[...] They will pay big big big bucks for this stuff. Plus we got a market for the hides. We are making money like you wouldn't believe" (Proulx, *Postcards* 245). Loyal is faced with the prediction of the extinction of the bears by a government official, who is surprised to find a decent trapper that does not incline toward the unlawful: "There's so much money in the illegal it surprises me anybody's still on the decent side of the fence" (Proulx, *Postcards* 258). He measures improvers in specific economic terms: "You multiply two hundred gallbladders by five K each and you understand we are talking serious money. Bear gallbladders bring more money than cocaine! We are talking a million dollars" (Proulx, *Postcards* 257). Most illegal hunters get away with it, just like the ones described in the narrative, who were all caught and paid only small fines:

"Success is defined by the end result. You know where this scum are now? Every one of them"

"I'll bite"

"Right where they were a year ago. Doing the same thing. Illegally trapping bear, taking the claws and gallbladders, selling to the Japanese and making a fortune. You know why? [...] Fucking, two-bit, dumb, egocentric, stuck-up, ignorant stupid judges who cannot tell their ass from a jelly doughnut." (Proulx, *Postcards* 257)

Proulx shows her concern for the annihilation of species within their ecosystems for economic improvement and illegal hunting, and makes a claim here on illegal hunting and the lax or lack of legislation on the matter, denouncing the complicity and responsibility of government officials and wardens –what Barry Lopez calls “a hazy legal understanding of responsibility” (Lopez, *Arctic* 417)– in cases of environmental destruction, from the point of view of the prosecutors: “The judges

think it's funny. They don't take any of it serious. That's the trouble. And. They. Don't. Care" (Proulx, *Postcards* 257-258).

It seems like Loyal has always been one step behind those improvers who were making their living on the latest occupation taking from the land, and now, at 60, he has regained some sense even though he has not achieved reconnection. When he again visits his old friends the Sagines at their ranch, he finds out that Jack has passed away. He is faced with the opportunity to start all over again with Starr, have a farm, go back to taking care of the land, and come to terms with his nearly-forgotten pilgrim ways.

Loyal gets older trapping, hunting for coyote and selling its fur, all across the West, complaining in one of his postcards about the low prices of fur –“What the hell is happening with fur prices? Can't make a living on these prices” (Proulx, *Postcards* 267). Clinging on to his pioneer ways, he fails to understand this activity as part of the past. He shows more and more disjunction with his surroundings. Loyal traps a red coyote, still alive, which makes him think of Billy. The narrative again parallels the two –Billy and the coyote– as during most of the story. This time, he cannot sell her fur –it is addressed as a “she”–, as it is damaged. He kills it with his hands –he also killed Billy– by twisting her neck. As the animal is about to die, it is humanized with the feelings that Billy must have gone through during the rape: “the crimped hair, the extraordinary expression on the animal's face, in her body language, mingling appeasement, fear, anger, threat, resignation, pain horror and more, the terrible and thrilling sense of her life's imminent death” (Proulx, *Postcards* 267). The coyote's impossibility to be of any use suggests that she, like Billy, will end up as part of the landscape.

From here on Loyal becomes “the hat man” (Proulx, *Postcards* 271), as his identity is reduced to the caricature of an old Western nomad pioneer, pulling a wagon with his truck, wearing an old cowboy hat. A young generation of residents that seem in conjunction with the land, represented by Pala and Kosti, contrasts with the decaying old man that tells them old stories, to whom they listen in compassion and admiration. The couple work on a mountain farm, producing their own vegetables, which suggests that a new generation of pilgrims might be on the way. They welcome Loyal to park his wagon there and to have a little patch of land to plant a few things. Unlike him, Kosti and Pala pay attention to the weather conditions, the landscape, their surroundings, but are still in the process of learning: “Gonna be hard frost tonight. Those old tomatoes ain’t never gonna make it any farther than they already are with nights like this” (Proulx, *Postcards* 272). They can feel that Loyal related to the land in a way that does not exist anymore, but he still gets their admiration: “He was a rank old man, grease and dirt and dog, hard face under the scarred forehead, hat brim tipped over the eyes. You could see he’d been good-looking though, said Paula. One of the tough old ones, said Kosti, never mind how he looked. He wished he could wander around the country like the old Hat Man” (Proulx, *Postcards* 273). Kosti even displays an aesthetic nostalgia for an old West that only exists in his mind. He fantasizes about Loyal’s life, oblivious to his hardships and misfortunes

I consider relevant at this point to retrieve the concept of “perceptual flexibility,” a related interconnectedness of all natural systems (Sewall 204). If one has to be perceptually flexible and have “freshness of vision,” this is clearly not Loyal’s case. To achieve that, Barry Lopez suggests the term “companionship”

("Place" 12), related to a pilgrim attitude, to distinguish it from notions of ownership or power, clearly an improver one: "It may be more important now to enter into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with everything around us than to continue to work toward the sort of control of the physical world that, until recently, we aspired to" (Lopez, "Place" 12). Sewall discusses the relevance of a different and interesting concept of time in nature, "forest time" (212), as opposed to the scheduled, hourly urban concept. If forest time involves perceiving the measurements or points of reference such as temperature, soil composition, rainfall, seasons and logging (Sewall 212), then Proulx's portrait of Loyal presents the image of an individual who does not perceive forest time. His perception of time is frozen, which results in a lack in his foresight capability and, more important, in his perspective of time. He has no relative perspective of time "beyond that of a human lifetime" (Sewall 211). His landscape is timeless, cryogenized, unchanged. Loyal's reluctance to perceive forest time alienates him and detaches him still further from nature, as opposed to his young friends Kosti and Pala, who perceive it and observe it. He displays a kind of imbalance with respect to the land, since he does not relate to time and space, forest time and landscape, although he is able to feel the history of the place:

He hears the slipping twinned voices canted at each other in fifths, the Stamping Dance of the Oglala, the voices whirling away and dropping, together, apart, locked in each other's trembling throats. The fast war dance, hypnotic and maddening, has irradiated the sandstone. He has only to hold a mass of stone in each hand and bring them together again and again, faster and faster, twice the speed of the beating heart. (Proulx, *Postcards* 250)

Loyal's severance from the landscape is now complete. The lack of perception of that forest time is manifest. He is not aligned with the natural processes of weather or the time: "He kept peculiar time. Sometimes we did his potatoes at ten o'clock at night, the trouble light used to heal them in the oily guts of the engine hanging on a post in the garden, casting enormous shadows of potato leaves on the bleached soil and throwing down the shapes of gargoyles from his hunched shoulders and cowboy hat" (Proulx, *Postcards* 273). When Loyal has the wagon stolen from his truck – where, among his possessions, he stacked a collection of hats and cowboy-movie memorabilia– the last token of something that symbolizes a home has vanished for good: "Busted, broke, he drifts into the stream [of migrant labor]" (Proulx, *Postcards* 279).

Loyal has become a full-time nomad, an image that mirrors a large section of American society during the 1980s, for whom the Western landscape had become homogenized, the "walmarted" or "starbucked" post-West that is underway. To get a sense of direction he still reads a few landmarks in the uniform landscape: "He's not sure where he is. So many roads look the same, same, the repetitive signs, the yellow stripe to the horizon. The same cars and trucks are repeated over and over. But in the early morning when he is not jostled by traffic he finds a way to the back roads where he sees box elder, sumac buds showing green tips" (Proulx, *Postcards* 278).

When Loyal requests a job at a potato farm, he is hired despite looking like a "bum" and "an old drifter" (Proulx, *Postcards* 284). He is employed as a foreman to supervise immigrant workers picking up potatoes at a potato farm. Old and unable to reconnect, Loyal works for Kortnegger, the last improver that Loyal comes across,

just to be able to survive even though he has to carry out a task that he is not fit to do. The owner exploits his workers by making them work in extremely harsh conditions, not paying them and killing them if they try to escape or complain about their treatment. The issue takes us back to Steinbeck's migrant laborers. In this case, the association is arranged by focusing on modern-day slaveholder agribusinesses, their abuse and exhaustion of the land, after replacing small farm operations across rural America.

The chapter exposes the abuse not only of the land but of the people who work it by agrobusinesses, underpaid and badly fed: "They were the worst-looking bunch of skags Loyal had seen. Old bindle stiffs, half of them coughing their lungs out and blue with emphysema, the younger ones caved in with malnutrition and liquor and confusion" (Proulx, *Postcards* 284). One hot day when a storm is coming from the West, Kortnegger urges Loyal to make them keep on working. His severance from the land makes him misinterpret its signs. He has set his farm on a dry area and he has suffered a two-year drought. His employer curses it:

"It might pass north of us. It's dry here. Two years of drought. I remember the goddamn year when every storm went past. You could see the goddam rain fallin' up in Gackle. Two mile north and we never got a drop. Fuckin' goddam country. Oughta give it back to the goddamn Indians." (Proulx, *Postcards* 286)

Kortnegger is enraged when the workers ignore him and seek for shelter – "Where the hell do they think they're going?" (Proulx, *Postcards* 286). Loyal tries to talk some sense into him: "There's a damn good chance they'll get hit with lightning. Nobody ever stays in the field through a thunderstorm" (Proulx, *Postcards* 286) but

Kortnegger will not hear of it: "These are goin' to [...] Get back to bloody work you buggers. Any man comes in from that field don't draw no pay!" (Proulx, *Postcards* 286). Later on, when he finds a strange dinosaur bone, Loyal discovers the buried bodies of Mexican workers and realizes that Kortnegger kills whoever tries to run away. The cotton grove next to the farm is filled with scattered human skulls and bones. Loyal, who departs before sunrise, writes an anonymous postcard to the government informing them about the situation at the Kortnegger farm, which stands for the worsened immigrant cheap labor in the West, and the indemnity that big corporations seem to be granted.

Still hanging on to the last sense, and in desperate need of money, Loyal tries to sell the bone that he dug at Kortnegger's farm at a college in Rapid City. It turns out that it is a fulgurite, a rock hit by lightning, which is likely interesting for the museum to buy. Loyal cannot wait and leaves with it, as he intends to cash it in right away: "I'd sort of want to sell it today. I'm on the move and I'm on my way" (Proulx, *Postcards* 294). He is told that "this is just not the way it's done, old-timer" (Proulx, *Postcards* 294). Still, he decides to get it to someone that he knew in Utah or Montana who "used to buy bones" (Proulx, *Postcards* 294). He still relies on his senses and his –misleading– reading of the landscape:

He'd buy it as soon as he saw it. Loyal remembered just where the place was, could see it clear, the way the dusty road looked left as you came down from the mountains, then opened out into tumbled low hills and the river flats and after a while there was the bone man's bar and the back room full of boxes of these things, the fulgurite bones. (Proulx, *Postcards* 294)

Once on the road, he stops for coffee and, again, not recognizing anything, he gets the feeling that he is going in the wrong direction. He is lost in a West to which he does not relate or which he understands no more:

He's on a back road. The traffic is thinner. But it's all wrong. He is turned around in some way [...] Red-winged blackbirds flare, the shadows of clouds flow over the soft country, storefronts, corrugated metal of machinery repair shops, grain storage, farm chemicals. Tractors churn. God, it has to be Minnesota. He's going east, must have driven northeast all the way across South Dakota. Turned around. Completely turned around. (Proulx, *Postcards* 297)

In the end, the truck breaks down: "Worn out, worn down, used up. That's all folks" (Proulx, *Postcards* 298). Without the truck, the last familiar space that he understood, he wanders on foot, with his bedroll on his back, trying to find food in the trash. Symbolically, he has turned into the bear of the postcards himself, from which, early in the narrative, we had learnt that it "came to the Lodge's garbage dump and its exotic peach peelings, buttered crusts and beef fat that melted in his hot throat" (Proulx, *Postcards* 34), becoming a tourist attraction. This is a moment of maximum disjunction, when he sees the land around him but does not decipher it: "When Loyal opened his eyes he was looking at a white spider crouched in the petals of a daisy. The round cream-colored abdomen reflected the buttery pollen rods. The grass like doll plates. No wind. Daisies floated in the grass like doll plates. He could not remember what they reminded him of" (Proulx, *Postcards* 299). He walks tired and sick in total dysfunctional awareness: "The air sweetened with flooding light as he labored through Birch and Poplar. Breathless, coughing, when he reached the meadow, he was disappointed to find it was only an opening in the

woods, a clearing of Lincoln and renting strawberry leaves, but he could not tell what he had expected he had come around so many corners they all look the same” (Proulx, *Postcards* 300). His survival-oriented improver eye has homogenized the landscape. Everything looks the same and nothing makes special sense to him anymore, even though it is a distinctive landscape: “The meadow was what he imagined summer in Russia was” (Proulx, *Postcards* 300). Johnson states that “his sense of the world is disjointed, seeing the pieces but not how they fit together” (M. E. Johnson 37). In the last pages of the narrative Proulx faces Loyal with nature, evoked by the narrator but not recognized by the protagonist. He sees his end near: “He thought: it’s almost gone” (Proulx, *Postcards* 300). Loyal’s ongoing process of mental decline foregrounds this detachment, emphasizing how the lack of genuine deep perception is leading him to a devastating aftermath.

Interestingly, Mark Tredinnick reads the interconnections between land and the human spirit in terms of lively musical forms –rhythm and dance–, as “a network of relationships intrinsically dynamic” (Tredinnick 290) and he insists on the role of imagination as the key to ecological engagement. His quotation of Paul Carter takes us back to Palmer’s matrix: “A particular landscape is not only what we see and hear. It includes all the things that escape our notice” (Tredinnick 290). The inability to develop clear visions and refreshing imaginations deprives Loyal of a guide, a future and a road to salvation. Proulx has always referred to imagination as crucial in keeping us connected: “Imagination is the human mind’s central life strategy. It is how we anticipate danger, pleasure, threat. The imagination is how our expectations are raised and formulated; it excites and ennobles our purpose in life [...] Imagination is the central pivot in human’s life” (Proulx “Imagination”). Sewall

agrees that the way for environmental awareness is imagination: “the practice of visual imagery” (214). Learning to work with it empowers us to distinguish between perception and reality, suggesting that the images created through imagination may well be the guide to our daily unconscious choices (Sewall 214). The images that Loyal carries with him –his visions– are significant determinants of subjective reality and choice, his future. These perceptions are not a product of his active imagination but the passive frosted images of his primary landscape.

In the last moments of life, lying on a field, the only sense that Loyal seems to possess is sight, but it is a vision in his mind: “he sees through the eyelids” (Proulx, *Postcards* 309). All his senses have failed him. He has turned into an observer that does not see, but through his hallucinations: “he sees the wind” (Proulx, *Postcards* 309) and then, like Billy, he becomes the landscape. The last still image of the home farm will remain an immutable image in the manner of the postcards that he sends, a memory of the reading of the landscape in a way that once was. The process of disjunction is now complete

Loyal’s is not the only process of disjunction depicted in *Postcards*. I consider relevant to pay attention to the number of relations that unfold regarding the landscape as the rapid changes in postwar America take over. The rest of the Blood family, the ones that stay behind, undergo different fates, all defined by their different relationships with the farm and its surroundings, just like some newcomers that take over the former farmland and establish there, as we have seen in the plot summary, attracted by other improvers in the business of selling the land, missing no opportunity to take advantage of the green areas and the economic possibilities that they offer.

3.4.1 The Bloods that Stayed Behind

As noted above, the breakup and subdivision of the Bloods' land stands for the rapid and significant transformation of rural areas during the second half of the 20th century. Kent C. Ryden recalls how people want to move onto what is left of the Bloods farm in order to "reap the perceived benefits of rural life, drawn by the enduring Vermont of the touristic mind" ("Corpse" 78), a reenactment of the newcomers and holiday makers longing for a piece of the Old West.

Jewell, Loyal's mother and head of the clan, with her son and husband behind bars and no income whatsoever, is forced to sell the farm. The ill-advice of Loyal's friend Ronnie Nipple, a pilgrim-turned-improver, together with sheer economics will force Jewell to sell most of the land and the farm. Ronnie, as we have seen, is the neighbor that "helps" farmers in Cream Hill to sell their land. He drops cards in the neighborhood postboxes urging them to sell:

Dear neighbor, since the death of my mother I have got out of farming and into Real Estate. With our boys coming back from the war there is a good market for farms. If you are thinking about Selling your place why not deal with a neighbor who can get you the Best Price? Call Nipple Real Estate at 4989 and let's talk turkey. (Proulx, *Postcards* 71)

Nipple sees the land in monetary terms, which invests him as the instrument that cuts the bonds between seven generations of farm families and their lands, and provokes the scattering of those families who change from being stewards of the land to what Proulx calls "service providers to the rich moving in" (Proulx qtd. in Morris).

Nipple has swiftly metamorphosed into a personage of the new times: “Leatherette briefcase bouncing against his leg, his upper body encased in a tight plaid jacket, head rocking left, right, left, Ronnie Nipple came up the may path. In the drive his dusty blue Fleetline Aerosedan cooled” (Proulx, *Postcards* 111). He has also learned the new suave improver ways swiftly and he persuades Jewell to sell the family land, using the family ties –Ronnie pretends to buy the land in her brother-in-law’s name, Ott– to take advantage of her: “A piece of the orchard so you can keep up your pies and applesauce. Ott has offered a real good price for the cropland and pasture, that field of Loyal’s prob’ly more than it’s worth right now. And I got a doctor from Boston wants to buy the woodlot and the sugar bush, build a hunting camp up in the woods. Between Ott and the doctor you’ll be free and clear of the debts. It’ll lay it right out for you, Jewell” (Proulx, *Postcards* 113). While Jewell is grateful that at least part of the land will stay in the family, Ronnie has learned that “family ties possess a new economic value” (Asquith, *Annie* 46), something that Jewell cannot comprehend.

Ronnie Nipple coldly exposes the “real” causes of the Bloods’ collapse, summarizing the full philosophy that connects both ends of the equation in the trade of the land –farmers turned improvers and new residents:

“You folks kept to yourselves up here. Missed out on a few things. Changes. It’s not just what a farm’ll bring for a farm, now. There’s people with good money want to have a summer place. The view. That’s important. See the hills, some water. The places with the barn right across the road from the house don’t move good, but if there’s a pretty view, why...” (Proulx, *Postcards* 114)

The “changes” to which he refers have to do with how land has become useful and he

will have his share. He makes a profit from the land without ever laying his hands on it; he is fully aware that none of these newcomers is there to work the land, but fundamentally want it for aesthetic reasons, trying to relive old Western pioneer ways or, as Ryden puts it: “a matter of playing at being Vermonters rather than experiencing the authentic historic textures of rural life” (“Corpse” 78).

Days after the sale of the farm, Jewell gets suspicious when she sees Ott appear on the land with a bulldozer: “I’d like to know what he thinks he’s going to do with that. [...] He says he wants to plant corn. I never see a farmer use a bulldozer” (Proulx, *Postcards* 119). Jewell feels betrayed and upset when she discovers him bulldozing the land at night and dividing it into small lots. She soon realizes that he is setting up a trailer park in partnership with Ronnie Nipple. Mahoney and Katz refer to the extent and impact of such practices, stressing the influence of outsiders on rural landscape transformation, when they argue that “like colonies, regions, then, may be produced for the eastern market, for outsiders and by outsiders” (xv). Ronnie Nipple impersonates “the very antithesis of the traditional attachment to the land through mixing labour, and signals the arrival of a new and damaging economic morality” (Asquith, *Annie* 47), that of the new urban improvers –such as the Witkins– that will give that new and destructive use to the land.

Once relocated, Jewell often misses old feelings and sensations, as she cannot capture familiarity in the new domestic environment. She feels the mark of generations in the land: “this farm has been in the Blood family since the Revolutionary War days. I’ll never know why Mink didn’t go to Ott, why he didn’t think the farm could bring anything” (Proulx, *Postcards* 113). Jewell reads some of

the signs of the new times and she is forced to move, relocating to a new landscape that she only partially understands. Caught between her attachment to the farm and her craving for freedom and independence, Jewell sees her domestic space reduced to a trailer in a trailer park, from where she can see the land that used to be theirs. Despite the commodities, including an electric oven, a symbol of the electrification of rural areas, she still misses the old authentic tastes and flavors and the real sensations that she experienced at the farm. Now everything she eats is canned or frozen. Through Jewell, Proulx has us look back and she reminds us of the importance that things have when we might easily dismiss them:

“Mernelle, you remember the hens we raised were so good. I can just taste one of those big roasters, go seven or eight pounds, sitting on the platter all crispy and roasted with a good bread stuffing. Make your mouth water just to smell it. I always liked my food and I guess I miss the stuff we grew on the farm. [...] There’s nothing so tender as home-canned beef. You can’t buy it for love nor money.” (Proulx, *Postcards* 175)

Somehow Jewell manages to support a dual structure of loyalties. On the one hand, her former life in a rural landscape where she belonged and that she understood and she was in alliance with it. On the other, the new economic and domestic premises that keep her connected and moving on an environment that she is already in disjunction with. The fact that her new unfamiliar domestic space is embedded in her old domestic environment plays out as an irony. The stimuli and challenges of this new existence lead her to venture beyond the borders of the once familiar landscapes and into the unknown. Moreover, it provides her with a freedom of movement that she has never had the chance to enjoy before. Proulx

places Jewell in a dangerous and eventually fatal situation; on an excursion to Mount Washington in her '66 orange Beetle. Her car gets trapped on a logging road. As she is trying to free it with a pole, she dies of an aneurism. Proulx is here referring to logging corporations –as seen in Loyal’s section– that bulldoze the land and, in this case, symbolically kill Jewell. Her body is never found and, like those of Billy and later Loyal, it too becomes part of the landscape.

Through Jewell, Proulx makes the clearest claim on the way that landscape – not just naturally but socially too– is changing. As she drives, she clearly perceives the environment around her, confronting it to her old untouched habitat:

She saw the landscape changing. Everything was changing. Brush growing up. She was critical when the road cruise got overhanging limbs from the maples. Tears streamed when they cut the trees themselves to widen the highway, hardtop now all the way to the post road. The village grew unaccountably, men sewed down the yellowing elms tore up stumps with great corkscrew machines. This the street spread like unpenned water to the edges of the buildings. Metal roofs glittered. At the dump, heaps of broken slate invited pot shots from rad shooters, then sent the above [...] The town sold off the timber in the water shed above the valley and for two years endured the nasal morning of chainsaws. The clear-cut left the hills as a bear as the side of a scraped hog. The old common became a park with walks and concrete benches already crumbling in the second spring [...] New people. New people on the general store. Started new stores, turned barns into inns and woodwork shops. They moved into farm houses hoping to fit their lives into the rooms, to fit their shoes to the stair treads. She thought they were like insects casting off tight husks, vulnerable for a little while until the new chitin hardened. (Proulx, *Postcards* 127-128)

Jewell lists, one after the other, the injuries of the previously familiar landscape. The

passage reads like an ecocritical manifesto, where one cannot help but hearing Proulx herself. On the one hand, improver machines have performed cutting, the sawing, tearing in the community; in other words, a mechanical erasing. At the same pace, a new generation of “new people” –“insects”– have taken over trying to re-live preconceived or idealized ideas of a country life, transforming nature into household commodities but, most importantly, getting rid of the central space in the community, “the old common,” which has been substituted by crumbling cement, just like the new society that is precisely taking over small rural communities for the sake of their aesthetics.

Even though the character of Jewell can be read at different levels –gender, domesticity– I find it relevant to point out this change of role *within* the familiar landscape and the final maladjustment to it. Rooted in the past, Jewell sees the advantages of the new life, while longing for the feel of a rural lifestyle that is long lost. Proulx places her at the mercy of the merciless, forces that overpower transmuted landscapes, as she succumbs to natural forces, dying in nature, but still in an improver-transformed landscape that becomes a road to destruction.

Dub, the Bloods’ youngest son, has no interest in the farm and he lacks the attachment that Loyal feels. After losing an arm jumping boxcars, he is crippled and of no use on the farm. As a result, he longs for a different life and dreams of learning to improve his personal situation somewhere far from the hinterlands. When he is around the farm, Dub is in a constant state of disjunction with the landscape, hostile as it makes him feel useless. Only after Loyal leaves, he makes a move and tries to be part of the farm, working hand in hand with his irascible father. He lacks Loyal’s perception, nor is he ready for it. That is why he does not hesitate

to help his father Mink burns down the barn for the insurance money, for which he will also be incarcerated. In *Postcards*, Dub's transformation goes from estrangement and disaffection to financial success, in pursuit of an economic improver status at the expense of the land.

Once he is released from his imprisonment, Dub applies to a number of jobs – see plot summary– that he does not get for being physically impaired. His wife leaves him with their kid. Divorced and father of a son that he will never see, Dub changes the home landscape –to which he has no attachment whatsoever, but a severe detachment– for the Florida landscapes, a vast ripe extension of land around Miami waiting to be sold, bulldozed and transformed. He is fascinated at the sight of the new urban landscape, which has finally driven him away from the rural farmland, the natural world. Dub is “ripe for conversion” (Asquith, *Annie* 53), ready to embrace his share of Eden³², as he is about to become a metropolitan improver.

Dub clearly falls into the category of mainstream successful improver-developers that plague the country in the 1950s, with an identical mindset to Ronnie Nipple's back home. After getting a degree from real estate school, he learns the ropes and develops a one-track improver's mind. Dub is immediately “corrupted” by Miami, where he develops a, “aesthetic” sense of place and attachment, awed as he is by the superficiality of the Disneyworld-like images which the place emanates:

³² Proulx gives the chapter on Dub's life in Miami a biblical title, “The Garden of Eden,” which has obvious references to the biblical theme of temptation and fall. There Dub will follow and be tempted by the malicious business practices of people like Maurice Bent in real estate, a sort of modern-day marketing prophet of improvers that teaches and motivates his real estate students with the sole reason to be in the business: “This class WILL be animated by each student's desire to make a million dollars” [...]The motto of this class is ‘I refuse to accept the fate life has handed me. I will MAKE my OWN fate’” (Proulx, *Postcards* 145). Proulx's ironic description typifies the new-age land entrepreneur that recklessly sells the landscape at a high-speed pace: “His face was tanned a deep-red orange. A ridge of muscle around his mouth whitened the rim of his upper lip and gave him the look of a shrewd simian. The bags under his eyes were dusky blues. His hair, parted on the left, leaped up in a great quaff over his left eye. He wore a white linen suit with a nylon knit shirt of pale yellow. The collar flared over the suit lapels, and when he leaned out, Dub, sitting in the front row, could see the crown emblem stitched over his left nipple. He bent toward them and, in a coaxing voice, said, ‘I am a millionaire. How many of you want to be millionaires?’” (Proulx, *Postcards* 144-145).

Along the streets Dub sees the parade of bright dresses, gold chains and sequins. Above the city a fan of clouds like crimson knife blades, below, marble sidewalk. He passes a window, and in it an antique gramophone horn with painted morning glories surging out of its throat. I love this, he thinks, the shriek of jets, statues with flowery garlands, the front yard layaway saints lit with pink neon and the flashbulb of tourists, windows heaped with conch shells, the raw bars and imitation shrunken heads, fish baskets and painted textiles and the funky music, the wild toughs, the deals and dirt, the eroding beaches, the sense of being in a foreign and lethal place. Home. (Proulx, *Postcards* 204)

He feels a desire to belong, but in disjunctive terms. As Mahoney and Katz affirm, “The desire to belong somewhere is as common as the impetus to find ways [...] to establish a connection to a place and a community” (24). While the authors are referring to an understanding achieved in terms of respect and appreciation, clearly Dub’s appreciation is purely economic; he commits to this specific geographical place, which is overtly conducted in terms of utility. Pala, his Cuban American wife, has turned into a real modern-day improver, and she has no scruples when it is about “going big” in real estate. Dub is attracted to her improver’s mind: “I am more interested in the special commercial properties –centrally designed, landscaped projects that balance hotels, shopping malls, marinas and services in a beautiful and coherent way. Spaces with water elements, plants, esplanades, open air restaurants. That is why I applied here” (Proulx, *Postcards* 183). Pala and Dub, an immigrant and a crippled farmer boy, have to all appearances succeeded in realizing their particular version of the American Dream. Through Dub’s account, Proulx’s sharp eye highlights Walt Disney’s purchase of cheap land on which to build what is now Disneyworld, as well as a residential area, for which a vast area of swampland

was drained and ecosystems destroyed. He is aware of the consequences, but dismisses them: “The Reedy Creek Improvement District, Disney World they will call it when it’s done. Expensive plastic shit, he thinks. But winks and says to himself, thanks a million” (Proulx, *Postcards* 203).

The tax administrators –the IRS– are after them, who receive a postcard summoning them to have their books examined. After experiencing a rioters’ attack in the streets, which terrifies Pala, they decide to move to Houston and open a travel agency. The Miami riots of 1980 were in part provoked by the type of improvers that Dub represents: “money-men and investors fleeing the condos unsold, office towers unleashed, undeveloped properties foreclosed” (Proulx, *Postcards* 248). They leave Miami well-off, having risen to the top of the Miami’s “jet set,” thanks to their real estate achievements: “He and Pala had an instinct for the protected properties, islands joined to the mainland by a single causeway or bridge. Peninsulas with a single approach road. They understood the clients who needed certain properties. He wished the tax people would understand them” (Proulx, *Postcards* 248). Prosperous but troubled, they cash their chips and move to Houston, just as the IRS is investigating them for tax fraud. Dub, now retired, grows orchids as a hobby, his first attempt at any type of cultivation. As Rood suggests, this is quite an appropriate vocation for someone with “no sense or connection to the land” (74), seeing that orchids survive without any contact with the soil.

Here Proulx is clearly referring to the economic growth and striking changes that have taken place in Miami’s landscape. They are attributed to the influence of drug money, especially cocaine, in a time of marked economic recession in the

second half of the 1970s³³. In this context, Dub's image of tacky prosperity is decadent and grotesque, almost surrealistic when contrasted with the old days when he was working on the farm: "Dub, fat in white linen in the peacock chair, having breakfast beside the pool before sunrise. The chilled mimosa, the opal-fleshed melon with a twist of tangerine juice, then the country ham and the quail eggs flown in from Japan, blackhearted coffee that wired you for the day" (Proulx, *Postcards* 247). Tanned and dressed just like him, he has fulfilled his dream of turning into another Maurice Bent. Grotesquely, he sits on a "peacock chair," drinking "opal-fleshed melon with a twist of green-tangerine juice" and significantly eats "country ham" and "quail eggs flown in from Japan" (Proulx, *Postcards* 247), what displays a complete severance from anything related to land, the farm or nature.

Mernelle, the Bloods' youngest daughter, is perhaps the only survivor in terms of conjunction to the surrounding landscape, following the disintegration of the farm unit. She measures her success in readjusting in terms of "lack of pain," the definition of success in strictly Proulxian terms mentioned before: "Happiness is simply the absence of pain, and so, the illusion of pleasure" (Edemariam). Proulx draws an archetype of young woman in the domestic role that Mernelle is destined for. As a young girl, she shows all the signs of connection and conjunction with the landscape, including feeling part of it. Mernelle is, like Loyal, a product of her landscape who reads the signs effectively and as a kid makes her little bit of money

³³ These economic growth and striking changes that occurred in Miami connected to cocaine trafficking account for a critical period that Billy Corben describes in his documentary movie *Cocaine Cowboys* (2006). Miami's opulence during this period (mid-to-late 70s) is contrasted with the rest of southern Florida, where real estate markets were collapsing and the unemployment rate increased dramatically. Crime rose to such an extent that on November 23, 1981, South Beach appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* under the heading "Paradise Lost?" This was an obvious reference not only to the changing lifestyle, but also to the disfigurement of the landscape. The movie was made into a Netflix documentary series under the same title in 2021.

by selling pods: ““And guess what, Da, some of the kids turned in milkweeds that was still green, and they only give ‘em ten cents a bag. I let mine all nice and dry up in the hayloft first”” (Proulx, *Postcards* 7). To borrow Sewall’s terms again, she perceives it as a relationship to and a partnership with nature:

She stepped into the blueberries and picked a few. They were still tinged with purple and sour. She squinted at the sky remembering the dusky brass color it had taken on the eclipse a month ago, though the sun had stayed visible and white. She had been disappointed, had hoped for a black sky with a flaming corona burning a hole in the darkness of midmorning. No such luck. The mournful call came again, and she stripped a handful of berries and leaves, chewed them as she climbed the hill back to the house and only spat them out at the fence. (Proulx, *Postcards* 63)

Mernelle is one of the few characters through whom Proulx reveals “partnership,” or what Barry Lopez refers to as “intimacy” with the place (“Place” 11). When the fatal disruption takes place—when the farm and the land are lost—after Mink has hanged himself in jail, she turns to the landscape, and reads its inauspicious and proleptic signs: “Mernelle sat dreamily rocking staring out the window at the scorched house foundation. She was apart from this talk. Fireweed had already surged up out of the cavity. The trilling was maddening. The weeds spurted, mallow, peppergrass, dog strangle vine, stinking wall rocket. The barberry bush near the old dog’s grave in sullen flower, the moths nipping and jittering” (Proulx, *Postcards* 112). She is one of the impoverished pilgrims-dwellers forced to leave their land and relocate. As we have seen in the plot summary, despite her attachment or “spiritual affinity” (Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* 250) with nature, she cannot

wait to leave the family farm and start her own life in another environment.

Mernelle marries Ray McWay through a newspaper campaign to find him a wife, and the two of them adjust to the rapid transformation of the landscape around them, becoming a traditional 50s middle-class couple. Unlike Loyal, she never leaves Vermont and the only contact that she has with the world outside is also through postcards. Mernelle represents the end of the line for the Blood clan, as she stays in the land but Ray and her do not have children: "This family has got a habit of disappearing. Every one of this family is gone except me. And I'm the end of it" (Proulx, *Postcards* 225). Mernelle's sterility stands for the end of a lifestyle, but also for the lack of a future for generations who have deserted their cultural environment for what Michael Kowalewski identifies as "attitudes, and economic and social forces that threaten local distinctiveness" ("Losing" 242).

Mernelle is the only one in the family that somehow succeeds, resisting in her own way the transformations that the landscape undergoes along the decades. She is the only one who seemed to understand the value of the family farm as a shield against the inevitable changes that are underway. Throughout the story, she blames Loyal for the break-up of the family, but she is the only one who seems to survive in an environment with which she has somehow managed to stay in harmony. As seen in the plot summary, Mernelle stands as an unresisting eyewitness of the deep alterations in both landscape and the world around her.

If the plight of the Bloods represents a fading generation of farmers that are unable to comprehend the profound transformations in the ever-changing landscape—a process that they cannot stop or join—, a new wave of improver newcomers arrives, the one that carries out those alterations that the new times bring. Witkin personifies

this character type, one that Proulx often depicts in her narratives: the urban yuppie that comes to rural areas to relive pioneer ideals in a rural setting. Unfortunately, he misses all the signs and lacks performing intimacy with the natural surroundings, what ends up in ecological disaster.

3.4.3. Yuppies in the New West: Witkin

The arrival of Franklin Witkin, a Boston dermatologist who has bought the other half of the Bloods' land, is an extreme example of a different use of the landscape, carried out by city improvers. Witkin is an urban improver archetypal character that deserves careful attention. He represents a modern-day small-scale improver completely at odds with its surroundings, not merging, reading or paying attention. On the contrary, it samples city improvers who are trying to redefine landscape by means of disjunction, impersonating a damaging economic morality, with the sole intention of adapting and transforming it to their own aesthetic needs.

In this case, cultural disjunction and lack of perception make for an explosive combination that will result in an unconscious transformation of the landscape that proves irreversible. He is the one, together with his half-brother Larry, who takes hold of the Blood's farm and part of the land after buying it from Ronnie Nipple. Witkin is the executor of Ronnie's vision: just like him, Witkin also sees the land in terms of utility, this time as a site for a vacation home and outdoor adventures. As a kid, he and his half-brother Larry –“a New York gallery owner, a man with a hundred interests and a thousand friends” (Proulx, *Postcards* 130)– had “both dreamed about huts in the forest” (Proulx, *Postcards* 130); and as a teenager, he developed the idea

of owning a place, an idealized Western home, while he was “studying photographs of Teddy Roosevelt in some log room decorated with the heads and skins of animals” (Proulx, *Postcards* 130). They both want to hunt deer in autumn, and have dogs to range and cast, fulfilling their childhood Western dreams when they played cowboys. Yet we are told that “neither of them had ever hunted” (Proulx, *Postcards* 130), and they admitted that “neither of us knows anything about the woods” (Proulx, *Postcards* 130). Their story contrasts with the old ideal of the simple life with alienating urban intricacy.

As with most newcomers, their activities are determined more by the urge to own than by the “sense of belonging” or the longing for companionship (Lopez, “Place” 12). Kowaleswki explains that newcomers do not feel the need to connect with old residents, as their possession of the land is done in capitalist terms: “Citizens are reduced to mere consumers and livable communities are seen as commodities to be purchased rather than entities that must be created, often with great effort, for ourselves” (“Losing” 243).

Witkin and his family arrive at their new piece of land in Vermont and camp out. From day one he shows no connection with the land, but rather curiosity. He is an outsider who cannot read nature:

There was too much to look at. Knotted branches. The urgent but senseless angular pointing of tree limbs. Grass the color of wafers. Trees lifting soundless explosions of chrome and saffron. Mountains scribbled maroon, riven by mica-shot cliffs. The yelling light. He looked up and the sky filled with swarming points. If he walked into the woods, land tilted, trees thronged like gnats, the air turned sallow and he was lost. He always came back to the wall for his bearings, finding in its linear perseverance, its lichened stones, a rope in the wilderness. (Proulx, *Postcards* 129)

On their first night there, camping with his family, he is unable to perceive anything as he looks out anything: “He woke many times during the night to sounds outside the tent but [...] he could see nothing. When he switched off the flashlight the darkness seemed immense and ageless” (Proulx, *Postcards* 131). Even though his family immediately despises the uncomfortable place and never comes back, “aspirant outdoorsman” (Berry 175). Witkin displays a growing infatuation with the land, and every weekend he drives up from Boston alone, seeking shelter in a strange landscape that he owns: “The last patient came at noon and then he was on his way. But once at the camp he felt uncertain. It was as if the road between his two lives was the realest thing of all, as if the journey counted more than arriving at the end” (Proulx, *Postcards* 133). The quotation focuses on the “transience” (Berry 176) and temporality, on the excitement of the getting there rather than on the enjoyment of the place itself. Ryden understands it as the point that Proulx makes about the ideal and the real-lived Vermont (“Corpse” 78), as it seems like Witkin enjoys more thinking about the land that he owns than the actual fact of being there. Their plan is more about property than stewardship, what defines that their improver disjunction is intrinsically linked to a feeling of possession and ownership: “It’s a different thing than coming up for the skiing or staying at a Woodstock inn, or even visiting friends or taking a house for the summer. That someone in the family owns the land” (Proulx, *Postcards* 130).

At first, the “place” in Vermont is barely an escape from their overscheduled agendas. The naming ironically parallels Loyal’s “place” in North Dakota, the farm that he was never able to call anything else as he was unable to feel attached to or

in conjunction with, just like Witkin with his new land in the old Bloods farmland. He gradually feels that the camp is the “kernel of life” (Proulx, *Postcards* 165), as it draws him away from his family and his life in Boston, although he is constantly confused about the feeling that he has for the place and about the unknown connections, as he does not know how to “perceive the relations” (Sewall 207). That is the reason for his permanent disjunction: “A cold confusion invaded him. Witkin was off-balance with every step” (Proulx, *Postcards* 164). He sees the land but does not equate with it. As an outside improver, Witkin is invulnerable to the sensual stimuli his place produces, and he is unable to gain intimacy with it (Lopez, “Place” 12), a condition to achieve conjunction, to be a pilgrim. Witkin’s lack of attentiveness makes him a stranger in his own place. Sense of place tries to enter him in a way that he cannot discern, and he wonders how to attain it:

Only the half brother understood the atavistic yearning that swept him when he stood beneath the trees, when a branch in the wind made the sound of an oboe. He had only to walk into the woods far enough to lose the camp, and he was in an ancient time that lured him but which he could not understand in any way. No explanation for his sense of belonging here. He stared, numb with loss, into bark crevices, scabbled in the curling leaves for a sign, turned and turned until the saplings heaved their branches and the trunks tilted away from him. He could hear a little drum, a chant. But what could it mean? The kernel of life, tiny, heavy, deep red in color, was secreted in these gabbling woods. How could he understand it? (Proulx, *Postcards* 165)

Even though he has owned the camp for years, Witkin cannot make anything out of the place, he does not read, understand or feel the “sense of belonging” to the place among that “confusion of trees” (Proulx, *Postcards* 252), despite that “atavistic

yearning” (Proulx, *Postcards* 165). Wes Berry stresses on the concept of absence and how it can turn destructive for an environment. Absentee owners “destroy places far away from where they live and work” (Berry 176). He notes that, with a nostalgia for a lost Eden, the “newly absentee landlord, Witkin, does not yet understand the particulars of the place” (Berry 176). Berry quotes Wendell Berry on the effects on the land of destructive absenteeism: “When people do not live where they work, they do not feel the effects of what they do [...] The people responsible for strip-mining, clearcutting of forests, and other ruinations do not live where their senses will be offended or their homes or livelihoods or lives immediately threatened by the consequences” (Wendell Berry qtd. in Berry 177). Witkin, even though he does not greatly damage his property initially, is a dangerously ignorant absentee that feels a proprietary urge –as stated above– but does not perceive the landscape connections.

Both half-brothers experience their disjunctive condition of improvers in two different ways. Even though they both feel the urge to get into the woods, Larry – the art gallery owner– approaches landscape with the aesthetic artistic point of view, distinguishing the different species of birds and trees, while for Witkin, “the birds meant as much to him as wild mushrooms” (Proulx, *Postcards* 165). Larry, at least, is able to make sense of the landscape through his practical metropolitan eye: “It was Larry who found the way through miles of brush, who kept his senses while cutting obliquely across the stone mangled ridges. Witkin was off balance in every step” (Proulx, *Postcards* 165). His numbness of feelings does not let him connect in any way, leading him further and further into confusion: “‘Nothing. I feel nothing.’ His sense was for the place, and the birds meant as much to him as wild mushrooms,

nothing in their singularity, everything as part of a whole. A cold confusion was invading him against his will. A coldness towards his life” (Proulx, *Postcards* 165). His disjunction is materialized by “an imperfect whole that makes no sense to his dermatologist eye” (Asquith, *Annie* 51). However, Witkin had aimed at experiencing some sort of Western cowboy rural survival, but on receiving his pair of cowboy boots, he sends a postcard inquiring about a pair of felt liner insoles: he wants “rural authenticity with comfort” (Asquith, *Annie* 49), metropolitan comfort.

Detached from his family and the medical world³⁴, in the woods, Witkin feels inexplicably alive, even though he is humorously mocked by locals. Throughout the years, Witkin –he is now Frank– changes the camp, adding extensions, and slowly grows apart from Larry, older and too tired for long climbs in the woods. It is only after Larry dies that Witkin tries to dominate, reorder the landscape from which he is disconnected:

He began to put the *chaos of nature in order*. The sinuous wood music, once so beguiling, had taken on discordance like a malfunctioning speaker. The same endless hum as the high tension wires when he had stood beneath them waiting for Larry to drive the deer across, confusing him so that he had not heard the deer come, had only seen the tawny motion. (Proulx, *Postcards* 252-253, emphasis added)

Significantly, his lack of perception makes him decide to reorder an area with two-hundred-year-old maple trees and projects a new lawn, a suburban symbol of the new times. Proulx insists again on the attention to millennial landscapes and the

³⁴ Ray Suarez, quoted by Kowalewski, explains the urban effect of the urbanites fleeing the cities, also leaving an imprint on metropolitan communities, in terms of breaking up the harmony of many neighborhoods (Kowalewski, “Losing” 245).

history of places, together with the processes of the land, a perception that Witkin's numb senses lack. He feels a rush to get it done as "other projects swarmed his mind, he had to hurry" (Proulx, *Postcards* 254). He has the machinery –again, the machines– tools and plans. He is ready to adapt the landscape that he does not understand to his urban improver needs. Ryden uses the term "imaginative malleability" to describe the value that the landscape has for newcomers ("Corpse" 79), as they have an "unrealistic understanding of their new place" ("Corpse" 79), which they obviously have romanticized or idealized. Proulx describes how holding on to these stereotypes or "regional cliches allows newcomers to ignore rural realities and focus on the only things that matter to them –surface aesthetics and property ownership" (Proulx, "Urban"). Witkin cannot build and rebuild enough. Even his now adult son gets tired of the work and quits, but Witkin cannot improve enough: "Witkin hired and hired. There was not enough time to do it alone. A crew of carpenters hammering the skeleton of the addition [...] Hurry" (Proulx, *Postcards* 254). Witkin clearly lacks subtlety and attention, and that makes him fail in every attempt to be part of it.

One day, digging near a wall in the property and rearranging the stones, Frank finds the buried remains of a woman. It is Billy. His romanticizing nature makes him think that it is the grave of a pioneer's wife, and he leaves it the way in which he found it so as not to profane a sacred place: "'Poor woman, I wonder who you were?' he said. In respect he undid the day's work, dragged the stone back to wall and levered it home again. He would not desecrate a grave" (Proulx, *Postcards* 255). Billy has been turning into soil for decades, and her death is partly what triggered the Bloods' decline, yet Witkin represents again the inability of the improver to be

able to grasp any truth in the history of the landscape that he owns.

Years later, Witkin's son Kevin, now an adult, has moved to the camp, next to the trailer park. Out of work, money and drugs, he is bothered by the noises coming from the trailer park³⁵ –“a cacophonous symphony of slamming doors” (Proulx, *Postcards* 306). Proulx portrays the social maladjustment to the land, which is now used to set camp, living trailers, a completely new use of rural landscapes. The place has turned into a messy ruin. Misalignment and disjunction have led to environmental destruction. The dirt and decay of the trailer park contrast sharply with what the land was once, the Bloods' farm, which Loyal was about to adjust to the new times. The scene drives Kevin crazy: “Filth was washing up around him. Yup! He walked along a washed-out road that went nowhere, smelled filth, found a decaying pig's carcass. Crows had pecked the eyes out. The skin pecked into pebble finish. Loosened reddish hair on the ground in sheets [...] The guts pulled away by something” (Proulx, *Postcards* 307). The trailer park packs up and the feelings of decay and carelessness for the place are invasive: “The trailers were packed closer and closer together. Overhead a jet roared. Yellow-eyed dogs on chains. In the doorways women holding beer cans or cigarettes or babies. Watching him. He drove

³⁵ The Midwest farm crisis of the 1980s during the Reagan Administration had its roots in high-interest rates, a 60% drop in the value of farmland, and overproduction which subsequently forced prices down. By early 1984, in the depths of the crisis, farm indebtedness had risen to \$215 billion (see Ronald E. Seavoy's *An Economic History of the United States: From 1607 to the Present*, 2006). Thousands of acres across America became trailer parks as the recess of American economy gained visibility –during the 1980s especially– and many people had to leave their homes and move into trailers. Not only that, but legions of well-to-do urbanites invaded rural areas, bought low-priced land and tried to set up their domestic spaces without any attention to or respect for the original landscape. This resulted, in most cases, in the destruction of the land of many generations of farmers who had been its faithful custodians for generations. Nature was never recovered and the American landscape was forever uniformly transformed into the starbucked” space that it is now. Mahoney and Katz agree that “Today regional barriers, borders, and markers of difference have all been irrevocably breached, awash in the nationalizing and globalizing flood of the economy, polity, population, and culture” (xx). Rupert Neate's extensive report in *The Guardian* shows how trailer parks are a huge and commercially successful business. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have been losing their homes in the continuous recessions, which created a big demand for cheap housing. US Census figures show that more than 20 million people –6% of the population–live in trailer parks today. The trailer park market in the United States is dominated by some of the country's richest and most high-profile investors.

faster, the car swung in the greasy ruts” (Proulx, *Postcards* 307). The environmental disaster in which the area has turned into –“a trailer-trash dystopia” (Asquith, *Annie* 47)– makes it unbearable for Kevin, who drives up to a hill and shoots himself with his father’s hunting rifle.

Through the subplot of the Witkin family, Proulx focuses the spotlight upon generations of urban absentee improvers who first owned the land and then tried to manipulate it into a state of total disjunction with it. Their lack of conjunction and intention of intimacy ends up in its destruction. Rood points out that the exploitation of Loyal’s field stands as a metaphor for Americans of the late 20th century, who are far more likely to resemble Witkin than Loyal, without any deep understanding or respect for the land (Rood 58). In conjunction with this idea, William Leach in *A Country of Exiles* explains the “weakening of place” due to capitalist influences. Using different words to describe urban improvers, he blames the heartless world of cosmopolitan escapists who do not acknowledge their own social location, assisted by legions of entrepreneurs who seem “bent on transforming everything, and land above all, into vendible commodities, how they tended to measure everything from labor to art for its market value” (Leach 4).

3.5 Final Remarks. Tracing the Intersections of Improvers and Pilgrims

As this part of the analysis shows, *Postcards* is a narrative about disjunction, according to the ecocritical reading that I have proposed. Proulx introduces improver characters around just about every page of her novel, whereas pilgrim attitudes are hard to find. She insists not only on the disjunction between the new generations

that extract and abuse what is left of the landscape, but also on the divorce from the land that rural people themselves suffer as a consequence of it. Most characters in *Postcards* relate one way or the other with that process of disjunction. With the exceptions of Mernelle and Jewell, none of the characters examined achieves or attempts any journey to intimacy with the land, conjunction through the senses, or the practice of an awareness that could provide them with a sense of inclusion. Most of them are people who manipulate, possess or extract, for whom there is no hope of reconnecting: “The true wealth that America offered, wealth that could turn exploitation into residency, greed into harmony, was to come from one thing –the cultivation and achievement of local knowledge,” Lopez writes in “The Rediscovery of America” (12). Proulx denounces how Americans are not only disconnected from nature, but from human landscapes as well. They come into nature with a benefit mindset and act in individual mode. They replicate each other’s pattern, as their interaction with landscape is utilitarian: they come to take, to extract and to possess as landscapes diminish as they proceed. Landscape is a conscious goal, not an unconscious consequence. Theodore Roszak refers to the “repression of ecological unconscious is the deepest root of collusive madness in industrial society” (320) and David Abram alludes to the lack of “ethical responsibility” to the planet as a consequence of the “collective myopia” or the “psychic numbing” mentioned before (Abram qtd. in Sewall 202), stressing again on the conscious use of the senses, as opposed to an improver’s mindset.

The individual’s lack of harmony in his relationship with landscape can lead to loss or fatal disjunction, and this is what *Postcards* clearly exposes. Human relationships and behavior are highly conditioned by the way humans approach

nature. Again, to come as a pilgrim or as an improver makes the difference, and examining the interaction of humans and landscape in those terms should work as a practical alert in terms of awareness. As Barry Lopez advises, becoming companions, rather than owners or authorities, is part of the secret to success ("Place" 12). Proulx's main aim in writing *Postcards* was to show the failure of a limited economic base for a region, which was "often the very thing that gave the region its distinctive character and social ways" (Morris). In this case, the promises of electrification for rural areas after the war—"farms first"—, an adjustment of rural areas to the changing times, meant the sudden collapse of a model that could not keep up with the pace of the country, what Lopez identifies as the main subject matter of literature of place: "The main topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development" ("Place" 10).

In the reading of *Postcards* that I proposed, Proulx vehemently warns us about the way to enter nature and the implications of understanding it in economic terms. The deterioration and annihilation of ecosystems, the merciless extraction of natural resources, the vandalization of archaeological sites, and the lack of responsibility and protection by the governments involved are all a consequence of a widespread improver modus operandi that seems dangerously genetic, global, perpetual. She conveniently reminds us: "Never has there been a time in human history when landscapes have changed and disappeared with such rapidity" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 18).

Lastly, this ecocritical reading is closely aligned with a reading in terms of American West as a post-West, as stated in the critical framework section. In

Postcards, Proulx challenges the idealized notions of the American West, which suggests Campbell's notion of the redistribution of the sensible in terms of acknowledging a different West in permanent motion and change, with differential elements that are part of this ongoing process of region. *Postcards* also suggests how the minor and local are represented in the connections and encounters around the family farm, which is often taken over by improvers that do not appreciate the difference, both in others and in themselves. The small community of Cream Hill, Vermont undergoes this process of change right from the moment that the narrative starts.

Following Campbell, I suggest a reading of the Bloods farm as an affective critical space. A farm in Vermont carries a parallel local meaning as a ranch could in Wyoming or anywhere in the West. Both *loci* carry with them a series of ready-made meanings that can be both used and challenged in this examination. One can argue that the Bloods farm "intones as a gathering power in the lives and landscapes, dreams and disappointments" (Campbell, *Affective* 42). This sense of loss, I argue, is a misalignment of the characters of the narrative, especially Loyal Blood, with the real and imagined landscapes. The farm, its surroundings and the region that it represents, "is a complex shifting presence of forces, rhythms and relations that come together and disburse" (Campbell, *Affective* 42). Proulx writes of a region alive with a group of characters that do not connect to it, some that hold on to old Western ideals and others that misinterpret those same ideals. Eventually, three farms emerge from the narrative: first, the imagined farm in Loyal's mind; second, the original fixed idea of Vermont farm that he remembers; finally, a farm that has gone through a process of transformation over time, becoming pray for modern

extractionist improver powers. These three spaces connect and intersect, and ultimately come to define the “real” active space of the farm, a rendering of the dynamic concept of West that Proulx comes to portray, attuned with Campbell’s understanding of region as affective critical regionality, an examining tool that I am using fully in the upcoming analysis sections.

Chapter 4. The Stubborn Post-West of *That Old Ace in the Hole*

We were in Albuquerque at the fights
The referee wouldn't stop the bout
The kid's blood hit the fifth row
How he didn't die that night I don't know
That was the night I gave up the fight.
Driving down 25 towards Las Cruces
We saw a flipped-over semi
We pushed in the windshield and pulled the guy out
Left him laying on the side of the road
My friend said we had to leave before the cops showed
What he'd done I didn't know.
Just hoped the guy was still breathing
As we disappeared down the road
I felt so bad
87dollars and bad nerves
87 dollars and a bag of clothes
And a guilty conscience that gets worse
the longer I go.

—Richmond Fontaine, *87 dollars and a guilty conscience
that gets worse the longer I go*

This second part of the corpus analysis deals with *That Old Ace in the Hole*, Annie Proulx's fourth long narrative, published in 2002. As I stated before, from an ecocritical point of view, Annie Proulx's literature is either about conjunction with landscape or disjunction and severance from it. My argument here is that *That Old Ace in the Hole*³⁶ is a clear

³⁶ From this point on I will refer to *That Old Ace in the Hole* in the citations with the abbreviated form "Ace," due to the significant number of them, for the sake of brevity.

example of the first category, mainly through the character of Bob Dollar, its protagonist. The narrative reverses the process of disjunction that *Postcards* unfolds, focusing on a character that comes in as an improver and slowly turns into a pilgrim, reading the landscape and becoming part of the community. At the same time, Proulx depicts a West in motion, where history and time play a major role in her reading of landscape, its wounds and marks. In this West, traditional notions are often challenged but not totally dismissed. Through the narrative, she makes a statement that the region is a dynamic space that takes into account encounters, change, opportunities, locals and outsiders, and permanent encounters of the local with the global, a reading of place attuned with Campbell's reading of region as affective critical regionality, my second examining tool. My analysis will thus follow the same examining framework defined in the introduction: an ecocritical examination of the narrative, using Scott Slovic's and Barry Lopez's concepts of conjunction/pilgrim and disjunction/improver together with a reading of region through Campbell's concept of affective critical regionality.

The main setting of *That Old Ace in the Hole* is the Texas Panhandle, a significant area of the American West, specifically the fictional town of Woolybucket. The panhandle is the main character in the narrative as Proulx, again, sets the focus on a region that is alive and outside the constraints of the classic idea of a Western town. Proulx based the plot on an ongoing issue in the panhandle: the spread of hog farms corporations in that low-populated area of Texas, a fact that generated the indignation of locals. The Ogallala Aquifer –more later– has been historically and gradually depleted, with the added problem of the polluted water underground from the waste pools in those farms. Together with that, she addresses the concern of the unbearable smell around those sites, which adds up to massive health issues (Hunt 185).

I argue that *That Old Ace in the Hole* is a narrative of conjunction, typified in the novel's protagonist Bob Dollar, who comes into the community as an improver and ends up achieving connection, a sense of at-homeness, and becomes a pilgrim, if stated in ecocritical terms. And he does so by paying attention to the land, through an awakening of the senses, and by interacting with the community. He becomes an active nature lover and a kind of landscape journal writer, which Proulx uses to put forward a constant dialogue between old and new (post) Wests, as we will see in the analysis. Her point, I argue, is to explain how extractionist interests can somehow be obstructed if a pilgrim attitude is achieved, together with a communal understanding of the land. This vision of the region is fully aligned with Campbell's reading as affective critical regionality. The local here is affected by the global in social and economic terms. Proulx reverses the fate of the small community of Cream Hill, in *Postcards*, analyzed above. Without being sentimental, in the conflict between global and local economics Proulx defends a communal effort and respect for the land as a path to salvation from modern-day improver-developers in the West. If, as seen in *Postcards*, global economics across the 20th century defined the fate of small communities, *That Old Ace in the Hole* exposes how local small-community economics can reverse that fate.

The analysis also deals with a reading of region as affective critical regionality. Woollybucket is an example of this idea of mutual relations, a space where the local and the global relate and intersect, a dynamic environment that exposes a permanent dialogue between many Wests: the imagined, the old, and the used and abused. Proulx emphasizes the fluid nature of the West, inflicted by the permanent or temporary inhabitants, some of whom possess an improver mindset against those –pilgrims– who feel the need for a change and strive to bring the landscape to its original state.

4.1 The Writing of *That Old Ace in the Hole* and its Reception

Annie Proulx was already considered a mainstream writer –as well as a literary celebrity– when she took up the writing of *That Old Ace in the Hole*, thanks to the success of the movie adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain*. Despite that, she continued with her regular historian-anthropologist process of writing by carrying out an exhausting amount of research to fully equip herself with knowledge of the place –context, history, and landscape. She told Alden Mudge in an interview how “For years I have been driving through the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, and always found panhandle places interesting, especially the northeast corner of the Texas candles with this long, Longview’s, windmills, abandon houses, acres of antique farm machinery, Shady Grove of trees and nodding bump Jack’s” (Proulx, “Abiding”). The fact that Texans drive through the Panhandle “as fast as they can” made her more interested in panhandles (Proulx, “Abiding”), so she decided to write a novel on the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles. I have exposed that exhaustive and intensive process of researching for her subjects and stories in chapter 1, which she considers crucial to validate the authenticity of her writing. For *That Old Ace in the Hole*, she admitted to Patricia Curtis that she did a huge amount of research. Even though she acknowledged that she compiled “boxes and boxes of material I could not use” (Proulx, “Abiding”), her research still did not seem sufficient to recreate a credible main character, so she went for another protagonist:

I intended the story to revolve around a windmill repairman, but was unable to gain expertise in the craft needed to create a convincing character. So, the windmill man, Ace Crouch, though central to the story, is not the major protagonist. Moreover, the day of the windmill as the prime source of water has passed. I focused instead on a current problem,

the blower proliferation of noisome hog farms in the Texas panhandle with a young hog farm site scout as protagonist. (Proulx, "Abiding")

In the statement, she admits to writing a novel aimed at a social and ecological problem, and as such it conveys a political reading. She replayed the groundwork procedure used for *The Shipping News*, by traveling back and forth to the Texas panhandle, eavesdropping, talking to locals, and studying. She eventually took up a residency for nearly a year. The weather, as seen in so many examples so far, is a prime subject of observation and research, something that her narratives transpire, and *That Old Ace in the Hole* is not an exception.

The ubiquitous use of humor is what defines, on the surface, the tone of the narrative, something that Proulx did intentionally. During the process of writing *That Old Ace in the Hole*, Proulx acknowledged her inclination to regard the creative process of writing the novel as "entertainment," similar to the approach usually adopted by Graham Greene. She did so, she explains, as a means to tackle problematic issues: "In a way this book was an entertainment for me, and the use of humor made difficult subjects, such as feedlots and hog farms, easier to write about" (Proulx, "Abiding"). The different narrative layers often uncover bigger issues than what stays on the surface. It is also one of the features that mainly went misunderstood among critics and reviewers, as I expose below.

The book had a mixed reception among critics and readers, old and new. Some of them missed the dark tone of her previous work, dismissing the comical aspect, even though there is widely high praise for how the novel evokes place and landscape. A few reviewers seemed to miss Proulx's point (humor to deal with a dramatic situation) and simply resolve the review with witty criticism as "the book's worst flaw is in the way

Proulx delivers the book message: Hog farms are bad. Proulx is ham-fisted in her delivery of this message [...] (but) the book is eminently readable” (Salkind). This kind of review – in my view– simply stay on the surface and they are similar to others that focus exceedingly on aspects such as its humorous tone, conceding that the novel “starts out pleasantly enough” (Miller). Some reviewers and critics fall into easy comparison –with *The Shipping News* mostly– by exposing for instance how *That Old Ace in the Hole* “can’t help but disappoint” (Jenkins Holt). Writer and critic Andrew N. Wilson states that “Proulx can’t stop herself regurgitating her researches into Texan history. LaVon has ceased to be a character and become a cypher for Proulx’s own manic detail-accumulations” (Wilson). A native Texan, she also points out two research mistakes, that she considers “vital:” “The first is that cattle, in a blizzard, can drown from breathing in snow during high winds. The other is that people's noses know the difference between hog farms and the finer scent of cow and horse manure, and they tend to get used to the latter” (Wilson).

However, despite the criticism of these detractors and disappointed specialists, there seems to be a common agreement in terms of the novel’s excellence and beautiful evocations of place. This, in my opinion, confirms that some of them miss the point that landscape is the main focus in all of Proulx’s books.

Among the praise, a Dickensian edge is often recognized: “humour comes from the unmistakable edginess and quirkiness of Proulx’s prose. It is hard to think of any living writer who deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as Dickens, with the exception of Proulx” (Wilson), or “her brilliance at evoking place and landscape” (Clark). Others immediately understand her reappraisal of her vision of her dynamic post-West: “Proulx manages to skirt around the edges of cliché while reassembling its ingredients”

(Caveney). Some admire how she manages “to build up a rich and many-layered portrait of the region” (Grant), or how effective or fruitful her research comes to be: “Proulx has a first-class eye and ear” (Mars-Jones). Finally, fellow writer John Banville shows mixed feelings about *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Even when he says that “here is a plot, though it is rather a feeble one,” he concedes that “the prose too, when it is not slipshod, produces moments of peculiar, syncopated poetry” (Banville).

In short, the reception of *That Old Ace in the Hole* was not unanimously positive owing to several factors. The main one was probably the lack of comprehension regarding Proulx’s approach to the American West through a narrative set in the specific area of the Texas panhandle. The fact that the novel employs a humorous tone, in contrast with Pulitzer-prize winning *The Shipping News* or the acclaimed debut novel *Postcards*, was often seen as a weakness rather than a strength. Proulx, as stated above, aimed at dealing with complex issues with humor, namely the depletion of the Ogallala aquifer through the invasive and ever-present hog farm corporations poisoning the land. She also makes long references to the history of the place and the changes that human agency has caused that have not been appreciated. Another overlooked or misunderstood aspect is the power of local communities in front of those global corporations, as well as their dynamic feature of relations. Last, *Close Range* –her previous work– had received wide praise due to Proulx’s portrayal of a diversity of issues regarding the West, and this novel did not match the critics and reviewers’ expectations. For all these reasons, the novel, in my opinion, failed to meet both critics’ and readers’ expectations. The analysis thoroughly focuses on all these disregarded features and clarifies Proulx’s depiction of the West –landscape, communities, individuals– in *That Old Ace in the Hole*.

4.2 Denver to Woolybucket in a GPR Saturn

What follows is a brief and commented account of *That Old Ace in the Hole's* plot that hopefully will help illustrate most of the points in the forthcoming analysis. The novel follows a main plotline, even though it often goes back in flashbacks or, at times, includes full chapters that tell the story of a character that seemingly has no relevance in the main story. Proulx often makes a case for the historical changes that the region has gone through, especially since the age of pioneers. This is a relevant aspect, for my examining purposes, as it focuses on the changing feature of landscape due to the way that humans have interacted with it, which is always, I believe, the main focus of all Proulx's stories.

In *That Old Ace in The Hole* Proulx introduces Bob Dollar, a pig farm scout for a multinational company, Global Pork Rind, who drives from Denver to fictional Woolybucket, in the Texas panhandle area, to find locals who want to sell their land. Dollar goes through a transformation in the process of learning from and about the land. While his undercover job is finding land for sale, he will be exposed to and eventually taken over by the old and new Western ways, the place, and its people, quitting his job eventually and becoming part of that place, where his identity is grounded for the first time.

The novel is mostly set in the Texas panhandle, a significant spot in the American West, as stated above, as well as in the Western urban setting of Denver. Bob Dollar, the protagonist, is an orphan whose parents went off to Alaska and abandoned him when he was 8 without apparent reason. He went to live with his uncle Tam in Denver. His uncle insists that Bob's parents did not abandon Bob, but unluckily they disappeared and were unable to raise him in Alaska. Tam calls himself "a crazy unrich uncle with a junk

shop” (Proulx, *Ace* 8). He has a partner and lover, Bromo, and the two run the thrift store in a sort of ironic permanent disagreement. “The best room” (Proulx, *Ace* 18) in the shop has a sign that reads “ART PLASTIC” (Proulx, *Ace* 18), whose varied and strange plastic and Bakelite objects are not for sale but on permanent display. There Uncle Tam collects these strange items as 20th century art, framed kitsch, together with other objects from rural activities, windmill implements, and all sorts of weird memorabilia that he buys or he gets from people that leave it at the door. Some of those engravings and paintings – “that had come in with loads of junk and taken Uncle Tam’s fancy” (Proulx, *Ace* 18)– raise interest in the West in young Bob:

One showed fifty great rivers of the earth arranged yes dangling strings and graded as to length, and the opposing corner illustrated a crush of mountain peaks, lined up from the smallest to the greatest, giving the impression of a fabulous and terrific range that existed nowhere in reality. Yet for years Bob believed that in some distant land hundreds of inverted ice cream cone mountains gave way to an immeasurable plain cut by fifty rivers running parallel to each other. (Proulx, *Ace* 18)

When Bromo reminds Bob that “It’s not a real place [...] You dunce” (Proulx, *Ace* 18), he warns us too about the distance between this fictionalized and imagined West and the real one that Bob is about to set foot in. Hunt describes this passage as Proulx’s “aesthetic approach to place,” where she exaggerates and fictionalizes real places so that readers can see the differences clearly (Hunt, “Ecology” 184).

Uncle Tam –his only family– has raised Bob with love and affection but little money until he is 25, during which time Bob “taught himself not to care that he was so uninteresting that his parents dropped him on the doorstep and never bothered to write or call” (Proulx, *Ace* 7), and tried to get rid of his sense of abandonment and not

belonging. Even though the two are very close, his whole youth Bob has felt that his life was just a bunch of parts to be put together: “In the early years Bob often felt he was in fragments, in many small parts that did not join, and internal sack of wood chips” (Proulx, *Ace* 9). He seems to be lost in what Margaret E. Johnson calls “an in-between state” in which “we are faced with uncertainty about who we are and what we are connected to” (25), a state of readiness or personal disposition to the “multiples choices of identity” (25) that he is about to come through.

Once he is done with college, Bob is at a moment in his life when he lacks illusion, interest, or focus. He does not feel part of any place. He has no attachment to his surroundings, no sense of at-homeness. He has turned into “a fellow with minimal attachments to people and even fewer attachments to particular places” (Berry 178) yet he is “a fairly pleasant guy” (Salkind) but still “purposeless” (Proulx, “Abiding”) in life. To follow the capitalist track that his name suggests, he ends up taking a job at a Japanese multinational operation, Global Pork Rind Corporation, with main headquarters in Tokyo and Chicago, as a location scout. His mission is to hunt through the Texas panhandle looking for ranches to buy land and build extensive hog factory farms, where the animals are not pigs but “pork units” (Proulx, *Ace* 302). His boss, Ribeye Cluke, knows to what extent the inhabitants of the Panhandle despise and oppose such facilities, making it clear that the enterprise is difficult and “secret.” Bob will have to lie about his true intentions in the area: “Bob, we don’t have many friends down there in the panhandle except for one or two of the smarter politicians, and because of this situation we have to go about our business pretty quietly. I want you to be as circumspect as possible, do you know what that word ‘circumspect’ means?” (Proulx, *Ace* 5). Bob is going to pretend to represent a company scouting for land to build luxury homes. The endeavor is not

easy as Bob has never been to Texas before and, besides, he is completely alien to the landscape and the ways and circumstances of the inhabitants of the panhandle. In Banville's words, Bob is "in search of himself, or any old self, so long as it is habitable." Here the narrative exposes the distance between the West that he fictionalized and imagined in his uncle's store, the one in the engravings and paintings, and the real West that Bob is going to encounter in the Texas panhandle.

Ribeye Cluke's second piece of advice has to do with Bob's appearance in the West. He insists that Bob is dressed in the wrong attire to fit in that rural Western landscape. Bob is wearing Oxford loafers, a fitting pair that someone had left at Uncle Tam's store. Cluke urges him to dress in full cowboy attire, as a form of going unnoticed in his clandestine mission and being naturally accepted:

"Now, Bob, you cannot go down to Texas wearing brown oxfords. Take my word for it. I've spent enough time down there to know a pair of brown oxfords can set you back with those people. Despite oilmen triggered out in suits, and wealthy wheat growers with diamond rings, the figure of respect in Texas is still the cattleman and the cattleman wants to look like the cowboy. It wouldn't hurt for you to get a pair of dress slacks and some long sleeve shirts. But for sure you have got to get yourself a decent pair of cowboy boots and wear them. You don't need to wear the hat or western shirts, but you got to wear the boots."
(Proulx, *Ace* 10)

However, Bob does not follow his boss' instructions regarding his attire, and does not immediately dress up "Western." As the story discloses in the end, Bob will not "wear the boots" until he is changed and becomes a member of the community, the outfit symbolizing the end of his process of transformation.

Bob sets off to Texas driving a company's Saturn model car, where the landscape welcomes him with bad weather: a strong wind that makes everything fly away, "The landscape churned with detritus" (Proulx, *Ace* 43). In the dusty car, he will go on "interminable drives, he takes many false turns, both physically and intellectually" (Wilson 51). These turns signify the routes to conversion from improver to pilgrim. The narrator confronts Bob with the unknown Texas panhandle, where the wind brings a scent that he is not accustomed to: "the smell and immediate choking sensation in his throat as he drove past an enormous feedlot, the cows obscured by the manure dust that loaded the wind and was clearly the source of the cloud, introduced him to the Texas panhandle" (Proulx, *Ace* 43). He is still ingenuous about both the effects of hog farms in that landscape and how the locals feel about them. Naively, he believes that the farms are impact-free, as he has never seen inside or been around one of these facilities: "Still, innocent of direct experience with hog production, he had looked through the glossy Global Pork Rind annual report and admired the clean low-slung hog bunkers" (Proulx, *Ace* 43). His drive down south shows how Bob is not just curious but observant of the landscape that surrounds him. He senses and notices the land, the oil rigs, the aquifers, cyclists on the road, and the agency of man on the landscape throughout history:

Alone on the highway again Bob squinted away the quilt of cloud crawling over the sky. There unrolled beside the Saturn the level land, every inch put to use for crops, oil, gas, cattle, service towns. The ranches were set far back from the main road, and now and then he passed an abandoned house, weather-burned, surrounded by broken cottonwoods. In the fallen windmills and collapsed outbuildings he saw the country's fractured past scattered about like the pencils on the desk of the draughtsman who has gone to lunch. The ancestors of the place hovered over the bits and pieces of their finished lives. (Proulx, *Ace* 4)

The area is right over the Ogallala aquifer³⁷, the main environmental issue across the whole narrative. The aquifer is "defined by its position atop the caprock" (Proulx, *Ace* 96). The region draws "end-of-the-world thunder, grass fires, blue northers, yellow dust storms and a yearly parade of dirty tornadoes" (Proulx, *Ace* 96). Even though *That Old Ace in the Hole* has been studied and analyzed as a static story of a place and a character, it undoubtedly takes place mostly with Bob on the road, a similar mode to Loyal Blood's exodus in *Postcards*. The difference here is that Bob is in search of some kind of place to call home and Loyal is running away from it. This point is further developed in the analysis section.

Once he gets to the crossroads –a pioneer symbol in the West– around the small town of Woolybucket, his destination, Bob Dollar spends a few days in a motel, surveying the town and looking for a place to stay. Suddenly he notices the large number of churches, a list that reminds of Proulx's long lists of acknowledgments: "There seemed to be a church for every five residents. But of apartment and houses there was nothing to rent" (Proulx, *Ace* 62). Here Proulx evokes the "one-deep religiosity of the place" (Caldwell) of which native reviewer Gail Caldwell reminds us, adding that when "the Panhandle eventually came under the sway of cattle and ranchers, oilmen, and

³⁷ The Ogallala Aquifer covers an area of 174,000 square miles, being one of the largest aquifers of the United States (according to the APEC Human Resource Development Working Group). It is located under the area of the Great Plains of North America, and its water was first extracted for use after the Second World War. The aquifer has been one of the most important freshwater resources for irrigation in the United States, together with the controversy it brings. More than 90% of its groundwater is used for irrigation purposes (according to *Scientific American*). However, after nearly sixty years of intense use of the Ogallala Aquifer, it is a source of great tensions as its rapid depletion has made it shrink, and the main source of water in the Great Plains area disappears. This is one the main underlying issues in *That Old Ace in the Hole*. The conflict, which spans from regional and state governments to local organizations, stakeholders, farmers and environmentalist groups, only builds up as water becomes scarce. From those many groups with important differences in values and interests of which it is worth to point out that a group of farmers support conservation, and have taken measures to reduce, in some cases stopping irrigation completely. Another of farmers resist to change in their irrigation uses and have taken minimal to none precautions to slow down depletion. These disputes only have prevented the creation of a single unified plan to preserve water, making the problem bigger.
Source: <https://environment.geog.ubc.ca/a-drying-shame-the-ogallala-aquifer/>

agribusinesses [...] The conglomerates won, but the churches stay put" (Caldwell), another layer of this dynamic post-West that cannot be dismissed. After a few days, Bob finds a bunkhouse at the Busted Star Ranch without running water or electricity, outside Woolybucket, at fifty dollars a week. He is drawn to the panhandle from the start, even when he is informed about the inconveniences of the bunkhouse that he is about to rent:

"I'll take it," he said without seriously considering a daily drive across a cow pasture, the labor of logging water, no telephone, for already he was taking pleasure in the subtle beauty of the panhandle, noting the groves and thickets along the watercourses, huge coils of grapevine weaving the trees into course fabric. He thought the bold diagonal of caprock rim that divided the high plains from the southern plains, the red canyons of the Palo Duro striking and exotic. (Proulx, *Ace* 67)

Her landlady LaVon Fronk, who becomes his guide of sorts, is compiling "*The Woolybucket Rural Compendium*" (Proulx, *Ace* 68), her modest version of a history of the region, based on family accounts and old photographs. This "faded panhandle Scheherazade" (Proulx, *Ace* 89) is a "walking reference book of local and Texan social history" (Battersby) that tells Bob about the genealogies, histories, and present activities around the panhandle. This fact parallels in a way the fact that the novel could as well be considered a compendium if we take into account the number of stories and histories that occur. LaVon, as some critic has suggested, performs the role of Annie Proulx in the narrative, as she does research for months and provides Bob Dollar –and the reader– with the results of her findings. At this point in the story, LaVon has already filled two rooms in the ranch house downstairs rooms, something that takes us to the unused information boxes from Annie Proulx for her research on the novel. This "roaming font of historical information" (Salkind) provoked that Bob's "head ached with the torrent of

information" (Proulx, *Ace* 89). LaVon's subjective bulk of documentation is complemented with an item of luggage that becomes relevant as the narrative progresses.

On leaving, Bromo gives Bob the journal of Lieutenant William Abert³⁸ on the Santa Fe Trail in 1843, one of the first Western explorers of the panhandle. Bob reads it at the light of a candle in the evenings in the cabin, as it has neither water nor electricity. The diary reads as a parallel narrative –more of it in the analysis– and it also puts together Abert and Bob Dollar in terms of explorers: they are both new and they both will explore, discover and document the Texas Panhandle. Bob Dollar travels from Denver to Texas in March 2000, a journey that Abert carried out in 1845. Hunt explains, differently from his nature observations, that Abert's military mission was unsuccessful, as he made a strategic cartographic mistake in documenting the area right before the Mexican War (Hunt, "Ecology" 187). The events in the text parallel Bob Dollar's mission, as he seems "lost" in the Texas panhandle until he finally loses his innocence and finds his place within the small Western community.

Bob Dollar, "an innocent abroad," as a few critics and reviewers contemplate him (Banville, Sanderson), starts his mission at the Old Dog Café, run by Cy Frease, a half cowboy half bartender that keeps the café conveniently open to his ranching needs. The

³⁸ As Proulx remarks in the author's note (361), James Abert spent many years at the service of the Topographical Corps, for her purposes the most outstanding activity from Abert's extensive list of similar occupations -soldier, artist, university professor or lecturer. The relevance of Lieutenant William Abert's diary -originally published as *Western America in 1846-1847; The original travel diary of Lieutenant J. W. Abert, who mapped New Mexico for the United States Army-* is explored discussed in length in the following section of this chapter as, I argue, its pivotal impact on Bob Dollar accelerates his transformation from improver to pilgrim. Abert led numerous expeditions across the West, specifically around the Canada River, illustrating and documenting everything with not only notes and writings but with drawings and watercolors as part of his reports. He was one of the pioneers in first representing and depicting the American West. These images include native American peoples and their names transcribed, landscapes, maps, animals and plants. Many of his images have been digitalized for public research, and some of the originals can be seen at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas. The fact that he is considered not just an explorer but an artist gives an idea of the scope of his illustrated observations. In his book *Expedition to the Southwest*, Abert extensively documented the town of Santa Fe in 1846-47. It is not by chance that Proulx has Bob Dollar have the intention of studying the history of the place specifically in that city. Source: www.tshonline.org

Old Dog –its name suggests a place where wisdom can be found– is an “essential theatre” (Battersby) that becomes Bob’s hangout, which is where he learns everything else about the people and the place that LaVon Fronk does not inform him of. It is the local place that assembles everyone around:

Customers came in, got their own silverware and plates, loaded up. Every rancher and farmer, oil rig worker, cowboy, truck driver within driving distance showed up for the big noon dinner, too many men for women to feel comfortable. It became something of a men’s club, the men almost interchangeable, most past their fifties, all in grimy jeans and cowboy hats –felt in winter, straw in summer. (Proulx, *Ace* 108)

Among the many locals that he meets, he soon settles upon Ace and Tater Crouch, his best target. As stated above, Ace was the original idea of a protagonist for *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Ace is a windmill man, who used to sell and set up mills in family farms and ranches to pull the needed water out for their rural needs. Now he mainly repairs and services the left old ones as most people “got the deep pumps” (Proulx, *Ace* 199). His unluckier brother Tater lives near a hog farm that makes it impossible to be at or near, as the smell is unbearable. Tater becomes Bob’s first target. Bob is sure that the former will sell the place as fast as he can. Besides, a hog farm next to another one will not make matters worse in terms of impact on the community or the environment. The large area, owned by the two brothers, would be perfect for the plans of Global Pork Rind.

Bob spends his time driving up and down the panhandle looking for places that might be suitable for the company. One day, one of the local ranchers, Francis Scott Keiser, gets suspicious about him, as he keeps on asking questions about water supplies, checks, land records, and helps locals part-time. Keiser represents the old Western

values in terms of possession and extraction from the land. He urges the sheriff to find out more about him: “But the guy says he’s workin for a luxury home developer, looking for land with a nice view and some water. You ever hear such crap? [...] Yeah, and maybe he’s a government man too, looking into anything –land prices, lifestyle, water use study. Who the hell knows? Not me, but I’d like to” (Proulx, *Ace* 197). When Sheriff Hugh Dough pulls him over, he asks for the car registration and he realizes that Bob Dollar is an employee of Global Pork Rind. Sheriff Dough is a comical character on the surface that exemplifies what Proulx expressed about using humor to deal with deeper issues. Dough has been a bed-wetter since childhood, which is why he has never married: “He had never married because the thought of explaining the situation was unbearable” (Proulx, *Ace* 49). He satisfies his sexual needs with his younger sister Opal, “Whyn’t you just let me put it in? I mean, it’s not much more that we already done” (Proulx, *Ace* 51). Here Proulx peels another layer of this post-West, an unstable and far-from-ideal place, where incest is just one more in a sea of circumstances. The sheriff does not understand why Bob needs to lie to the inhabitants of Woolybucket about his job, but suggests him scouting for another type of facility, such as prisons.

Suddenly Bob receives a letter from Waldo Beautyrooms, the owner of Texola Petroflex, an oil corporation based in Houston, offering to buy a ranch with 8,000 acres of land around Woolybucket, where a creek flows through and the pasture is used by local cattlemen. Beautyrooms is willing to sell it on the condition of developing luxury homes, Bob’s alibi. Beautyrooms demands nine million dollars, a figure at which Bob Dollar literally chokes. When he questions the price, Beautyrooms admits that he could easily sell it for more, solely for the water rights, as the only water left of the Ogallala in the panhandle flows right under that land. Bob goes back to Woolybucket to check the

place and meets old Mrs. Beautyrooms, who, in turn, is in no disposition of selling the estate at any price, contrary to what her son was so sure of. On his way home a tornado breaks near the area and Bob is caught in the middle of the terrible storm, at the edge of the whirlwind. The scene looks like the twister is angry at the Saturn and Bob, as a kind of punishment:

The wind, gusting and veering, pushed the Saturn toward a deep ditch that ran alongside the road filled now with rising water nearly up to the asphalt [...] The hailstones were bigger now, and it seemed a dozen roofers with nail guns were attacking the Saturn. All at once the windshield cracked and crazed in a dozen places [...] No wonder, he thought, that panhandle people were a godly lot, for they lived in a sudden, violent atmosphere. Weather kept them humble. (Proulx, *Ace* 224)

When Bob meets Jim Skin, who explains to him that he owns his father's old ranch but nobody is interested in it, working on it or buying it, Bob sees an opportunity: "I'd sell it, but there's a nobody wants a buy. It's pretty poor and I'm stuck with it. No good for farmin or ranchin. No sir, there ain't no corn on *that* cob" (Proulx, *Ace* 240). Bob jumps at the chance and suggests buying it for Global Pork Rind. Jim Skin is open to the idea although he needs to check with Ace Crouch, his uncle, who owns the other half. "Bob felt the world getting smaller" (Proulx, *Ace* 241), as he has found out by now that environmentally-minded Ace Crouch has a sort of influence and grasp on the community. At this point, no one really believes Bob's cover story, but the "canny folk" (Banville) of Woolybucket nevertheless welcome him into the community. The exchanges and encounters that Bob is part of in Woolybucket suggest Campbell's reading of affective critical regionality, as I will show later. Bob at this point remains oblivious to the relations unfolding around him, and in which he is involved. These reveal the community's

permanent state of transformation. He is slowly becoming part of the place that is open to encounter and that accepts his bonhomie and predisposition, recognizing his contribution to the community's evolution.

Bob is visited down south by his long-time only friend Orlando –“The Evil Fat Boy” (Proulx, *Ace* 31)– from Denver, after he has spent some time in prison that proved “a positive growth experience” (Salkind). After getting out he has come out changed, both physically and personally. Orlando has made quite a bit of money by selling a hilarious and peculiar type of music compilation CDs:

“It’s called *Live Fart Rock Hits from Prison* and that’s what it is. In prison you discover some surprising things about your body, and some of us noticed a variance in fart pitch. And we had one guy was a real star. othing he couldn’t do –basso profundo to coloratura, whistles and quavers, tremolo. The Louis Armstrong of the asshole.” (Proulx, *Ace* 250)

Orlando now drives a Porsche that he parks by Bob’s bunkhouse –a symbolic contrast between the capitalist urban West and the rural community– and does not understand what Bob is doing in the rural West. He offers him a position as a sales manager in his company, where he could “make some real money” (Proulx, *Ace* 269), but Bob has other plans. On their night out they come across two characters connected to Global Pork Rind: Robert Bodfish, a hog farm manager to whom Bob begs to give him a tour of a pig farm as soon as possible, and Evelyn Chine, the leading farm scout of Global Pork Rind, a rival to Bob, who is also after Tater Crouch’s land: “Bob didn’t doubt that she used feminine wiles on the old boys as well, giving a glimpse of flesh, making suggestive innuendos. As Freda Beautyrooms might say, the woman was a snake” (Proulx, *Ace* 261). Chine is not welcome in the panhandle, and she will not trick locals, even though her cover story is

probably more believable than Bob's: "She said she was working on a thesis about panhandle folks. Looked me right in the eye. How I knew she was lyin. That's the sign. When they look you right in the eye" (Proulx, *Ace* 266). She has an affair with Francis Scott Keister, which will have fatal consequences for both of them. Keister follows the pattern of a "scientific rancher, methodical, correct, progressive" (Proulx, *Ace* 55) who monitors breeding with computers and gives his cattle "growth stimulants including antibiotics ... At eighteen months his big steers were. Ready for market and he received the highest prices for them" (Proulx, *Ace* 56). He is the same type of farmer as the Shears, the environmentally-violent Dakota improvers described by Proulx in *Postcards*, employing almost identical descriptors.

When, finally, Bob drives next to a hog farm, he tries to get a closer look but he is overwhelmed by the bad smell. The description is quite explicit: "Bob rolled his window down to get a better look and within seconds regretted it, for the wind had shifted and carried a full load of hog farm flavor, a huge fetid stink like ten thousand rotten socks, like decaying flesh, like stale urine and swamp gas, like sour vomit and liquid manure, a ghastly palpable stench that made him retch" (Proulx, *Ace* 135).

Bob opens up to Tater Crouch, confessing that he works for Global Pork Rind, and asks him to sell the place to the corporation. The unbearable stench from the neighboring hog farm that is already all over the place is not going to get worse, that is why another hog farm will not change anything. Tater agrees and will wait for Bob to get a price per acre from the company.

Before driving up to Denver to talk to his boss, Bob has a long and significant conversation with Brother Mesquite, a former rodeo champion, who owns the Triple Cross ranch, a place to "get an idea of what this country looked like a hundred fifty years

ago" (Proulx, *Ace* 275). The ranch is a sanctuary for buffalo, an animal of the plains that "evolved on the plains with the plants" (Proulx, *Ace* 274). The buffalo is native to the place, unlike the cow: "Your cow is out of place here and that's why they are so much work" (Proulx, *Ace* 274). The ranch is an exposition of how natural habitats cannot be altered with new modern farming methods that have proved unsuitable for such an environment. Brother Mesquite also explains how the ranch is helping balance the ecosystem by preserving bison, the only animal that they raise at the Triple Cross. Bob opens up to him as well about his job for Global Pork Rind, in which he has failed so far. He does not feel like doing it anymore and admits that he is only interested in history, specifically on the Santa Fe Trail, influenced by his readings of Lt. Abert's diaries. This influence is also a significant return to that conflictive tension between the modern West and the old West and a revision that is inspired by human connection and a minor literary narrative, which resonate with the idea about the minor affecting the conceptualization of the West that Neil Campbell suggests (*Affective* 20).

Once at the offices of Global Pork Rind, he is threatened by Ribeye Cluke and "Mr. Ragsdale from the Tokyo office" (Proulx, *Ace* 300) of being fired unless he gets some land for the company. Bob tries to make a case about how locals feel about hog farms, and how they despise the smell, but he is sent back to Woolybucket with the order to get at least two properties for the company to buy: "We are going to give you one more month to make good. You will sew up two properties in that time or you are out on your bumps" (Proulx, *Ace* 302). The epistolary between the two has become absurd. Bob writes about the place and its people, while Cluke is getting more and more sarcastic as his impatience builds up: "We've GOT to have those sites. SPEED-SPEED-and more SPEED is the order of the day ... That job, that responsibility, that DUTY is to cinch hog farm sites and

PRONTO! Grab your pencil and start doing your part RIGHT NOW! Get in gear, Bob Dollar” (Proulx, *Ace* 281-282). The humorous tone and punctuation of the passage only stress the helplessness of Ribeye Cluke in getting Bob to do his job. This use of the epistolary, more relevant in *Postcards*, will be dealt with in the upcoming section.

Bob Dollar drives back to Woolybucket with another book from Bromo, *Broken Hand*³⁹, a biography of Thomas Fitzpatrick, who went on Abert’s expedition and which complements Abert’s journal. Bob has turned into an avid history reader and is getting deeply interested in the history of the place. Once there, a series of events have happened in his absence. Francis Scott Keister and Evelyn Chime have been shot by Keister’s wife, killing the husband and leaving the lover badly injured in hospital. The scene reverses the old Western tale of revenge at sunrise, with an inversion of traditional gender roles, where the woman is the one who holds the gun and administers justice. Some of the locals feel that she should be rewarded instead of being in jail (Proulx, *Ace* 357).

Just like on his arrival in the Panhandle, Bob is now at a crossroads about his future, though with the knowledge that he did not have three months before. He feels bad about lying to all the people that have been so nice to him but his obligations to the company still make him look at the land as a place that can be purchased. He is torn between a strong sense of duty and a sense of justice:

³⁹ The book, originally published as *Broken Hand: The Life Story of Thomas Fitzpatrick, Chief of the Mountain Men (Old West, Denver, 1931)* obviously complements William J. Abert’s Journal. A relevant figure in the early pioneer years in the West, Fitzpatrick was an Irish-American explorer and fur trader, guide and Indian agent, called “Broken Hand” due to a firearm accident. He traveled extensively across the Rockies and the West, developing a good relationship with some native Americans. His biography can be read as an account of the expansion to the American West in the mid-19th century. Sources: <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/bison-books/9780803272088/>; <https://www.santafetrail.org/pdf/Thomas-Fitzpatrick.pdf>

He felt he wasn't going to fall into anything fortunate, not a hog farm sale, not a dimpled, curly-headed girl. He did not want to lie but seemed unable to stop doing so. Yet he could not just quit and go back to Denver and look for another lightbulb job. He had taken up a responsibility –to find sites for hog farms and persuade elderly farmers and ranchers to sell out their decades of labor to the silent rows of Hog World– and he would not put it aside. (Proulx, *Ace* 308)

Soon, a Money Offer Person from Global Pork Rind comes down to Woolybucket to help Bob close the deal with Tater Crouch. The company unequivocally sends a woman as, in this male-dominated West, “it soothes the rancher to have a woman offer him money and makes him inclined to take a little less” (Proulx, *Ace* 310-311). However, Bob and Mrs. Betty Doak, are informed that his brother Ace will not sell. At the Old Dog, in the meantime, Bob is told as well that Tazzy Keiser has escaped prison and is after his blood. She has stolen the sheriff's car and is considered “armed and dangerous” (Proulx, *Ace* 326). The old reversed Western tale still goes on.

Bob Dollar knows that he finally needs to confront Ace Crouch if he wants to move on with the land purchase. Ace is a central character in the story, even though he only appears by the end of the narrative. He was a young man when he was employed by Dutchman windmill master Habakuk Melkebeek, who understood the way windmills worked and would climb on them to fix them every time it was needed. He knew that they were necessary to get the water to cattle, at a time when he had to confront the new exploiters of the West, such as oilmen, even though he made his fortune with water and oil. Ironically, water and oil do not mix well, but, in their case, their enterprise succeeded. Gail Caldwell reads the tale as a “Cervantes-like story” where Ace Crouch was Melkebeek's “Sancho Panza” (Caldwell). This frame story turns out crucial in understanding both the impact of the water –or the lack thereof– on the inhabitants of

Woolybucket as well as the relevance of the figure of Ace Crouch in the community. Ace followed in the steps of Melkebeek, secretly making a fortune with the same exploits as his boss and then inheriting all the former's fortune. Ace's prosperity turns him into a sort of "land saver" in ecological terms, becoming the "advocate of bison ranching" (Hunt, "Ecology" 190), which raises the moral issue of using dirty money for a good cause. Eventually, Bob meets Ace Crouch atop a windmill platform where Ace is working. He is immediately overwhelmed by the view:

"My God," said Bob, taking in the view across miles and miles of prairie, white grain elevators rising in the distance. Despite the heat haze and quivering mirage that made the main road look as if it were underwater, he could see thirty miles. For several minutes neither said anything. Bob enjoying the delicious air, the coldness of the tea, Ace thinking his own thoughts. (Proulx, *Ace* 332)

Up on the mill, the two engage in a discussion regarding the past and future of the panhandle, exhibiting two different visions of the Western landscape. Bob still tries to convince him –and himself– that a hog farm would be the "best thing for the general good" (Proulx, *Ace* 334), but Ace is attached to the place and knows the history of the people and the hardships put into: "You think it's just a place. It's more than that. It's people's lives, it's the history of the country" (Proulx, *Ace* 333). Bob still struggles to understand why farm hog operations like Global Pork Rind threaten the Texas panhandle, at which Ace explains how the citizens of small communities such as Woolybucket need a system of sustainable energy rather than water and oil –fossil fuels– dependent businesses: solar and wind energy, windmills (Proulx, *Ace* 333).

Back in town, Bob puts the pieces together. This is where the whole “ace in the hole” surfaces. Ace’s name has a three-layer effect on the narrative. First, he is the ace in town, as he is respected, has worked on windmills forever, and his approach to the land and the use of water is admired by everyone. Second, he is someone that the community highly considers, due to his wisdom and experience. Third, and more relevant to the plot, he is the one who has the ace in the hole, thus the story is resolved. He works as the deus ex machina in the story. The actual “ace in the hole” is Ace’s fortune plus the inherited millions from Melkebeek –ironically, he is a “petrodollar billionaire” (Proulx, *Ace* 339)– who is planning to buy both the hog farms in the area to set up his Prairie Restoration Homesteads. Nearly at the same time, Bob also finds out that Tazzy Keister has also shot over a few people at the Global Pork Rind. The reversed Western tale takes another twist: the gunslinger, female, is going from the small town to the city –not the usual other way round–, where she will kill Quantum Goliath, the president of Global Pork Rind. Western justice prevails, symbolically reflecting that the small town has succeeded in –for now– getting rid of a global agribusiness that wants to take, use and abuse the land.

The narrative closes with a final chapter on the Woolybucket Barbwire Festival, an event that residents have been preparing the weeks before, where most matters get resolved. Bob is now feeling part of the community. He finally feels the right to dress Western, wearing his unused cowboy boots and getting rid of the oxfords, finding “his feet at last” (Sanderson). The town is packed with tourists and locals, walking up and down the street booths in the scorching heat, from which Bob finds protection under a cowboy hat, “a Resistol polyhemp with a hand-tolled brim” (Proulx, *Ace* 346). There is

cowboy poetry recitation, food booths, Western souvenirs and, obviously, a rodeo at noon.

During the festival, Bob has to take care of a booth, selling tickets for a quilting bee to raise funds for the church and the community. The quilt, which has been stitched together by the Round Robin Baptist Bible Quilt Circle of women, represents a landscape with hilarious “Westernized” biblical images, such as this representation of the Garden of Eden. Despite the humor, Proulx’s eye for the detail of the area’s specific flora in the description is very precise, depicting a “different” West:

In the center of the Garden stood a magnificent apple tree loaded with shining satin apples, and twined in its branches was an oversize diamond rattler [...] In the cocoa-colored soil grew Mexican hat, Tahoka daisy and rabbitbrush, with purple groundcherry creeping around two knobby boulders. Adam was naked except for cowboy boots and a hat, which he held in front of his crotch. (Proulx, *Ace* 173)

At the fair, Bob is approached by Brother Mesquite, who offers him a job with Ace Crouch, who is going to set up a monastery for the buffalo, and homes for potential visitors who want to observe them in their natural habitat: “Ace is thinking? there would be people want a live where they can see a bison and watch the prairie come back. It would be like kind a prairie restoration homesteads” (Proulx, *Ace* 356).

Bob still has something else in his mind. His idea is to go to Santa Fe and learn about history, the Spanish language, and the Santa Fe Trail. Learning about the natural and cultural history of the place has left a mark on him and he wants to know about it and fit in it: “I *sort* of been thinking about going back to school. Learning about history, the Santa Fe Trail, learning Spanish, learn how to ride. Maybe start a small bookstore” (Proulx, *Ace* 356). LaVon Fronk offers him the bunkhouse. Bob realizes that he is welcome

in the community. He takes a stroll downtown, and he finds the old lawyer's office for rent, full of empty shelves to be filled with books: "He wanted time to stop, just for a few days, an hour. He needed to sort things out. But of course nothing stopped nor slowed, the minutes tumbling down, the day moving to a close, everything up in the air. He felt for his pen, found it, and wrote the telephone number on the palm of his hand" (Proulx, *Ace* 359). Bob would go back to Denver to get all his things to come back and move to Woolybucket, finally finding a place that he is attached to and a community where he feels that he fits in. His failure in finding land for Global Pork Rind means a triumph for both Bob and Woolybucket.

The narrative ending, far from a fairy tale or happy ending, resolves most matters but leaves the question of the future of the community still unresolved. It also expresses Bob Dollar's doubts about the feasibility of Ace Crouch's plans, where the residents of his home sites will have to sign an ecological contract: "Each one of the home sites would have a covenant –the buyer would have to agree to maintain habitat for prairie species– prairie dogs and burrowin owls, prairie chickens [...] or whatever" (Proulx, *Ace* 356). He does not seem to be convinced but is "tempted to join the effort" (Hunt, "Ecology" 193) of reverting bad new West practices into some old West ecological preservation.

4.3 Bob Dollar: Conjunction in Proulx's Stubborn Post-West

That Old Ace in the Hole describes the process from disjunction with the landscape – improvers– to conjunction –pilgrims. As lengthily exposed, the two attitudes define

opposite positions concerning landscape. To do so, Proulx portrays a Western setting that, as stated before, reads as a post-Western: a region of fluidity, interconnectedness, and steering away from rigid paradigms of space, “something beyond the immediately local” (Campbell, *Affective* 13). The West depicted in this narrative reads as affective critical regionality, as it opposes fixedness, borders and, as explained, it engages with “other kinds of encounter and invention [...] to better participate in and articulate the affective spacetime of regionality” (Campbell, *Affective* 10), a concept developed in the critical framework section. These affective spaces and relations are key in Bob Dollar’s progression to conjunction –with both natural and human landscapes. These points and arguments, advanced in the previous section, are the theoretical basis that frames the upcoming analysis.

I am retracing here Scott Slovic’s concepts of pilgrim and improver, lengthily discussed before. Bob Dollar comes as an improver-newcomer that is disconnected from natural landscapes and does not know how to gain intimacy with it, but will eventually achieve conjunction by perceiving the relations and achieving harmony. His process implies developing awareness of his surroundings through attentiveness, one of Proulx’s main concerns, and with an awakening of the senses. Proulx directs Bob’s way into an area of use and abuse, a place where panhandlers “understand their relationship to the earth and the use of their natural environment” (Hunt, “Ecology” 186), drawing attention to an area where the environment has been heavily impacted. Getting to that understanding will be the end of the progress for Bob Dollar.

Proulx’s West in *That Old Ace in the Hole* resonates as a term that implies a rethinking of regionalism that comes from the fluidity of borders. This fluidity allows for cultural and social encounters, leaning on mobility and difference. This attention to the

global but to the local as well dismisses local color, an all-American “cultural signpost” in “not truly landscape novels” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 10), as seen before. Regional concepts of place have thus given way to dynamic conceptions of space that transcend depictions of the geographical landscape, as the quote –which I reuse– implies:

Landscape is geography, geology, archaeology, astrophysics, agronomy, agriculture, the violent character of the atmosphere, climate, black squirrels and wild oats, folded rock, bulldozers; it is jet trails and barbed wire, government land, dry stream beds; it is politics, desert wildfire, introduced species, abandoned vehicles, roads, ghost towns, nuclear test grounds, swamps, a bakery shop, mine tailings, bridges, the dogs, landscape is rural, urban, suburban, semirural, small town village, it is outboards and bedroom communities, it is a remote ranch. (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 10)

This challenge of a West as a fixed and unchanging entity signifies a West in a “state of continuous variation” (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Campbell, *Affective* 11), not rigid but “stretching” (Campbell, *Affective* 11). In this dynamic context –a small Western community– the global and the local relate in economic, technological or social terms, thus defining the relation between the region and the rest of the world, to use Kollin’s terms (xviii).

However, as seen before, Campbell’s concept of regionality does not fully dismiss traditional or fixed concepts as they are not “insignificant [...] (but) they remain part of an assemblage of scored refrains that relationally and actively are thrown together in and as regionality” (*Affective* 205). Woollybucket, the small Western town where the narrative progresses, reads as a dynamic and affective space that is constructed with regard to those fixed concepts, as a part of its flowing process, understood as the matrix

of relatedness, an action of becoming. Campbell introduces a concept that assumes that ecology needs to branch out in at least three ways, following Guattari: environment, society and the subject (Campbell, *Affective* 206) or, as he rephrases in terms of “ecological registers: ‘environment, social relations and human subjectivity.’” (Campbell, *Affective* 204)

I am borrowing these three registers to develop the three sections of the analysis of *That Old Ace in the Hole*, as Annie Proulx actively follows in those three registers to illustrate Bob Dollar’s conjunction with the landscape. First, in terms of environment, Bob gains observation and awareness through the senses in direct contact with the landscape of the Texas panhandle, unconsciously replicating the Thoreauvian “rural ideal” that Tater Crouch mentions (Proulx, *Ace* 335). Second, regarding human subjectivity, he is an avid reader and learner who absorbs the history of the place through Lieutenant Abert’s diaries and through the historical accounts from LaVon Fronk, a local historian whose chronicles add to Abert’s. That makes him avidly interested in the history of his immediate surroundings and open to them. Third, if we consider social relations, Bob is gradually but unconsciously immersed in the process of being accepted and merging into a community that stands out as a local collective unit, fighting the global economic power represented by corporations such as Global Pork Rind and everyone related to it. Bob will eventually gain ecological awareness and become part of the place.

In the analysis, the pilgrims and improvers that reside or populate the American West and their attitudes towards the landscape are approached from the vantage point of a post-West perspective by using Campbell’s framework of affective critical regionality. Pilgrims here approach the West respecting and retrieving its historical and cultural significance but alerting the need for protecting and restoring the landscape.

Improvers such as Global Pork Rind view the West as an opportunity to develop and grow, at the expense of natural resources. The analysis delves into the implications of these opposing attitudes towards the landscape within the context of the ever-changing West, where small communities play an essential role. The degree of success or failure within this dynamic context/space comes from a deliberate choice of attitude toward the landscape. The three sections explore Bob's relationship to the environment, his interplay with the literature and the history of the place, and the dynamics of his social interactions.

4.3.1 Environment: Welcome to the Texas Panhandle

Bob Dollar starts out in the narrative as lonely, aimless and disconnected. He dwells in the urban setting of Denver, and at twenty-five he is open to change. As his name suggests, Bob Dollar has been brought up to measure himself in economic terms. Part of his disjunction has its origins in his inability to support himself economically. He does not fit into that –or any– environment, so he feels grateful when he starts working for Global Pork Rind and is sent south. His mindset is initially aligned with his employer's improver extractionist ways, as he is alien to anything related to hog farms, the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, pollution or the environment. He appears to his boss, the quintessential corporation shark, dressed in an attire that, in Cluke's opinion, will not be sufficient to trick locals. The man is aware that rural people anywhere do not want hog farms, as he knows very well what they mean in terms of affecting the environment.

On leaving Denver we are reminded that his uncle's place—the "Used not Abused" second-hand store—is merely a platform from which to depart in search of connection: "Uncle Tam's house and shop were way station where he waited for the meaningful connection, the even or person who would show him who he was. At some point he would metamorphose from a secret reindeer to a human being, somehow reconnected with his family" (Proulx, *Ace* 37). Here Proulx seems to unconsciously use ecocritical terms as she prepares Bob Dollar for a trip to reconnection or conjunction. Actually, Bob Dollar only starts finding a way to a "meaningful"—I will come back to this term later—attachment or "connectedness," to use Campbell's terms, once he is out of Denver and heads off south. Proulx foregrounds the excitement of the journey: it was a roaring spring morning with green in the sky, the air spiced with sand sagebrush and aromatic sumac" (Proulx, *Ace* 1).

After leaving Denver, his first contact with the region is overwhelming, but from an improver point of view. Bob does not sense the land, as he only sees how others are using—and abusing—it, and he wants to be part of it, own it, possess it and deliver it to his employer. His is a conquering journey, and his job will be to dominate and benefit from the Western land that he is now driving through. His senses are still numb to any "practice of place" (Tredinnick 77) as the new territory is exotic to him. He is an alien. Here, Proulx is proleptic again when he tells the reader about the unconscious excitement of his quest West: "Gradually, the ancient thrill of moving against the horizon into the great yellow distance heated him" (Proulx, *Ace* 1). Bob is still ignorant about the that overlooked area of the West; in fact, the reader is told that "Bob Dollar was a stranger in the double panhandle country north of the Canadian River" (Proulx, *Ace* 4).

At these early stages in the narrative, Bob Dollar is a white canvas, still not perceiving the relations within the landscape, thus not responding to nature. On his way down to Texas, in Oklahoma, he comes across a different –from his employer– type of improver that aims to transform the West of the Oklahoma panhandle into a new West for tourists, following the model of the city of Santa Fe. He is a Californian who has just moved back to the panhandle to take over his grandfather’s land, abandoned during the Dust Bowl. He now wishes to transform the place and has “an ambitious retirement plan to make the place into another Santa Fe” (Proulx, *Ace* 25). He is convinced that his new vineyards can compete with Napa Valley. He has the idea of giving the place a utilitarian use, as he envisions it in economic terms:

“See, my grandparents left here in the thirties. Dust bowl days. I thought I’d come back and see what they left behind. It’s a beautiful place. Great potential. Got electricity too, more than you can say for California. We got craft people here, carvers and painters, we got Indians, we got people and sheds full of antiques, we got a small tourist trade that just needs working up [...] With a little luck Oklahoma panhandle could put Napa Valley in the dumpster [...] The new county agent thinks we got a chance to make real nice regional varietal. The old agent couldn’t see past cows.” (Proulx, *Ace* 25-26)

Proulx expresses that Bob already has a feel and an understanding of the “value of history” (Abele 120), even before he gets to Woollybucket: “He thought of the storekeeper’s apparent ignorance that it had taken Santa Fe centuries to build up from its start as a trading town for Mexican hides and Indian silverwork” (Proulx, *Ace* 26).

From the windscreen of the company’s Saturn, Bob notices the transformation of the place over time and the geography of human intervention. This suggests Proulx’s dynamic and unstable reading of the landscape, what Abele calls “this tug-of-war

between geography and man's harnessing of geography" (118). The signs on the Panhandle are visible all around him: pumpjacks, water pumps, fences, barbwire. However, he is still unaware of the ecological disaster of extreme extraction, as, in his initial views, the land stems from an improver Global Pork Rind perspective:

Bob Dollar had no idea that he was driving into a region of immeasurable natural complexity that some believed abused beyond saving. He saw what others had seen -the bigness, pump jacks nodding pterodactyl heads, road alligators cast off from the big semi tires. Every few miles a red-tailed hawk marked its hunting boundary [...] He said to the rearview mirror "some flat-ass place." Though it seemed he was not much in a place as confronting the raw material of human use. (Proulx, *Ace 3*)

Not only the land has been transformed, but its habitat and the natural sounds: "Where once the howling of wolves was heard, now sounded the howl of tires" (Proulx, *Ace 3*). Several paragraphs of this nature introduce the narrative to underscore the condition of the landscape of the West through human hands. Still, improvers have not been able to fully contain nature: "for even fenced and cut with roads the overwhelming presence of grassland persisted, though nothing of the original prairie remained. It was all flat expanse and wide sky" (Proulx, *Ace 1*).

As he drives on, he realizes that to drive in the West one must be alert as it is full of twists and turns –as the ones he will come across in his personal journey as well. He is mentally lost and disconnected, but also lost in a landscape that he cannot mentally order. Symbolically, he is alone at a crossroads:

And so he maneuvered onto a set of dusty ruts dotted with manure, a primitive road wandering through uninhabited grazing land. There were no towns, no gas stations, no houses, no corrals, no traffic. He was the only person on an endless track without turnoff nor intersection. The fine dust got into the car and choked him and he wished he had bought gallons of water from the talkative store man. (Proulx, *Ace* 27)

The landscape ahead is premonitory of some kind of commotion: "Eight miles later he hit a right-hand turnoff without a sign but it surely headed east and gave him a view to the south of a massive wall of blue-black cloud slashed by lightning [...] He had found the road but lost the day" (Proulx, *Ace* 27). These "twists and turns" across the West will eventually get him to find himself and connect with his surroundings. It is pre-GPS days and Bob is following his route on a map. That is why he unconsciously drives back to Colorado. His permanently getting lost prefigures how he is diverted from his path towards an improver mentality. He keeps on missing the directions, as he eventually will at the end of the narrative. At this point –he will later– he is not attracted to the back roads of West, but the fast and straight highway, where picture-like images pass through her Saturn window.

Bob's first contact with his immediate natural surroundings is the landscape around the bunkhouse that he rents from LaVon Fronk. His disposition and openness make him like the place from the start:

"I'll take it," he said without seriously considering a daily drive across a cow pasture, the labor of lugging water, no telephone, for already he was taking pleasure in the subtle beauty of the panhandle, noting the groves and thickest along the watercourses, huge coils of grapevine weaving the trees into a coarse fabric. (Proulx, *Ace* 67)

Still with an improver mindset, his senses awaken at the view of the natural world around him. He starts studying his immediate surroundings with the attention that the electricity-free cabin allows him. The fact that he is more alert and freer to stimuli allows him to notice the Western landscape from the first moment. He is absorbed in the Western landscape of that panhandle that –Proulx remarked– people went past. However, his first night alone at the cabin parallels improver Witkin from *Postcards*, as he is bothered by the lack of comfort: “At that moment, sitting in the deep dusk, the flashlight beam weakening, the course of Bob Dollar’s life shifted, all unknown to him, for he was conscious only of his annoyance at the lack of light and swore to get the camp light or a candle the next day” (Proulx, *Ace* 71). The passage talks about personal disposition and proleptically exposes Bob Dollar’s “shift” into a different mindset. He is open and unassuming, with personal disposition, and he is unconsciously awakening. It could somehow be said that Bob’s domestic Thoreauvian setting plays a significant role. This isolation, however, is just partial, as he is permanently on the move, making contact with both the community and the different loci of the area.

If we retrace at this point Sewall’s concept of how perception can contribute to ecological awareness, together with intentional practice, we could affirm at this early stage of the narrative that Bob comes with a disposition and it is on his way, yet not ready to find an order. It is worth remembering how openness to perceiving the relations is key to ecological connection and conjunction. How this perception changes “as a function of relatedness within the visual world” (Sewall 209), which can be a consequence of predisposition to the practice of a “relational view” (Sewall 209). Bob Dollar is ready to see and take in the land, as he comes as a blank page, an empty vessel. He is underway in his “journey of belonging” with the landscape (Lopez qtd. in Treddinick

79). Julie Scanlon concurs in that “what is important is the act of observing closely, immersing oneself in close engagement with the landscape, for a photograph would surely have been enough to act as a reminder” (93). Proulx explains how looking at a place consists of an “intense absorption of everything that’s going on: the sound of the wind, the movement of the clouds, the temperature of the air, footprints in the dust, what vehicles people drive and what’s in those vehicles besides the people themselves” (Proulx qtd. in Scanlon 93). Bob is not ready yet for this profound assimilation but he is sure underway. He has just arrived with a responsibility that makes him read the land as something to possess, purchase, manipulate and extract from. He is still unaware of the disastrous ecological consequences that his employer’s –and his own– actions could have on the panhandle, but his “sharp and special sensitivity” (Proulx, “Afterword” 283) might just do the trick.

Bob is a potential improver or improver-to-be, walking the fine line between that and pilgrim. His mission to secure land to be transformed into hog farms is parallel to the process of awakening of his senses to achieve conjunction with the place. In active participation, the reader wonders all along the narrative which of the two will thrive. He is permanently on the move, which reflects the tensions between both attitudes. Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams* explains how personal disposition is crucial in achieving a pilgrim mindset: “What one thinks of any region, while traveling through, is the result of at least three things: what one knows, what one imagines and how is disposed. What one knows is either gathered firsthand or learned from books or indigenous observers” (271). This could be precisely the point that many reviewers miss when analyzing the novel. These long accounts of history and readings are Bob Dollar’s first-hand experience to which

Lopez refers (*Arctic* 272). Bob's accumulation of knowledge, built upon his initial lack thereof, ends up building his eventual pilgrim attitude.

As soon as he rents the bunkhouse and gets acquainted with landlady LaVon Fronk, he learns about the pioneers' history of the place⁴⁰. LaVon tells him first about her own grandfather Moises Harshberger, who came to the West as a pioneer-improver, not feeling or understanding the land, and got rich abusing the land although ended up in a string of fatal misfortunes due to his disregard for the region and his permanent state of disjunction:

Perversely, Harshberger abhorred the shadeless plain, its grass and silvery sand sagebrush. He hired men to dig up and ship to him hundreds of sapling big-tooth maples and chinquapin oaks, five hundred ponderosa pines, grudgingly watered by the wagon drivers on their jolting journey somewhat as Captain Bligh's breadfruit trees had been tended by sullen sailors on the *Bounty*. Nor did his attentions fail once the trees were planted around his new house [...] But the young trees could not endure the sand-blasting wind and before he put sheltering lath fence on their windward sides, half of them perished. (Proulx, *Ace* 85)

Harshberger did not understand the animals that were suited for the Western plains. He wanted to introduce cows and calves and all die because of the cattle tick. His calves got black leg disease and the blizzard took the last of the animals: "It had took him ten years to build up his life to where he got his own place and in one year he went from sittin pretty to flat broke" (Proulx, *Ace* 87). LaVon though explains his grandfather's approach

⁴⁰ An upcoming section deals more in-depth with the innumerable tales and stories about Woollybucket and the West that LaVon Fronk's tells Bob Dollar on a regular basis, and how they affect Bob Dollar in terms of building his pilgrim character and the role that these stories play in his road to conjunction.

to the land in terms of bad luck. Harshberger embodies the ethos of the settler-newcomer whose only disposition for the land is possession through ownership, whose interaction with the land is expressed in utilitarian terms: possess, to extract, to improve. It is a universal –improver– credo: “Now Harshberger felt that the land was servant to him and owed him a living, owed him everything he could get from it” (Proulx, *Ace* 86). This is the first time that Bob hears about the Ogallala aquifer and the dependence of local farmers on extracting water from it. Through many of her accounts, LaVon tells not only about the actions of people on the landscape but about the effects of the West on its dwellers, what Abele calls “the effects of this mercurial landscape on people” (119).

Once he is settled, he starts imagining himself as a dweller of a classic Western setting, home-on-the-range style, but duty calls: “Bob felt he should have a harmonica and play it sitting on his porch with his chair tilted back and his feet on the rail. He wrote instead to Mr. Cluke” (Proulx, *Ace* 93). He writes one of a series of letters that starts an epistolary relationship with his improver boss back in Denver. This epistolary use parallels the one analyzed in *Postcards*. In *That Old Ace in the Hole*, however, the letters have an immediate response. On the one hand, they illustrate Bob Dollar’s ongoing transformation from improver to pilgrim –his process of conjunction, and, on the other, the tension mounting up at Global Pork Rind headquarters as a consequence of it.

In the first letter, Bob states the current situation of affairs by listing potential sellers or land available, but including some personal contacts with the locals as well as what he has already learned about the cultural and economic history of the place. Bob even expresses his concern –he has just learned about it– for the pressing issue of the lack of water related to the depletion of the Ogallala aquifer right under his feet:

Water is something to worry about. Although there is still a lot of water in the Ogallala, it is shrinking very fast. One lady I met said “I’m not worried, they will find another source, icebergs flown in or something, they always do.” But I don’t think they will be flying icebergs in the near future. I hear a lot down at the grain elevator and one farmer told me they’ve used up about half the water in the Ogallala since the 1960s and there’s very little recharge. Some of the farmers take the attitude that if they don’t use it somebody else will. It seems that in Texas if you own the land surface you own the water rights under the property and you can do what you want with it, so it’s like a lot of people sticking straws into a big common pot of water and sucking as much as they want [...] It is very controversial. (Proulx, *Ace* 94-95)

Proulx introduces the issue of ownership of the land, an integral part of an improver attitude, as we have seen in the analysis of *Postcards*, and previously with the character of Harshberger. Even though boss Ribeye Cluke had warned him against opposition to hog farms in rural areas, Bob realizes early on that there are a number of locals with an improver mentality, ready to welcome hog farms, even though it is not the dominant mindset: “There’s actually plenty *want* hog farms. Especially some politicians. They got them up near Follet. My goodness, they *requested* them, they courted the hog corporations” (Proulx, *Ace* 102).

At the Old Dog, he finds himself immersed in a discussion on the necessity or not of having hog farms in the county. His innocent and still improver mind does not comprehend how farms work, as he has never been to one. The dialogue is central to Bob’s acquisition of the local feeling for the hog farms and their attachment to the land. At the remark that “Those water ponds that Kim Skin has been dumpin into pollute the water table and are surely leakin into the Ogallala” (Proulx, *Ace* 113), Bob responds that “I read that the lagoons are lined with non-porous plastic and they are emptied out and

the manure spread on the fields to improve the fertility of the soul” (Proulx, *Ace* 113). The discussion projects a dialogue of pilgrims’ facts against improvers’ opinions that slowly opens Bob’s nature conscience: “And if you think the lagoons and exhaust fans make a stink, wait until you get a whiff of a field fresh spread with hog poop. The ammonia will burn your eyes out a your head. Your hair will fall out. They could make the stink better by coverin over the waste ponds or aeratin, but that costs money” (Proulx, *Ace* 113). Bob insists: “But hog farms make jobs for local people. I mean, this is a region where there aren’t many jobs, so that’s something. Helping the economy and all?” (Proulx, *Ace* 113). The matter is settled with a list of facts on how hog farms do not actually provide those many jobs and how little impact they have on the local economy:

“Why Bob, you are innocent a the facts a life. One hog farm site makes a very few jobs at a minimum wage. They run three shifts but everything’s automated and computer controlled. The corporations don’t buy locally. They buy bulk supplies in the world market, truck it in. Good business. The hog farms come in, they look like they’re bringin money into the region so some a the locals just lap it up [...] They polluted Tulsa’s water supply. They poisoned rivers in North Carolina [...] What a you think hog farms do to a rural panhandle community?” (Proulx, *Ace* 113)

In the same conversation, Brother Mesquite refers to a “moral geography,” defending the idea that in the old West there were no hog farms, claiming that a local economy is key to fight global corporations’ practices that end up destroying small communities: “In the old days you had no hog factory farms. Maybe fifty, sixty farmers and ranchers raisin a few pigs the traditional way. Each one of them families bought local. The kids went to school local. People got together for dances and dinners, they banked local and the

money enriched the region” (Proulx, *Ace* 114). Such local practices, Brother Mesquite explains to Bob, are key to environmental change, like the bison monastery –already underway– or the plan of the Prairie Restoration Homesteads. Tater Crouch illustrates:

“We’re going to take down a fences and open her back up, tun bison in the panhandle. Brother Mesquite’s goin a help with it. We got them Poppers comin down a talk at the church next Thursday. They’re already doin this kinds thing in the Dakotas. Why not the panhandle? There’s a buffalo market now that Ted Turner’s opening up them burger stands. Things is goin a change.” (Proulx, *Ace* 340)

Hunt discusses this moral force in terms of Christian values as complementary and not opposed to ecological ones (Hunt, “Ecology 192). According to Hunt, Proulx here traces back to the idea of the Buffalo Commons⁴¹, a concept developed by geographers Deborah and Frank Poppe. They came up with the idea of bringing the buffalo back to the Great Plains after the failure of experimental agriculture in the area (Hunt, “Ecology” 191), as a means of economic and ecological recovery.

Even though “being of place” is slowly entering him, his responsibility and duty towards Global Pork Rind keep him busy scouting for land to buy. He writes his boss again stating that locals “are stubborn about holding on to the land” (Proulx, *Ace* 120). He is proleptic in his failing outcome as improver. He writes that

it has been difficult to catch the rhythm of the place. At first I could not tell if it was the shift of the seasons driving the agricultural community,

⁴¹The Buffalo Commons is today a movement integrated in the Great Plains Restoration Council. According to their website, they describe it as “a cultural and social movement for positive, restorative social and ecological change on the Great Plains.” It is more of a metaphor of a model than a real plan, where people can engage not just in discussions and activities but in actively investing in their communities. It addresses “small businesses, housewives, big landholders, small landholders, inner cities, inner-city children, suburbs, towns and villages.” Source: <https://gprc.org>. Hunt remarks how it has at least raised awareness and this public dialogue has made it more concrete and specific (Hunt, “Ecology” 191).

or the market fluctuations of beef and pork, or what. Every ranch and every town has acres of exhausted machinery. I think that saving this junk is linked to the frugal German habit of holding on to things that might come in handy someday. The derelict machines strike me as private museums of past agricultural work. (Proulx, *Ace* 120)

Bob cannot help but let his connection with the place out, and so it does with insensitive Cluke, whose humorous reply stresses the impatience and lack of sensibility that one can expect from a corporation manager:

You do not need to know anything about the operations side of the industry to do your job. Nor are we paying you for a sociological analysis of the panhandle. Bob Dollar, if you want to be in Global's Big Shot League you will have to get out there and hustle [...] the time has come to ACT. I expect to hear some GOOD NEWS from you very soon. Let us have your cooperation. (Proulx, *Ace* 190)

The term "hustle" implies here serviceable and soulless practice in terms of perverting the land. Ribeye's corporate mindset demands fast results at any cost, as he needs to send the Money Offer Person to close the deal. This figure stresses the clinical and cruel way to dispossess owners from their land.

Wes Berry retrieves the works of environmental economists Bill McKibben and Norman Wirzba to insist on how "our exaltation of the individual and pursuit of maximum economic production" (169) are dangerous as they inevitably lead to ecological crisis and destruction of local economies. Even though this point will be developed later, devoted to local communities and economies, it is worth at this point to mention how the cruel methods that Global Pork Rind uses exemplify how dehumanized agribusinesses and corporations get their hands on the land, depicting the ecological costs of industrial meat production –ironic contrast here with the "Used Not Abused" sign in Uncle Tam's shop.

In a pioneer mode, they will step over anything and anyone through ownership. In the same work, Berry states that, in the year of the book's publication (2004), a similar company to Global Pork Rind, the Seaboard corporation, was aiming at locating 16,500 hog-per-day slaughterhouse in the Texas panhandle, a huge operation that required at least 4 daily million gallons of water only for washing carcasses and equipment, which in turn they would become the same amount of waste water thrown out daily (Berry 177). All the water, obviously, had to be taken directly from the Ogallala Aquifer.

In his drives up and down across the Texas panhandle, Bob occupies more time perceiving the environment than actually scouting for land for Global Pork Rind. He slowly learns to appreciate the Western landscape, yet his perceptions still include images of hog farms:

One late afternoon he was under the brow of the caprock hiking along a trail of orange dust so fine it seemed a kind of defiant liquid, climbing a slight incline through shrubs and violet-colored cacti like spiny cow tongues. In the undergrowth cardinals turned leaves and scratched up fallen twigs. Above him rose a landscape of red baguettes headed by the grey crust of stone, the great caprock layer, a section of the limestone escarpment that wavers diagonally across the Texas panhandle, intersecting with the Canadian River to make a huge crooked X. To the north and west were dry high plains, the treeless Llano Estacado, and to the south and southeast the moister southern plains of ordinary Texas. He squinted his eyes at the landscape, trying to imagine a sea of hog farms. (Proulx, *Ace* 198)

Once the sheriff uncovers his story and finds out that Bob works for Global Pork Rind, he warns him that his improver ways will not trick the locals:

"Now, there's no law against searchin out property for swine production, but it could be unhealthy to tell folks you're a real estate developer frontman when it ain't true. My guess is that the price

differential between agricultural land and property folks think is goin a be developed is enough so's you won't make many hog site buys. You may think because most a these old boys didn't git too far in school they will be suckers for the easy deal. I'll tell you what. These illiterate old coots can figure you out right a your socks. I don't know why you are lyin about it." (Proulx, *Ace* 204)

The sheriff likes Bob, like most people in the community. This is why he demands at least honesty from him towards the locals that have warmheartedly welcomed him. Instead, he suggests, Bob should aim at another kind of improver enterprise, with an obvious ecological impact, yet more subtle and without implying any confrontation with the locals, more "socially reforming:"

"Why you ought to be scoutin for a prison builder corporation stead a hog farms. There's one up in Nashville. They pay good money. I bet, to fellers finds them a sorry little town at the back a everything that's perfect for a good prison. Your best prisons are in rural places. You get in touch with that Nashville outfit and tell them you know some good places in the panhandle perfect for prisoner incarceration." (Proulx, *Ace* 205)

From this point on Bob's trend of thought derails from a full improver attitude, as he feels more and more in conjunction with the land. He tries to convince himself first, and then his bosses of the convenience of purchasing land to build luxury homes, ironically, the lie that he was telling the locals about his work. The idea turns into a plan to reverse his employer's idea of building hog farms in Woollybucket county, or the Texas panhandle. So, when Waldo Beautyrooms approaches him with that same improver idea –developing luxury properties in his family ranch, taking the land away from the ranchers that use it– he threatens with selling it otherwise for the water rights, back to the Ogallala issue:

My siblings and I believe that the family ranch left to our mother, Frida Beautyrooms [...] would admirably suit your needs. It is a beautiful ranch of 8,000 acres with rolling terrain through which Big Lobo Creek flows, feeding a small lake of the same name (on the property) [...] At this time most of the pasture land is leased to local cattlemen. I would like to speak with you about the possible sale of the ranch should my siblings and I persuade my mother (93 years young) that such an event would be beneficial to all. (Proulx, *Ace* 209).

Here Proulx reintroduces the issue of yuppies and urbanites in the West, weekenders – just like Witkin in *Postcards*– aiming at experiencing the Old Western ways from brand new SUVs and airco/pooled mansions. After meeting with Beautyrooms at a Houston restaurant, Bob meets someone in the restroom, a pilgrim-minded customer that overheard their conversation, explaining that yuppie impact in the American West, raising one more time the question of ownership and taking us back to the notion of “moral geography” discussed above:

“You got any idea what you’re doing to the country when you chop one of those ranches? You’re bringing in powerlines, roads, increased water consumption for Kentucky bluegrass lawns, giant trophy homes. You’re bringing in people who don’t know and don’t care about the region, so long as they get theirs. All so some greedy little pipsqueak developer like you can make a buck.” (Proulx, *Ace* 214)

A panhandle humanized landscape attacks Bob in the company’s Saturn when he is on his way back to the bunkhouse. It looks as if the place is forcing him to make up his mind, trying to shake off him his remaining improver consciousness. A storm assaults the car as if this one was an intruder, reminding us also of how the weather shapes the character of the people. It is a long quote yet significant:

He watched in horrified amazement as the water swelled out of its banks and began spreading over the road behind him, then, with thin, watery fingers, crept over the bridge roadway. He saw he could be cut off and swept away in the flood.

Quickly he started the car and left the shelter of the black willow, back into the full force of the hail and wind. The wind, gusting and veering, pulled the Saturn toward a deep ditch that ran alongside the road filled now with rising water nearly up to the asphalt. Slew and skidding he fought his way through the wet detritus on the road. The lightning flashed, the brassy light revealing carbuncled underclouds. A dozen cows, pelted by the hail, ran in front of him, their hooves splashing, the young calves blating in fear and pain. A piece of metal roofing hurled past and tumbled end over end across the prairie. The hailstones were bigger now and it seemed a dozen roofers with nail guns were attacking the Saturn. All at once the windshield cracked and crazed in a dozen places. He could not see through it and had to put down the window and drive peering out on the side. A large dark hump in the road turned into a dead cow and somehow he steered around it. No wonder, he thought, that panhandle people were a godly lot, for they lived in a sudden, violent atmosphere. Weather kept them humble. (Proulx, *Ace* 223-224)

The quotation draws attention to an essential part of the landscape that Proulx is both very keen on and observant of. Often her characters shudder at the elements in the unforgiving landscape, and their degree of success is measured on their attention to it.

After three months in the area, Bob has not succeeded as an improver anyway. He has not been able to convince anyone in the community to sell him property or tricked any of them into it. He opens to Brother Mesquite, a symbol of the wisdom of the West, who has explained to him about the ecological project of balancing the panhandle ecosystem with the reintroduction of bison, the buffalo farm: “‘We put our buffs out and in two weeks they’d found all those wallers their ancestors made and took them over for themselves’” (Proulx, *Ace* 275). Brother Mesquite also explains the pilgrim’s ways: “‘We’ve learned from these animals’” (Proulx, *Ace* 278). At this stage in the narrative, the place

has won him over and something shifts inside him for good: “There’s some beautiful country here” (Proulx, *Ace* 276). At the prospect of putting his pilgrim ways at the service of the buffalo sanctuary, he is still uncertain about his future, even though he admits his interest in the history of the West. He knows that at one point he will have to confront his boss about his situation at the meeting to which he has been summoned.

Before his trip to Denver, pilgrim Bob decides to take up a trip into nature, visiting the Alibates Flint Quarries National Park⁴², situated in the center of the Texas panhandle. He is now drawn to the landscape of the West, as he is open to practice the relations. His process of gaining intimacy with places is underway, exercising attentiveness (Proulx, *Ace* 283). Before he departs, he notices the skeleton of an animal and he imagines clearly and vividly retraces the moment and how it died:

He parted the last stalks of grass and looked on the bizarre sight of an entire deer skeleton impaled on a metal fence stake, the head missing, the stake straight through the center of the chest. The curved ribs were cold grey with hard shreds of flesh on them. Dried sinew still held the bones together. At first he thought it must be the remnants of some ghostly ritual, but after staring at it from all sides he decided that it was the evidence of a freak accident, that the deer, bonding through the tall grass, had not seen the concealed metal stake and had, by pure bad luck, come down full force on it, impaled and killed, to hang like a grisly scarecrow until the weather separated the bones and beetles chewed them to dust. (Proulx, *Ace* 283)

⁴² It is not by chance –nothing usually is with Proulx– that Annie Proulx chose this existing national park in the narrative, situated geographically right in the middle of the Texas, as she is interested in the millennial history of landscapes. According to the National Park Service from the U.S. government, the park is a geological treasure showcasing a rugged landscape shaped by millions of years of erosion caused by wind and water. The area’s geology reveals a story of nearly 300 million years, with sedimentary rocks formed from a shallow sea during the Permian Period. The Alibates Flint Quarries, in particular, are renowned for their high-quality flint that indigenous peoples used for making tools and weapons, the ones the Bob tries to steal but later drops. Source: <https://www.nps.gov/alf/learn/nature/geology.htm>

Once at the park, still betrayed by his own old outsider-improver mindset, he tries to seize a stone from the park area, one that Uncle Tam might find nice, but puts it back as he understands that the soil is where it belongs: “Don’t even think about it” (Proulx, *Ace* 284), the park guide warns him.

On his way up, Bob picks up a hitchhiking Indian⁴³ that is on his way to live with his daughter up north. The scene parallels the *Postcards* story of the hitchhiker Indian that Loyal picks up and ends up half scalping, robbing him. In the case of *That Old Ace in the Hole* Proulx confronts Bob with an old Indian that is lost in “his” post-West. She depicts a Native American carrying a Neiman Marcus –a quite pricey designer’s brand– sack. Its sense of direction is gone, as the West has turned into a uniform landscape that he does not recognize. The role is reversed here if compared to *Loyal Blood* –he was the lost one– not the scalping Indian –who knew his way very clearly. Bob reads the land a bit better and ends up finding his daughter’s home. The old Indian is confused all the way: “The old boy had no idea where he was going” (Proulx, *Ace* 286). In a similar way as in *Postcards*, the Indian disappears but Bob is luckily able to find him. Once at the daughter’s place, the Indian explains what the West has turned into for his people, who have no prospects whatsoever, if compared to white Anglos:

“But you are lucky. There are chances for you, a white young man. How you like it on the reservation, forty to eighty-five percent unemployment, no jobs at all, no money to get out, no school, nothing but get drunk, make babies, use the ADC check for bottle? Young men there do not think, What am I going to be in my life? Answer: a drunk, die young and miserable, leave damaged children behind, they think, How long will I live?” (Proulx, *Ace* 293-294)

⁴³ Proulx employs the term “Indian” instead of “Native American,” and so I am using it.

Invited for dinner, he feels uneasy about the displaced Indian and this disclosure of information. Their youth is not going to be able to take care of the land of which they were once stewards. They are now confined in trailer parks and “condemned to a complex negotiation with the region’s western heritage” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 182). A place that keeps on being exploited and taken up by corporations and global money. It means another useful –and painful– lesson for Bob about the history of the place.

Once in Denver, he tells his uncle about his change of heart. He is relieved: “I kind of hate this hog site job” (Proulx, *Ace* 297). He imagines his future and he shares it with his uncle: “I think it would be fun to pen a bookstore somewhere” (Proulx, *Ace* 297). Uncle Tam summarizes to him, in simple words, the pilgrim credo, the wise attitude and mindset to achieve conjunction: “Sometimes is not a matter of doing what you like. I know your generation puts a lot of value on that, but for most of us it’s a matter of doing the best we can with what we’ve got and who we are” (Proulx, *Ace* 298).

At the headquarters of Global Pork Rind, Bob is relaxed and relieved at the prospect of being immediately fired. He complains about the smell of hog farms –he feels closer to the locals now– but he gets dismissed by his boss with a speech on ““That’s the country, Bob. That’s rural life. Feedlots smell too. Stock smell is a natural accompaniment of living in the country. The panhandle -in fact everywhere where we put our farms- is rural, low-population *country*. Anyway, only a few very supersensitive souls are bothered. Most people are not affected’” (Proulx, *Ace* 302). The lines underline the utilitarian ways agribusinesses use to justify themselves, something Proulx depicts with humor. Global Pork Rind does not deal with “animals” –in the same way as they do not use any term related to nature– but, significantly, with the economic concept of “pork

units” (Proulx, *Ace* 302): “‘We don’t think of hogs as ‘animals’, Bob, not in the same way as cats and dogs and deer and squirrels. We say ‘pork units.’ What they are, Bob, is ‘pork units’ –a crop, like corn or beans’” (Proulx, *Ace* 302). They do not take into consideration what local communities have to say about it, hence the tricky subtle ways: “But people down there in the panhandle feel like if they own property they have some say in what happens on it and next to it” (Proulx, *Ace* 302). Apart from dismissing the locals, Ribeye Cluke utters the main word in the improver bible: “‘What rules the world is *utility*’” (Proulx, *Ace* 302, emphasis added). In front of these agribusinesses, Bob voices for the community: “Well, they say other things too. They say the animals are confined in those buildings, that they suffer and live unnatural lives” (Proulx, *Ace* 302).

Back in Woolybucket, Bob needs to rent a room somewhere else, as his bunkhouse is taken. He finds a room at a place near a hog farm, where he will have first-hand experience of what it means to live near one. He is immediately overwhelmed by the stench, as the landlady explains what it is to live in such an environment, in terms of health:

“We *are* next to the hog farm, and to tell you the truth, I don’t know what in the world we are goin a do. It’s not so bad now but when the wind changes and they turn on the fans it is very bad. My husband suffers from it a good deal. In the house we have nine special air conditioners and six air purifiers runnin all the time, so it’s not too awful, but outside, when the wind is right, your eyes just flame up and your throat hurts. That’s why I only ask fifty dollars a month for the apartment. Otherwise it would be two hunderd. So if you can stand the hog farm it’s a good deal. Do you have a tendency to asthma?” (Proulx, *Ace* 309)

The smell cannot even be taken away by the air purifier in the room. Besides, Bob misses the “comfort” of his primitive Thoreauvian setting –no water or electricity–, his readings and being surrounded by the natural world. He cannot concentrate on anything but on the unbearable smell:

The next morning the stench was worse than ever, he woke with a headache, his ears ringing, his eyes red itching. He felt dizzy and disoriented as though he were coming down with the flu. Only in the shower under the stream of shampoo-scented water could he get away from the smell. It terminated everything. His clothes reeked, his mouth seemed filled with manure and mud. (Proulx, *Ace* 321)

As stated, Ace Crouch stands as a central *deus ex machina* in *That Old Ace in the Hole*. His symbolic name, as seen also in the previous section, appears throughout the narrative, even though he only shows up as a character in the closing chapters of the story. Even though Ace appears as the epitome and embodiment of the saver of the local ecosystems, thus a respected holder of a pilgrim status, the way in which he got there appears controversial. There is a duality that stems from the way that he and his former boss and then partner Melkebeek made their money. Ace Crouch’s money, together with the fortune that he inherited from the former, is the real and actual “ace in the hole.” Yet the account of the facts regarding that fortune is only known by the middle of the novel.

The two started out ranching but saw an opportunity in advancing economically, rather than in ecological terms. They associated installing windmills across the panhandle to pump up water from the Ogallala Aquifer so that farmers and ranchers could extract water for their pastures, animals and farm needs. Melkebeek and Ace were, by all means, improvers at the service of their own economic interests and not

attentive to ecosystems or the land in any way. Abele wonders if the two “are culpable for their abuse of the panhandle” (121-122). Furthermore, Melkebeek expanded his fortune by digging for oil in the panhandle, eventually ending up drilling in faraway locations all over the world, such as Java, Kuwait, Qatar or Venezuela. Proulx exposes a “dark underside” (Kowalewski, “Losing” 244) that is hardly more respectful with the landscape than the extracting and polluting ways of Global Pork Rind, as a part of the process that the West as a region is. Now, Ace’s project of running buffalo and renewing the ecosystems by restoring the natural balance of the panhandle prairie, using Melkebeek’s “corrupted” inheritance, exposes the moral dilemma of dirty money put to good use, in ecological terms: improver’s money at the service of the landscape, as to who will benefit from the bison sanctuary and the Prairie Restoration Homesteads. Consequently, the question here is: Is Ace Crouch a former improver turned pilgrim after a process of reconnection that made him go back to protecting the land, or is he simply an elderly man from the old West seeking to become reconciled with his landscape? This is just an example of the fluidity and relational set of affections within that ever-changing West. Abele points the finger at both in terms of guilt, as she finds them “culpable for their abuse of the panhandle” (121-122). In truth, they were the ones that allowed farmers and ranchers to extract water from the Ogallala with their windmills and pumps for irrigation or their cattle, changing drastically the use of the land from then on.

Early in the narrative, through LaVon Fronk, Proulx already brings up the issue of urbanites who will pay a fortune to relive the old West life, and again brings up the concept of the urbanite absent ownership discussed in *Postcards*. If read in economic terms, the deal that Ace and Brother Mesquite are proposing might not clearly benefit the local economy, as this should not depend on intermittent commuters or holiday

makers that drink lattes and watch the bison, living out Western fantasies. In this “transformed” West of “stubborn” people, according to Bob Dollar, newcomers will anyway have to sign a deal with the landscape. It is nearly a pilgrim contract, an ecotourism deal, as brother Mesquite explains later in the narrative: “Each one of the houses would have a covenant – the buyer would have to agree to maintain habitat for prairie species -prairie dogs and burrowing owls... Ace thinks there’s people out there would be proud to get into such a way a livin, kind of experiment in community habitat restoration” (Proulx, *Ace* 356).

When Bob and Ace Crouch finally meet, they have a significant debate on hog farms and their effect on the land and the people. At this point, Bob is still unaware that Ace is a billionaire and that he is about to buy the existing hog farm or about his plans for the bison sanctuary. Even though he is “enjoying the delicious air” (Proulx, *Ace* 332), when asked about what he sees, his improver mind still takes over: “Barbwire fences, the road with some trucks on it and a gate. The railroad and two sets of grain elevator, suppose one is from Woolybucket. Pumpjacks” (Proulx, *Ace* 332). Ace makes him see that this improver mind blurs his pilgrim vision:

“You don’t hardly know a thing about his place. You think it’s just a place. It’s more than that. It’s people’s lives, it’s the history of the country. We lived through the droughts that come and we seen the Depression and the dust storms blowin up black as the smoke from an oil fire. We seen cowboy firin squads shooting half-starved thirsty cattle by the thousand.” (Proulx, *Ace* 333)

Ace Crouch tells him about the history of the place and its people, and insists on how agribusinesses are steadily and silently taking over: “Every year a few more sell out to the corporations. Everman for hisself. It’s mostly younger ones wants the money as they

don't intend a live here. They got their hundred reasons for it. I happen a feel we should *stick together* on this one and tell the hog corporations to go pound sand" (Proulx, *Ace* 333). Ace Crouch claims the sense and value of community to fight those businesses, the local facing the global, a kind of David against Goliath scenario. Here Proulx shows her concern for "the current generation's flight from the ranch in the panhandles" (Proulx, "Abiding"). When Bob brings up the issue of "probably in forty years there'll be something else that pushes out the hog farms and somebody else will say how sad it is, how the panhandle heritage is being lost" (Proulx, *Ace* 334), Proulx brings up the ever-changing character of the post-West that she keeps on depicting, with its "encounters" and "flows." And she does it through Ace Crouch, who nearly offers a definition of affective critical regionality when describing the panhandle: "Things are as the windmill to the mill, constantly changing, makin a response. But what things change *into* is something else. Just one or two people can stand up and fight back" (Proulx, *Ace* 334).

However, Ace admits that Bob's cover story would not have been a bad idea: "You know, your luxury home idea was pretty good. It could work if there was no hog farms around. Maybe not just places for rich folks, but something more moderate" (Proulx, *Ace* 334). This observing and respecting the land is then not exclusive to locals, but an "open field of potentiality" as Campbell explains (*Affective* 198). Ace expresses this necessary openness and fluidity with outsiders in Western lingo: "Why should being born in a place give you more rights than anybody else? I've never understood that. It's like Francis Scott Keister going around with his bumper sticker, 'Texas Native.' I mean, so what? It's historical and psychological rights" (Proulx, *Ace* 335). Proulx exposes how Keister's credo holds on to the old idea of a fixed and unchanging West, with static boundaries and a reductionist view:

“Goddamn, I’m a Texas native, I was born right here in the panhandle, right in Woollybucket. Us native panhandle Texans don’t whine and bitch about wind and dust and hard times—we just get through it. We work hard. We’re good neighbors. We raise our kids in clean air. We got a healthy appreciation for the outdoors. We pray and strive to remain here forever. We are Christians. We are bound to the panhandle like in a marriage. It’s like for sicker or poorer, richer or healthier, better or best. Livin here makes us tough, hard and strong. The women are tough too, the ones can stick it out, anyway. This is horse and cow country and ever dollar you squeeze out a the place, by God you’ve earned it.” (Proulx, *Ace* 197-198)

This insisting use of “we” in the quote submits the rhetoric of the “us” against the rest, rigidity of mind, and closeness to affective processes. Keister’s West is excluding, whereas Ace Crouch’s exposes the need for flows between insiders and outsiders, locals and foreigners as in integral part of the redefinition of the region West. Longtime residents are as open to newcomers as these are to absorb the place and become stewards, not owners, such as Ace Crouch: “We’re in the years when we meet our fate instead a dodgin and twistin in the long game that nobody can win. We sorted it out, Tater and me, that we got an obligation to the panhandle. I’m the oldest one. I got the responsibility. And the power. Tater won’t sell nothin to no hog corporation” (Proulx, *Ace* 336). Proulx states, through her “ace,” the fundamental issue in land preservation, responsibility, a mandatory requirement in a pilgrim’s mindset, a feature that will soon enter Bob’s absorbing nature.

In short, this section has delved into the first of the three dimensions (environment, society and the subject) of ecology that Campbell proposes, following Guattari’s ideas on the environment. Specifically, it emphasizes on the relationship that Bob Dollar establishes with the landscape in his process of becoming an improver. He

comes into the Texas panhandle as a grateful mindset improver with a brand-new job and a mindset based on extractionist practices that he is initially unaware of. He appears alien to anything related to hog farms, the panhandles, or any environmental issues. His first contact with the region is promising and full of possibilities, even though the landscape will slowly win him over. Slowly, his senses awaken to the natural world by paying attention to and interacting with his immediate surroundings, at the Thoreauvian-like bunkhouse near a ranch, with no water or electricity. This journey is made visible in the letters that he sends to his employer as well as the growing lack of interest in finding land for Global Pork Rind. Once he fully understands the environmental impact of corporations in this ever-changing West, he develops a full respect for the environment and advocates for preserving both panhandle heritage. The next section focuses on the second aspect of ecology proposed by Campbell, human subjectivity, and how it equally contributes to Bob's journey of transformation.

4.3.2 Human Subjectivity: a History of the Place

On leaving Denver, Bob Dollar carries along a piece of luggage that, I argue, is crucial in his transformation process from improver to pilgrim. As seen above, his uncle's partner Bromo gives him the Journal of Lieutenant Abert, an expedition account that reads both as a history volume and a nature journal. As Proulx so often states, the history of a place is a crucial and integral part of the landscape and, as such, Bob's "intense absorption" of the history of the panhandle takes place through mainly the writings of Lieutenant Abert and the stories told by LaVon Fronk, the sort of local historian. Abert's reports focus on

the landscape, flora, fauna and the inhabitants of the panhandle at the time –Native Americans–, while the stories of LaVon Fronk are centered on the people and their mark on the region, as prior examples have shown.

The quiet Western setting of Bob Dollar’s bunkhouse is auspicious for an awakening of the senses, not just towards the natural surroundings, but for devoting time to reading. Bob co-engages with the landscape of the panhandle from the moment that he sets foot in his cabin, but also from the first pages of Abert’s journal, a text that can be both classified as pioneer literature and nature writing. Slovic suggests that nature writers “use this writing as a ramp or a springboard -as a guided preparatory meditation, [...] toward a newly receptive state of mind” (Slovic, “Seeking” 150). Nature writing fosters an intimate connection with the natural world, and, as such, it serves Bob Dollar. From the first page, Bob realizes the parallel expedition to the Texas panhandle that both Abert and himself undertake:

Bob Dollar’s heart went out to Lieutenant Abert, surrounded by military bullies, sissy drawing his only skill. The lieutenant was Bob’s age when he and his friend and second-in-command, the mathematically inclined Lieutenant Guy Peck, and a small company were ordered by the idiosyncratic and haughty John Charles Frémont to separate from the large expedition and form the “South Expedition” to explore the territory of the Comanche, to chart the course of the Canadian River while Frémont himself pushed on to sunny California. (Proulx, *Ace* 30)

Symbolically, both Abert and Bob represent a big corporation or organization in the panhandle: Bob’s employer is Global Pork Rind and Abert works for the government. Another parallel is that both come as improvers of sorts and will become pilgrims, both commanded by a “haughty” boss. The parallel is just accurate: they both work for the

powers that be. Like Bob, Abert was lost in the panhandle, in the sense that he misplaced his own location and, eventually, could not deliver what his employer –the government of the United States– was expecting from him, just like Bob Dollar. Instead, he took on nature writing and he took an interest in the landscape and the communities inhabiting the panhandle, in the same way as Bob Dollar. They have both steered away from original duty and instead turned to documenting the panhandle. The U.S. government performed ethnical cleansing and transformed the landscape dramatically, something that Global Pork Rind is about to carry out economically.

Bob reads that, like him, Abert “had an inspiring eye, a good nature” (Proulx, *Ace* 30) and that he “was early in the country” (Proulx, *Ace* 30). This distance between the early settlers, the pioneers, and the West that Bob experiences is what, in Proulx’s concept, makes the old West a post-West, the mark of time and humans in the landscape. Proulx brings attention to “other” human elements that have also played a role in shaping the West, which were overlooked in the traditional narrative of the West. These include “invisible” imprints left by native peoples on the landscape such as tools or structures. Through the pages of the journal, Abert instructs Bob to observe and appreciate these subtle traces of human presence across time in the land. Bob relates Abert’s discoveries to his own experience, gaining intimacy:

Bob Dollar had gone to Bent’s fort himself on the eighth-grade class trip. He knew the fort was a reconstruction and the guides, blacksmiths and mountain men lounging around were only actors, but the feeling was remarkably real that he was on the border of Mexico marked by the Arkansas River in the mid-nineteenth century [...] Now, looking at Lieutenant Abert’s watercolor of the fort, done from the far side of the Arkansas and showing an overly large flag flying from the fort and, in the foreground, a conical tent, perhaps a teepee, with two white men

standing near, one wearing a striped shirt and, his arms folded, the other in buckskin pants and with a rifle over his shoulder, he felt he was there again. (Proulx, *Ace* 62)

He is so much into the book that, at first, he gets annoyed when the sun sets and he does not even have a flashlight or a candle, ending “with the book to his nose, squinting at the small type” (Proulx, *Ace* 91). As he immerses himself in the history of the place and its people, he simultaneously joins the journey to sense and connect with the landscape. In his readings, he deepens his understanding of the real cultural and environmental history of the place –and of the West–, the “environmental interconnections and flows” (Campbell, *Affective* 178) of the millennial landscape. After reading Abert and listening to LaVon Fronk, it all starts to coalesce in his mind:

Bob Dollar began to see that the two panhandles once had been part of a single region where the curtain had risen on many stages. Here the Indians had lived nomadic hunting lives; traders opened routes to Santa Fe and Taos to sell calico and took peltry from the Indians in exchange for manufactured goods; army scouts came to map the terrain and tangled with the Indians; buffalo hunters shot and skinned for the eastern trade. As the great herd disappeared, ranchers brought in cattle to run the free and open range and the sons of settlers became cowboys. Mule team freighters carried in lumber and fence posts, kettles and flour, wire fencing. The flood of people came with the railroads, small farmers who believed that drought and wind could be overcome by hard work and the plow. Finally came the oilmen and flimflam tricksters, government men to tell the farmers that they were doing wrong. Now corporate agriculturists like Global Pork Rind had moved in. (Proulx, *Ace* 95-96)

This quotation accounts for the story of the American West and the historical position of Bob Dollar’s company in such an equation. Proulx here displays again the historical

responsibility of multinational companies that disregard the future of the land –in absence. Bob Dollar is now able to make connections in his mind with the landscape, the history and the people, and to wonder about the reasons why the pioneers in the old West unnaturally divided and organized the territory like that:

There was something, he thought, about projecting the territory that worried: a pot handle can come off if the rivets fail, can bend or break under blows and weight. The Oklahoma panhandle was shaped like a finger pointing west. The Texas panhandle attached to the state like the neck of a bottle. It was the northern territory, unlike the rest of Texas, geometric, bony and high and hard-rocked, cut across by the Cañadian (in his mind he replaced Lieutenant Abert's lost tilde). It was a place defined by its position atop of a caprock. As a lone tree attracts lightning, the panhandles drew end-of-the-world thunder, grass fires, blue northers, yellow dust storms and a yearly parade of dirty tornadoes. At night, the light out and limbs composed for sleep, no one could know with certainty that he or she would awaken in the morning or be carried into the sky with whirling metal and smashed wood. So there was an underlying sense of unease in the panhandle life. (Proulx, *Ace* 96-97)

It looks at times as if Bob impersonates Abert when trying to relive his experience by actually surveying the exact places at which the Lieutenant was. He also starts using the diaries as a map to locate and visit the historical landmarks that Abert set or scouted in the panhandle. His improver mind of finding land for Global Pork Rind is shifting, as he spends most of his time driving with Abert in his mind:

He spent the evening with Lieutenant Abert, using his Texas road map to puzzle out the locations of the Bents' panhandle trading posts, for the notes told him the trader brothers had built something called "the Adobe Fort" on the Canadian around 1840, and, in the spring of 1844 put up another trading post a few miles distant. Even with the big

gazetteer, *The Roads of Texas*, he could not locate the marker streams Bosque Grande Creek and Red Deer Creek. He supposed the map was not detailed enough or that the streams had been renamed. (Proulx, *Ace* 125)

Bob, who, like Abert, has “an inspiring eye,” is able to read some of the dramatic consequences of the white settlements in the old West. He reads the episodes of wars with Indians, the explanation of the expansion West:

They held off the Indians for three days. After a number of the attacking men fell, the main Indian body retreated to the ridges above Adobe Walls where they rode back and forth out of rifle range. On the third day the plainsman Billy Dixon snapped off a shot at one of the distant riders with his .50 Sharps rifle. The Indian fell dead from his horse and soon after the demoralized attackers, who had believed their strong medicine protected them from bullets, left. It was the beginning of the end, and a year later the panhandle had been ethnically cleansed of its native people stop Billy Dixon’s longshot became a pillar of Western myth. (Proulx, *Ace* 125)

This more critical account of the Western expansion resonates throughout the narrative as opposed to the successful narrative of the West. If the first settlers aimed at and succeeded in pushing away and getting rid of Native Americans, Bob’s job for Global Pork Rind is, in a way, analogous: his job is also to take over the land and push away its dwellers.

After the incident in the violent storm, discussed above, he keeps on trying to relive Abert’s experiences, as his perception and his senses are open to it. Abert’s writings work as a nature guide that is providing him with open possibilities to absorb the landscape, which is now familiar and homely. The sameness of the experiences reflects Bob’s process of conjunction with his surroundings:

It took several days for the creek to drop enough to allow crossing. Bob felt as though he were coming home after a long journey. He sat on the porch with his bottle of Pearl and read of Lieutenant Abert's encounter with a remarkable similar storm, which coated the ground with an inch and a half of hail that, lodged against the bluestem, formed small dams until the prairie was ankle deep in water. (Proulx, *Ace* 243)

Bob starts discussing Abert with the locals, and he is amazed that Tater Crouch is updated on the subject and that provides him with more information. Proulx is showing the need here that local communities should be aware of their own histories to at least keep a perspective and better assess the ever-changing flows:

You know, a couple of years after that Lieutenant Abert come through the panhandle, the Topographical Corps sent out another fella, Lieutenant James H. Simpson⁴⁴. He was supposed to find a good southerly route to the California gold fields. In 1848. He's the one I like. He was a smart one. He thought the panhandle population was too scarce for any railroad a come through then but said there should be forts and military roads first, and then they ought to make a start on towns and wagon roads—which is what happened. It was freight wagons and stages opened up the panhandle region, not the hide hunters and not the cattlemen and sure not the railroad. The wagon routes established a line of supply -goods mail, communication. (Proulx, *Ace* 264-265)

By the end of the reading, Bob realizes that he is nearly obsessed with the history of the place, that crucial part of the landscape, planning to move to Santa Fe to study history

⁴⁴ Simpson was, like Abert, a real historical character, member of the U.S. Army and the chief reconnaissance officer of the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers during the years 1846-1859. Its relevance in the narrative comes from the fact that he was the one that started out the Panhandle in settlements not aligned with the railroad system. His keen observations and interactions with the Indians as well as detailed information about sites such as Chaco Canyon and Canyon de Chelly, whose documentation was instrumental in helping preserve their historical and cultural significance. His journals made of texts, drawings and sketches followed Abert's model (Bender).

and deepen in the knowledge that he has gained from Abert's journals, to follow in his footsteps:

"I hate all this skulking around. I just took it because it was a job. I don't actually *know* what I want to do [...] About the only thing that interests me is like –history? History of the Santa Fe Trail." And he told him about his pleasant ho that 1845 with Lieutenant's Abert account and his desire to retrace that 1845 path to see what the lieutenant had seen. "And books. I really like books." (Proulx, *Ace* 277)

When Bob picks up the hitchhiking Indian on his way to Denver, Bob wishes that he knows a little about Abert, so that he could get information from a Native American perspective, and he is disappointed at his silence: "'What tribe?' Hoping that somehow the man was a Cheyenne and he could talk a little about Lieutenant Abert. But there was no answer and when he glanced over he saw that the old man's eyes were closed, though he doubted he was asleep" (Proulx, *Ace* 286). The last reference to Abert's diaries in the narrative insists on Bob's attention to the landscape, and its species. It is clear that he has gained conjunction with the land: "He read Lieutenant's Abert account until the letters on the page began to swim. It came to him that the Colorado squirrels with tasseled ears were called Abert squirrels and wondered if there was a connection⁴⁵. *So far*, he had noticed nothing about squirrels. Perhaps he would re-read with squirrels in mind" (Proulx, *Ace* 321, emphasis added).

There is a follow-up to Abert's journal that suggests that Bob's future readings will be history books and equally landscape-oriented. He is ready to continue his journey

⁴⁵ This is, no doubt, one of the many examples of Proulx's detailed research method. There is, in fact, a relationship with Abert and the Abert squirrel. The animal –also called "Tassel ear squirrel"– was named after John James Abert, Lieutenant Abert's father, who had also been, before his son, a naturalist and a member of the U.S. Topographical Corps. Source: www.nps.gov/band/learn/nature/aberts-squirrel.htm

through landscape and history, this time as a pilgrim. The next book that he gets from Bromo, by the end of the story, is Thomas Fitzpatrick's biography, which is closely related to Abert, as these two men had been together in the expedition that Bob had been reading about all this time: "The new book from Bromo lay on the seat beside him – *Broken Hand*, a biography of the mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick, who had been with Abert on the trip across the panhandle. It was broken hand who warned the lieutenant never to tie his mules to the shrubbery" (Proulx, *Ace* 305).

In short, Abert's volume has let Bob experience direct contact with the landscape and he develops his attentiveness and awareness of the place. The journal, which reads more like nature writing, is a second pillar in Dollar's transformation.

However, it is not just the journal that transforms Bob Dollar. Another crucial source of historical information for Bob is LaVon Fronk. LaVon, a "salty widow" (Banville), is the one that provides Bob with most of the details on the people from the community, their ancestry, as well as with a history of the Texas panhandle through her own eyes. At the same time, LaVon is the main source of gossip and hearsay in town: "You can't beat LaVon on news" (Proulx, *Ace* 352). She stands out as an ambivalent narrator that continually exposes the duality between the two Wests. In her accounts, LaVon provides as well an account of the improvers that have populated and had an impact on the West. LaVon is a rich and endless source of information that is putting together *The Woolybucket Rural Compendium*, a history of the place consisting of "hundreds of memoirs and photographs from families of the region" (Proulx, *Ace* 68), a work that she has been working on for thirteen years. It certainly reminds of Proulx's compiled material to write the novel as LaVon also has boxes stacked in rooms that she might not use, as she confesses: "I suppose I'll never get it done...I'll die and my son will throw everything

out -essentially the entire story of Woolybucket and everybody in it" (Proulx, *Ace* 68). Mark Sanderson concludes that LaVon's inexhaustible observations and stories are a result of Proulx's own months of research (Sanderson), although Proulx displays it as well on each occasion that Bob is told about someone's history in Woolybucket.

On arrival, Bob likes her place, the Busted Star Ranch –symbolic name, post-West: "Bob thought (it) a beautiful place. For the first time in his life he saw what extraordinary personal privacy a family ranch enjoyed [...] La Von told him the ranch had been mixed-grass grazing land -bluestem, buffalo grass, gramma, wheat grass and Indian grass- when the first settlers came into the country" (Proulx, *Ace* 85).

Interestingly, the soil already tells the story of the place through the agency of its dwellers. At the beginning of the analysis, I have shown the connection between place and history when I dealt with the story of improver-pioneer Moises Harshberger, LaVon Fronk's grandfather, and the string of misfortunes and unfortunate events that he went through, due to his continuous disjunction with the landscape. However, LaVon will extensively fill Bob in with stories and more stories.

Bob displays an eager curiosity for anything related to the place, even though at times, after listening to LaVon, "his head ached with the torrent of information" (Proulx, *Ace* 89). Her account is essentially a history of the challenges and failures that the people from the panhandle came across through history, and the way in which landscape and weather molded them to the way they are today. Those challenges include the changing natural environment, tied to a string of economic misfortunes: "Only repeated failures, from bankruptcy to death put a true panhandle resident down" (Proulx, *Ace* 99). With those stories, she will go on telling the history of the place, one that does not match the idealized Western stories that Bob has heard about the West. This "redistribution of the

sensible” (Campbell, *Affective 4*) challenges artificially created notions of the West, those of all-time successful pioneers and prosperous settlers. LaVon tells stories of hardship, suffering and failure, concepts that have traditionally been left out in the classic narrative of the American West, like those in Abert’s diaries, mentioned above. But LaVon shows a lack of sentimentality or nostalgia for the old West. As a true historian, he breaks up romantic assumptions of how the panhandle West came about. The true improvers of the West were already corporations with a clear economic concern:

“Forget that pioneer and first-settler stuff [...] They didn’t have much to do with town locations. It was *all* the rayroads. The rayroad corporations said where the towns was goin a go and that’s where they went. Nothin a do with pioneers. It was all corporate goals and money and business [...] The rayroads didn’t care about the towns –they was after the long-term wheat and cattle freight charges. They had plans for the whole region, the whole state –the whole country– and they run things. What the rayroads done is break things up.” (Proulx, *Ace* 91-92)

This breaking up with the myth of the formation of the imaginary West, in LaVon’s words, ends up with the irony that it is the places that escaped that original corporation design that are now sought after as an expression of authenticity: “I agree that there was *some* towns away from the rayroad that people started, like Cowboy Rose, but most a them was out in the boondocks and they wasn’t worth much. Funny, now it’s those little places that people like” (Proulx, *Ace* 92). Bob, attentive and absorbing, devoid of sentimentality, immediately gets the point: “Although Bob was sorry to lose the idea of the pioneers bravely setting up in the wilderness, the railroad theory explained why so many towns looked like the last one and the next one” (Proulx, *Ace* 92). Bob understands that it was

pioneers-improvers that started the devastation of the West: “Maybe LaVon was right: business interests had wedged the west open” (Proulx, *Ace* 93).

Soon both lines of information –LaVon’s and Abert’s–, plus the stories that locals tell him at the Old Dog, enter Bob’s conscience and process of attentiveness, letting him perceive more and more things around him: “The violent sunset came on slowly, faded to clear yellow, dimmed blue until the water lily moon floated up. And somehow, after listening to LaVon’s stories, it all mixed in with Lieutenant Abert’s explorations, the slangy old days of the XIT, the Frying Pan, the Matador” (Proulx, *Ace* 95). He is immersed in the history of the place. He is able to make assumptions about the transformed landscape and its consequences. Unconsciously, LaVon projects as well environmentalism when explaining about poisoning of the land: “LaVon told him that there was much cancer in both panhandles, and multiple sclerosis, which she believed was somehow connected with owning little dogs. She mentioned the cancer centers at Perryton (benzene from the oil fields), Panhandle (nuclear weapons disassembly) and Pampa (a large chemical plant)” (Proulx, *Ace* 96).

LaVon reflects the pioneer psyche: “And, a course, not everybody born here has got their act together either stop the frontier character means not giving up on anything after it fails” (Proulx, *Ace* 99). This quotation carries along the idea of a “stubborn” West, as in the letter from Bob to his boss Ribeye Cluke, quoted above. It talks about the old disposition of trying over and over in a difficult landscape. The character is clearly linked to the difficulties of establishing in the West as improvers, trying to tame it or extract from it. Oil is one of the main issues, and LaVon tells Bob endless stories about improvers in the West that did not make it. The story of the Baums could respond to a pattern in the West. They were a family of ranchers who found oil in the panhandle right before

they went bankrupt. They got rich and lost it all again, as they thought the oil would run on forever. It is the story of the nouveau riche improver with his back on the landscape:

“They found awl in his south pasture and the money begin a come in like a fire hose squirtin. Over thirteen thousand dollars a day every day Jerky Baum went crazy. Part of it was he hadn’t never had any money at all to spend and now he was drowning in it. They built a great big Stonehouse like a castle with tennis court and a moat and a swimming pool in a glass house. He bought a jet plane and hired a pilot, though he didn’t have any place he wanted to go. Built a runway or two for the plane [...] Then the awl began to slack off and the money dropped. Jerky Baum behaved like it would start up again same as before but it didn’t.” (Proulx, *Ace* 99)

LaVon’s clarifying stories heavily contrast with her own rigid fixed opinions on the West, in the same line as Francis Scott Keister’s, as explained before. LaVon’s romantic idea of the West is made for rough and tough improvers that endure the weather and all the adversities that the landscape confronts them with. It is, again, a fix, excluding and static West, anchored in the old views, that heavily contrasts with the post-West that Bob is experiencing:

“Light soil, drought, bad wind, terrible heat, tornadoes and blue northers. And you never can tell which one is coming next. It’s a weather place.” She implied that the remote and level land, tempestuous blasts, tornadoes drilling down from super cells and the peculiar configuration of the territory worked with the wind to blow away the human chaff, leaving the heavy kernels. It was defeat to give up and pull out. (Proulx, *Ace* 102)

Bob probably feels that he belongs to that “human chaff” that LaVon refers to. Her improver-pioneer mindset fills Bob with how the land needs to adapt to the settlers and not the other way around. Bob will soon in the narrative learn about the bison sanctuary

–fully discussed above– yet at this point, listening to LaVon’s never-ending stories, he learns about the introduction of the cow in the panhandle and how it became a symbol of the place: “The cattle drives up to Montana and Wyoming went through here too. This was the original cow and cowboy country and still is the most cow of anywhere. So people are pretty rugged. This country was made for cows, once they got rid of the buffaloes” (Proulx, *Ace* 103). LaVon applauds buffalo extermination for the sake of ranchers’ advance, as her nostalgic views on the land define what a true panhandler should be.

Bob’s witty eye and absorbing nature understand right away LaVon’s concept of panhandle conservative, static and invariable persona:

He had seen for himself that right-thinking ways were supported by billows of gossip and a constant and surveillant picking at those who showed the slightest tendency to slip off the trodden path unless they fell into the category of Colorful Panhandle Characters. And work was the great leveler, work and the land, the twin assets of all rural people. (Proulx, *Ace* 103)

Besides, LaVon had also evidenced that “dark skin color, strange accent or manifestations of homosexuality and blatant liberalism were unbearable” (Proulx, *Ace* 102). Proulx uses LaVon Fronk to portray the fix rigidity of attitudes that would make no sense today in the West –or anywhere, by extension. Furthermore, and stressing on the idea of the white Anglo-West, LaVon considers the original Ku Klux Klan “a community organization dedicated to decent Christian behavior. I tell you, everybody wanted a join. I personally think the panhandle is a better place because a them” (Proulx, *Ace* 201). LaVon disguises the power of the Klan with social responsibility and duty:

“But the KKK set out to improve. They’d get the men to build onto them two-room shacks so they could separate out the boys and girls. They

talked a the mothers. The girls that was in trouble, why they carried them over to Amarilla to the Unwed Mothers' Home. They kept their eyes open and they could tell if a girl was *that way* before she knew it herself." (Proulx, *Ace* 200)

According to her views on that uneasy –nearly dystopic– and intolerant West, the organization “improved” the society in the old West by keeping it, white clean and decent (Proulx, *Ace* 201). Young pregnant girls were kidnapped and given out to marry without any consent; all to keep LaVon’s pastoral concept of the West: “LaVon [...] believed in the idea of harmonious rurality, where outlying farmers and ranchers and the people of the small town were linked not only through living in a common geographical region but through kind-intentioned and neighborly interests” (Proulx, *Ace* 98). Proulx exposes “small-town viciousness and intolerance” (Hunt, “Ecology” 184) of this narrow-minded part of the community, a view that ignores Campbell’s notion of “the important relations and rhythms between the region and the world” (*Affective* 202), as it produces only “staleness and isolation from one another” (*Affective* 202).

Bob becomes aware of the “underlying sense of unease to panhandle life” (Proulx, *Ace* 97), due to the permanent tension or contrasts with the West that he is being told about and the new hybrid West that he is experiencing firsthand, as the two interact. LaVon’s accounts of life in that panhandle are, however, very valuable and, in the same way as Abert’s journal, stir Bob’s desire for knowledge, awakening also his interest in the mythic Santa Fe Trail. This knowledge, in turn, deepens his connection to the land and fosters a sense of attentiveness and awareness. Dollar’s admiration for Abert and his interest in LaVon’s stories suggest that he sees the exploration of the panhandle as a noble and important endeavor, further fueling his commitment to understanding and appreciating the place.

Both with Abert's journal and LaVon's historical accounts, Proulx insists on the importance of history to get to know and become part of a place and its landscape. Bob Dollar loses his "innocence" by learning from both Lieutenant Abert and LaVon Fronk. Hunt explains it as "moving from a merely aesthetic to an ecological understanding" ("Ecology" 188). The stories are essential, in Abele's words, "to keep the present and future in perspective" (121). The concern with history that comes from both subtexts helps put together the focus on an environmental crisis.

This section has exposed that through human subjectivity (the second ecological branch that Campbell proposes), Bob Dollar's process of conjunction is nearly complete. Both Abert's journal and the little stories by LaVon Fronk, including his grandfather's, are minor stories that challenge the idealized myths of the Western expansion and read a redistribution of the sensible (Campbell, *Affective* 4). Both through the real hardships that many of them went through as well as the peoples and communities that Abert found and were annihilated under the name of expansion and progress, Proulx regenerates a renewed understanding and history of the West, taking into account those ignored so far: the native peoples and the early settlers and pioneers that succumbed to the hardship and failure. Symbolically, it is the compendium of a text, different narratives, a collection of stories, culture in general and ingrained experience that comprise the driving force behind Bob's transformative process. These elements highlight the significance of his journey to understanding the region's complex layers of meaning and to environmental awareness. The following section deals with the third and last branch of ecology that Campbell suggests in his study, social relations, specifically the interplay of encounters between Bob Dollar and the community of Woollybucket, which leads to a complete state of conjunction with landscape.

4.3.3 Social Relations: No News from Woolybucket

The third register that, I argue, completes the process toward conjunction with landscape that Bob Dollar experiences is implemented through the network of social relations that he exercises in the town. In other words, the mutual affects between him and the community of Woolybucket. I have stated that Bob arrives in the panhandle with a predisposition to absorb, perceive and connect with the landscape. At the same time, he is open to change into the history of the place, displaying multidirectional attention, absorbing the past and recognizing the changing present. This section deals with the process of absorbing the region or place as a space of fluidity where the local and the global intertwine. Bob is about to inhabit a larger “terrain of sympathy, solidarity and collaboration” (Hsu qtd. in Campbell, *Affective* 207) that goes both ways, where social practices function (bi)directionally from the local to the global and the other way around. Bob’s slow and steady immersion in the community takes place as he develops that sense of ecological responsibility, materialized in his process of conjunction. His dissociated life in urban Denver was a disjunctive attachment to place and landscape: “In the early years Bob often felt he was in fragments, in many small parts that did not join, an internal sack of wood chips” (Proulx, *Ace* 9). His notions of community and social interaction are limited to his uncle and a couple of friends, so the first mental collective image of a place that he fixes in his mind comes from improver boss Ribeye Cluke, who spells out to him the target community of the panhandle with its diversity of spaces and places:

And Bob, here’s a list of the qualities I want you to look for -on the q.t.- in that country. Look for your small cow outfits and farms, not the great big ones or the ranches with four hundred oil wells. Look for areas where everyone and everybody is gray-headed. Older. People that age just

want to live quiet and not get involved in a car or fight city hall. That's the kind of population we want. Find out the names of local people who run things -bankers, church folks- get on the good side. Keep your eyes open and ears for farmers whose kids went off to school and those kids are not coming back unless somebody puts a gun to their heads. Read the obits for rural property owners who just died and their offspring are thinking 'show me the money' so they can get back to Kansas City or Key West or other fleshpots of their choice. (Proulx, *Ace* 10)

The initial notion of community is an external one, a place from which there is something to take advantage, even though his observant eye will fast enough dismiss such a view. On his way down to the panhandle, at a restaurant, he observes attachment to the place in the reunion of a family:

The restaurant was crowded with Baptists and their children, who either sat passively without moving under the parents' stern eyes or raced wildly up and down dodging waitresses. He ordered enchiladas and studied the crowd. There was a booth next to his table where two very quiet children sat with their hands folded. The father and mother conversed in near-whispers, shooting narrow-eyed glances at the rowdy kids running and jumping. Bob heard the father say that if he had them in his care for five minutes he would learn them what-for, he would dust their seat covers, they would get a rump-whacking to last them a lifetime. The family's food arrived, cheeseburgers and fries for each, iced tea for the parents, enormous glasses of milk for the children. (Proulx, *Ace* 46-47)

Bob, who had never experienced family as a form of community, directs his attention to gatherings of people each time that he encounters a crowd. His first contact with the town of Woolybucket transpires an old Western feel, yet auspicious of the multi-layered region that he is about to merge with: "The wind had died down, leaving an emptied, medium-blue sky. On the outskirts of Woolybucket a sign proclaimed THIS IS THE BEST PLACE IN THE WORLD. smaller, almost completely faded sign beyond it was illegible

except for the sinister words ‘...out of town before sunset’” (Proulx, *Ace* 64). Once in Woolybucket, Bob notices how the old and the new West coexist:

The newer shops that proclaimed Woolybucket a community of modernity flanked the courthouse on the side streets. Here was an Episcopal church shaped like a wedge of cake, the Motel Caribe with a bathtub-size pool in the center of the parking lot, a Thai-Mexican restaurant, the Woolybucket Cellular and a fitness center named Gym Bob’s [...] The post office was streets back, a false-front building shaded by a small cottonwood tree. On slat-backed benches sat four elderly men, leathery, wrinkled, skinny-necked and thin, all with their right leg crossed over the left. Their pants legs rode high exposing four white shanks in oblique alignment. They all smoked cigarettes showing *the same length of ash*, they turned their head in unison to watch the traffic pass. Bob Dollar was pleased to see many oldsters and imagined them to be proprietors of big spreads. (Proulx, *Ace* 65)

When he writes his boss Ribeye Cluke on his first impression of the community, Bob points out that businesses in Woolybucket do not operate with credit card as they do not trust global banking operations: “None of them have credit card machines so I have to pay cash” (Proulx, *Ace* 94). Proulx shows local economics against bigger monetary power, which Bob Dollar also acknowledges when he observes the community’s business attitude with his inquisitive eye:

“I’ll just mention that the entrepreneurial spirit is strong here. Most people live in small ranch houses and drive old trucks, they are conservative and frugal, and at first you think that they are still pioneers. But I am finding out there is big money in the banks and big money invested in agricultural machinery and land. The trouble is, it will all come to an end in another generation as the young people do not wish to be here.” (Proulx, *Ace* 95)

Bob learns from LaVon Fronk how the community is shifting and intersecting, even though it is not exactly her idea of the West:

“Even if the local kids don’t want a stay here there’s galore a people retire to the panhandle from the cities,” LaVon started, slicing coffee cake, “from Houston and Dallas just a get away from the lights. They come from all over. Maybe they rather go to hill country down around Austin but they can’t afford the property prices. There’s people in this town has moved in pretty recent and they are resented. Yes, you’re in back porch country now, Mr. Dollar. We’re like a family out here. Everybody knows everybody and has for a long time. What we got here that don’t exist in the big cities is a sense of community.” (Proulx, *Ace* 97-98)

LaVon, despite her narrow-minded views on place and community –white, never-changing–, stirs in Bob the concern of belonging to a place, something unachievable, in her opinion, in urban centers, as they lack this sense of at-homeness: “What we got here that don’t exist in big cities is a sense a community” (Proulx, *Ace* 98). Even though she is somehow bothered by it, she admits to the shifts and encounters that help define the place and make a statement to change it. Through LaVon, Proulx makes a statement against small-town dwellers that are not open to outsiders, missing the shifts and encounters that help define the West:

“Trouble with these retirement people comin in is that they all want a change things to how it was where they come from. They want that National Public Radio. They want organic grocery stores. They want the *Houston Chronicle* delivered to their doorstep. They want likker stores. They want *restaurants*” She gave the last word a tone that equated it with “leper colonies.” (Proulx, *Ace* 99)

She also disapproves of urbanite yuppies that disrupt communities not only socially but economically as well, forcing locals to redefine their commercial –and social– target. LaVon’s rigid morality and attachment to old conservative values is exposed when she insists to Bob:

“You just don’t understand our ways. Here’s what you got a understand about the panhandle –people here work hard, they’re honest, they hold a high moral conduct and the most a them are Christians. At the same time, there’s men talks hot and mean and will hurt anybody gits in their way. There’s backbitin women with tongues like knives. In fact, about the only thing draws folks together these days is a funeral or a tornado. It ain’t perfect, specially since the hog farms come in.” (Proulx, *Ace* 100)

Here, Proulx suggests how the old ways of the community have been transformed through the action of hog farms, and have lost some kind of cohesion in the process, in her own words. But Bob does comprehend that the community is a more complex, dynamic and multi-layered space than that, a fact that LaVon’s limited and constrained vision fails to recognize. Through Bob, Proulx exposes how this post-Western community is eccentric and varied, even though for some the West is still a static, excluding, racist and homophobic place:

In his first weeks in Woollybucket Bob Dollar discovered that if the terrain was leveled and flat, the characters of the people were not, for eccentricities were valued and cultivated, as long as they were not too peculiar. Crusty old ranchers who worked an embroidery hoop, or a pair of alcoholic septuagenarian twin sisters, or the man who was building a full-size locomotive in his garage [...] were not only tolerated but admired. But dark skin color, strange accent or manifestations of homosexuality and blatant liberalism were unbearable. (Proulx, *Ace* 102)

Bob slowly falls into community habits, feeling at ease not only in his natural surroundings but socially as well: “He made a morning habit of dropping in, first at the grain elevator where there were usually four or five farmers who drank coffee and talked with Wayne Etter, the manager, about grain prices, value-added product, cursed the government and Canadian imports” (Proulx, *Ace* 104). However, it is at the Black Dog Café where he fully understands and absorbs the sentiment of community, a true sense of at-homeness. The place is a mixed lot of locals and shifting outsiders, a permanent “affective space” (Campbell) where Bob feels at ease. There, he listens to the locals telling stories about the history of the place and this is complementing the knowledge that he is acquiring through Lieutenant Abert’s diaries and the stories by LaVon Fronk:

He had a steady clientele of older men because he included on the menu eight or ten favorites from Depression days when they had been boys and their tastes set: vinegar pie, cocoa gravy over biscuits, fried salt pork and, for the old cowboys, son-of-a-bitch stew. For the early generation of saddle bums he occasionally made the supreme cowboy dessert, cherry Jell-O containing ginger ale and cut-up marshmallows, cut into small gleaming cubes, garnished with a whack of maraschino cherry. In a place where men spent much time outdoors in heat, dust and gritty wind, Jell-O was esteemed. (Proulx, *Ace* 107)

The Old Dog both offers old and new dishes, fitting together the two Wests, the one from the old days, not to be dismissed, merging or tensioning at times with the new. At the Old Dog, his regular hangout, Bob

learned from men sprawled and akimbo, like abandoned machinery, that a center-pivot irrigation system could cost as much as \$100,000 per quarter section; that the region was too cold for cotton, but grew staggering amounts of wheat, milo, sorghum, alfalfa, corn and soybeans for domestic and overseas markets and to feed the thousands of feedlot

cattle and bunkered hogs that gave the panhandle its distinctive odor.
(Proulx, *Ace* 109)

The feeling of the town against agribusinesses is what gets this heterogeneous community together, based on their common understanding of the use of water. They have a sense of history, but they also feel that they have extracted too much: "Irrigation with the Ogallala water saved everything, proved that if you toughed it out you 'd get your just reward. What nobody seen at first was how it would backfire, open the door to this agribusiness and corporate farmin" (Proulx, *Ace* 111). Bob replies with a "they say we live in a global economy" (Proulx, *Ace* 111), establishing that local economics will eventually have to face at global structures of power. The "backfire" alludes to the way in which panhandlers will have to deal with local solutions to the lack of water and resources to be able to restore ecosystems.

The discussion on the hog farms corporations issue only reflects how the matter has brought the community together. As seen before, locals call Bob "innocent" (Proulx, *Ace* 114) to the facts as he does not realize the seriousness of the situation, yet they feel his good disposition, his good nature and his willingness to listen. They bring up their origins to validate their ecosocial position, as they instruct Bob: "Hog farms create unhabitable zones just sure as land mines was planted here. Does a corporation have any kind a right come in the panhandle and wreck it for the people rooted there?" (Proulx, *Ace* 114). In contrast, local small farms raise pigs in traditional and more sustainable ways: "Sure, but they are spread out and they are in the open air. The small is nothin compared a closing in a massive number of animals. You drive past a herd a cattle grazin in a pasture. There's no smell. You drive past a feedlot -it stinks. With the hog farms a large number a confined animals. There's the health factor" (Proulx, *Ace*

114). They also express their concern for the animals: “pigs *are* animals, yes, but they are also intelligent and they like fresh air and the scenery, they make nests and frolic and take good care of their babies. But these -just cooped up to breed and breed, no nice dirt or weeds, no friends. Pigs are gregarious animals but not in them damn hog bunkers” (Proulx, *Ace* 115). Again, Bob realizes how the community reads the land, knowing how hard making it in the West has always been, despite the romanticized old stories about the place:

“People first come into this country after the big outfits bust up” said Grapevine, who farmed 15,000 acres of wheat and sorghum, “and they believed that old sayin, ‘Rain follas the plow’ Feller made that up broke a damn many hearts and backs. Rain don’t folla no plow...You wouldn’t believe how hard them old granddaddies worked. And most a them buckled at the knee. Think about what they had to do to git a crop started. Had a bresh out the fields, catclaw, mesquite and the most a this was handwork, week after week.” (Proulx, *Ace* 115)

The message of the quotation is reinforced with a comparison with the actual dwellers of the West, who lack the endurance: ““People today can’t work like that. Those old boys their whole lives was crisis. There’s never been nothin else here but ranch or plow”” (Proulx, *Ace* 116). To put it in Proulx’s words, “living in such country demands and takes everything” (Proulx, “Afterword” 281).

The folks at the Old Dog do not only read the land, but how the people use it or abuse it, in terms of pilgrim or improver: ““There’s a many a farmer and rancher ... who will tell you how much they love the land, but then they sell out to the hog farms, or you go look at their sweetheart place and what you see is overgrazed and over cropped, live water dried up, weedy and poor. You’d pass out did you know what kind of a government subsidies them birds was pullin down”” (Proulx, *Ace* 117).

Another scene that accounts for this sense of community and togetherness is the gathering of the Round Robin Baptist Bible Quilt Circle, a group of women that meet every week to sew and weave a quilt together, and later share a meal. Bob is invited to one of them, as it takes place at LaVon Frank's ranch:

"You'll hear more about the old days and what made the town work than if you lived in Woolybucket for fifty years. We started the quilt circle in 1978 with five women. There's twenty now. We meet for three hours each week. That's sixty hours a week times fifty weeks—we don't meet Christmas or Easter weeks—equals more than three thousand work hours in each quilt. You can't put a value on them. The first one was the Garden of Eden and you wouldn't believe how beautiful that quilt was. It only stayed in Woolybucket for a little while. It was raffled off—they are all raffled off—to raise money for a new roof for the church and by the strangest stroke Father Christopher, the priest at the Harmonica Catholic Church up in Popeye, Oklahoma, won it." (Proulx, *Ace* 172)

The name of the quilt suggests that the ladies view the community as a "garden of Eden," understood in biblical terms, as Texas panhandlers relate to the earth and the surrounding landscape "in large part through their understanding of Genesis chapter 1" (Hunt, "Ecology" 186).

Interestingly, Proulx expresses a move from the local to the global here, as that quilt was featured on the cover of *Art in America* magazine, bringing the image of an "edenized" West into the global. The models for the faces in the quilt are taken from the community as, for example, Cy Frease, from the Old Dog. Most quilts from the Circle are inspired in biblical moments and scenes, such as the Cain and Abel quilts, but they are "Westernized" to the likes of the community. In a historical and multi-layered mode, the group takes inspiration on James Dean and the characters and aesthetic from *East of*

Eden, the 1955 movie picture directed by Elia Kazan. It displays a post-West design that, in layers, absorbs the old past, the fictional past and the Western present to illustrate an artistic expression of community, and a reappraisal of different stories across time in the American West: “‘Didn’t you see *East of Eden*?’ said Dawn Crouch. ‘I embroidered that face and I *wanted* it to look like James Dean. *East of Eden* was based on the Cain and Abel story. We studied it in the English class. When I was in school’” (Proulx, *Ace* 176). Bob does not have the knowledge or background on Western culture, as in urban Denver he was exposed to another type of cultural inputs: “‘I didn’t see it,’ said Bob, thinking suddenly of *Rat Women* and the films he had seen with Orlando -*Mudhoney, It’s Alive!, Psych-Out, The Tingler* and *Sin in the Suburbs*” (Proulx, *Ace* 176). The stories told in the circle awaken Bob’s sense of community, even though they often refer to gossip stories from the local past: how the town came about, the people who came and went, Ace and Melkebeek’s story and even Woody Guthrie’s temporary stay –“that Woody Guthrie was a communist” (Proulx, *Ace* 179). Through their description of the West, from a conservative and nostalgic point of view, Proulx in fact exposes their unconscious description of an open West.

This combination of relations within the community, coupled with stories that, eventually, everyone tells, contributes to shaping Bob’s notion of an ever-evolving American West, with its interactions and multiple relations. As Bob drives through town, he perceives images of a non-sentimental post-West. It is a mixed unromantic yet affective space:

He drove slowly through the back streets of Woolybucket, many of them unpaved, the traffic kicking up enough dust to keep vacuum cleaners humming. There were many vacant lots in town, some of them places

to store machinery and vehicles, others garden plots where residents worked out the tomatoes and string beans in the cool of the evenings. A few people still kept horses and it was not unusual to see them riding slowly around town, to the post office (where the old hitching rail was still handy) or the feed store. A bald man everyone called Red was the local expert on animal diseases and the complaints of large stock, and many of the riders stopped by his front yard for advice. (Proulx, *Ace* 232)

Bob “rides” in the Saturn as he mixes in with the horse riders. He is now seeing the place from the inside, not as an outsider crossing main street but from the back streets. In the same way, if on arrival to Woolybucket he was mainly driving on highways and main roads, he has now made a habit of navigating the heart of the place: “He opened the window to equalize the temperature disparities in the car and saw the moon bleached and as small as a dime. He decided to go north and take the back roads” (Proulx, *Ace* 260). By the end of the narrative, he sometimes helps out at the Old Dog, attends illegal cockfights and is a steady client at the baker for cookies:

After the dishes were in the washer Bob drove over on the floury back roads to Cowboy Rose. There was a tiny bakery there and on Wednesday –cookie day– they had vanilla-pecan wafers, for which Bob had developed strong affection. The bakery was strategically located across the street from the elementary school, and if he didn’t get there before three o’clock there would be no cookies left. (Proulx, *Ace* 233)

Ace Crouch’s “ecosophical” (Campbell, *Affective* 203) statement on the land and at-homeness –largely discussed above– is the last stage of Bob’s realizing the low opinion that the town has of his ways, “he had never been a villain before” (Proulx, *Ace* 336), and a step into conversion. He finally understands that his role as an improver will have disastrous consequences in the community that he has learned to appreciate, together with the history and the Western landscape. His choice is imperative as he will have to

decide if he will join pushing a community that is against his employer or leave and move on. The final episode, a chapter symbolically called “Barbwire,” depicts a community micropolitically (Campbell, *Affective* 207) involved and away from romanticized views from the old West, as the “hybrid relations” of the place are “overlapping and intersecting” (Campbell, *Affective* 39). What is clear, I argue, is that Proulx does not “want to return to the past in order to reconstruct former ways of living” (Guattari qtd. in Campbell, *Affective* 204) but open to new possibilities that the community will need to figure out by itself. Bob Dollar’s individual failure—as an improver in his work for Global Pork Rind—is a triumph for the community that has absorbed and welcomed him: “well, you didn’t buy many hog sites and you riled some folks, but you also made a good impression on some. Showed you had grit. Stuck with it even when it got ugly” (Proulx, *Ace* 355).

This final chapter works out as well as an open field of relations that defines the heterogeneity and multi-layered relations in the collective. Bob finally transforms physically into a local Westerner, as he feels entitled to dress accordingly:

He showered [...] and dressed first in shorts and sleeveless shirt but when he looked in the mirror it struck him as an un-Texas costume. And there was the rodeo and the blazing sun—no doubt people would dress western. He put on jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, tugged on the never-yet-worn cowboy boots Mr. Cluke had told him were vital to success in the panhandle. (Proulx, *Ace* 344)

Bob is selling the quilt tickets for the raffle. He is still clumsy as a new Woolybucketer, as he sells fifty tickets to an antique dealer from South Carolina who does not have the patience or time to appreciate the pace of things, when the limit is ten tickets per person. However, he is approached by LaVon and Brother Mesquite, two characters that

represent two opposing views of the West and the community, who let him know how welcome he is in the community: “Seems that you belong in Woolybucket, Bob” (Proulx, *Ace* 356). His process of conjunction is now complete, yet the “unstable, opportunistic, open-ended and ultimately unpredictable” (Harding and Martin 61) West of the panhandle continues its shift.

4.4 Final Remarks: from Ownership to Stewardship

The chapter has exposed how that *That Old Ace in the Hole* depicts the process of disjunction to conjunction with nature of the protagonist, Bob Dollar, who comes in the community as an improver and ends up as a pilgrim, achieving connection, sense of at-homeness and despising his old improver ways. And he does so not by adjusting to the old Western ways –by which the town of Woolybucket apparently lives on– but by understanding its dynamic aspect. He reads the signs of the complex and varied dynamics of the place. His fascination with the place and his “deep absorption” of landscape, history and community means abandoning his former “innocent” trust in his corporate employer and becoming a pilgrim politically involved in helping preserve the local ecosystems from exploitation and contamination. By absorbing the history of the place, he has learned about the Western history of improvers exploiting, abusing, draining and assaulting the West –ethnic cleansings, extinct buffalo, or oil and water extractions– over and over, raising his ecological conscience. If *Postcards* was the story of a process of disjunction with the landscape and the destruction of the economy of a

small rural community, all leading to ecological disaster, *That Old Ace in the Hole* is a tale of hope, depicted through the rite of passage of achieving conjunction, the opposite stance, leading to the safeguard of local and communal habitats.

With Bob's transition, Proulx political stance exposes how extractionist interests can be obstructed if a pilgrim attitude is achieved, together with a new way of understanding the land and, unfailingly, a sense of community. This reading is fully aligned with her post-Western vision of the region, an unsentimental view that considers the changes on the landscape inflicted by the permanent or temporary inhabitants. She proposes a future in which the symbol of the buffalo commons together with a critical ecotourist operation, in an equation that might be the solution for small rural communities that need to avoid communal disintegration or face an uncertain future in the hands of monstrous corporations. Wes Berry retrieves the ideas of agrarian economist Norman Wirzba, who aligns with Proulx's perspective by emphasizing the significance of small agrarian communities as a more responsible way of living, as they represent

the most complex and far-reaching accounting system ever known, for according to it, success must include a vibrant watershed and soil base, species diversity, human and animal contentment; communal creativity, responsibility and joy; usable waste; social solidarity and sympathy [...] and the respectful maintenance of all sources of life. (Wirzba qtd. in Berry 170).

The quotation strongly resonates with Campbell's reading of affective critical regionality that I propose here, as it suggests actions within the space based on interrelations and an ecosocial mindset, with which to face issues previously overlooked in the inward-looking readings of the American West.

In her exploration of the human interaction with the landscape, Proulx sews together, like the quilt in the story, regional, national and global narratives by using “regional materials and cosmopolitan methods” (Hunt, “Ecology” 193), addressing local and global concerns. Localism offers “a physically plausible economy for the future, ... an economy that might better provide goods like time and security we’re short of” (McKibben qtd. in Berry 170). Annie Proulx urges us to act against the disintegrations of these communities, their physical environments and the destruction of their natural resources, focusing on the question of ownership versus stewardship. Capitalist exploitation, an improver attitude, goes together with possession, and it should be fought with ecological restoration, a pilgrim attitude leaning on stewardship of the land.

Proulx creates a narrative of hope, the closest that she ever gets to a happy ending. Bob Dollar’s reciprocal affects –to and from the community and the landscape– leave him optimistic, preparing him for new challenges. Some critics like Hunt express their preference for Bob, rather than for the other fictional extreme, Ace Crouch, when they explore the story in terms of faith: “Relying upon wealthy landowners motivated by conscience and love of place to invest in and foster environmental conscience certainly is not a viable solution to environmental crises” (Hunt, “Ecology” 192). Bob Dollar –he loses his last name by the end of the story– is a symbol of all the Bobs out there, who only need a hint of hope to engage in the undertaking.

Chapter 5. Wyoming Stories: “Reality’s never been of much use out here”

I saw her standing on her front lawn just twirling her baton
Me and her went for a ride, sir, and ten innocent people died
From the town of Lincoln, Nebraska,
with a sawed-off .410 on my lap
Through to the badlands of Wyoming
I killed everything in my path
I can't say that I'm sorry for the things that we done
At least for a little while, sir, me and her we had us some fun
Now, the jury brought in a guilty verdict,
and the judge he sentenced me to death
Midnight in a prison storeroom
with leather straps across my chest
Sheriff, when the man pulls that switch, sir,
and snaps my poor head back
You make sure my pretty baby is sittin' right there on my lap
They declared me unfit to live,
said into that great void my soul'd be hurled
They wanted to know why I did what I did
Well, sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world

–Bruce Springsteen, *Nebraska*

This third and last section of the analysis deals with Annie Proulx’s trilogy on Wyoming, *Wyoming Stories 1: Close Range*, *Wyoming Stories 2: Bad Dirt* and *Wyoming Stories 3: Fine Just the Way It Is*. First, I consider it relevant to include a general section on the personal and literary relationship that Proulx has been holding with Wyoming, the landscape and the people, even though I have dealt with it up to an extent in the introduction. The section also deals with her idea of the West *through* the trilogy. Following, I add an introduction to the writing and reception of each collection to identify

them in the timeline of Annie Proulx's literary career, as well as to relate it to the time frame of their publication and the different reviews.

In the analysis section, not all stories are fully analyzed, as I think that the task would make the analysis repetitive and unnecessarily long. Some of them are omitted from the main analysis because they illustrate similar points or ideas illustrated elsewhere. However, these stories are still referenced indirectly across the three sections. On the other hand, I do not consider it necessary, for my purposes, to include any specific subsection for each book only to give a detailed account of the plots or lengthy summaries, as I have done before. Instead, these are dealt with in the analysis section, where I focus on stories that, for my purposes, I consider more relevant.

This chapter includes also a section on Proulx's choice of the short story form to write about Wyoming, a practice that she has regularly alternated with long fiction. The three volumes on Wyoming all appeared in between the publishing of one of her novels, and the section explores both the conditions and restraints of a writer when creating short stories and the correspondence and adequacy of the short story form –a compressed type of narrative– to depict a huge area with long sightlines such as Wyoming.

The third and main part of the chapter deals with the analysis of the selected stories from the three volumes. I opted for an organic and mixed approach rather than a standard linear and chronological view as, for my purposes, I find it more illustrative, dynamic, and less repetitive. Even though I am including the first and short section to contextualize each collection, I consider Proulx's trilogy of short stories on Wyoming like a continuum, not three unrelated works. The short narratives from the three volumes could be grouped thematically, chronologically, classified according to their common

setting, or studied from the point of view of historical background. In interviews, Annie Proulx refers to them as a single unit, and even at times she forgets what story belongs to which book, which supports my idea of a single unit. This is another reason to refer to them as an individual work, even though they have never been published as one volume yet. If we go back to the premise that everything that she writes is about landscape, then it seems plausible to consider them as a whole: Wyoming is the central character, and that is, I suspect, the reason why they all are grouped under the obvious heading “Wyoming Stories.” At the same time, she writes about relationships and powers of humans within that landscape through communities, and their intervention in the natural world, a backdrop in all stories. The natural and communal spaces that these humans populate define the region, in permanent motion and change. For all these reasons, my analysis, in the last section of the chapter, examines them organically, as if they were taken from the same volume, and not taking into account to which of the three collections they belong.

5.1 Wyoming in Proulx’s Words: “Tweaking” the West a Little

When Annie Proulx published *Close Range* in 1999, the first volume of the trilogy, Proulx had already received the Pulitzer Prize for *The Shipping News* and appeared in a number of media. It was a time when she was often invited to literary discussions and presentations at several institutions, public appearances that she did not enjoy. However, in some of them, referred to in this section, she explains and dwells on what Wyoming represents in her literature, both as a writer and as a resident.

It is not surprising that Proulx's literary relationship with Wyoming came about partly through nature writer –widely mentioned in this text– and friend Barry Lopez, who had so far commissioned an initiative from The Nature Conservancy to raise money by publishing texts on nature. That year, 1993, the institution decided to move on to fiction and invite Annie Proulx to write a short story. Her only condition to accept was to write from and about Wyoming, that is why she needed a place to write. During that residency, she wrote "The Half-Skinned Steer," published as a single story in the institution's anthology of short fiction *Off the Beaten Path* in 1998 (Rood 154). She had "such a good time writing that story" (Proulx at John Adams 1999) that she decided to write the rest of the stories for *Close Range*. She tells that interestingly "the ranching community in Wyoming asked my publisher if I could take a leave of absence from the novel that I owed them and, did in fact spend fifteen months on these stories I found them very rewarding to write it was interesting it was exciting" (Proulx at John Adams 1999).

At that same lecture, on account of the publishing of *Close Range*, in October 1999, Proulx extensively explains how she became a resident, after researching for *Postcards*, due to her fascination with the endless landscape. She admits that the vast spaces "moved her deeply and [...] provoked a spiritual shudder" in her (Edemariam). She keeps on referring to the "sightlines" to explain what drew her to the state, in contrast with the fragmented spaces of her Vermont home. These long lines of vision and the wide field of view became the ideal writing place for her: "You can stand out of your kitchen sink and look out the window and see a hundred miles down the road, (unlike) the closed horizon that you get in the East or in the South; (it) orders your life in a way that suburban life does not" (Edemariam). Wyoming writer Tom Rea referred to those spaces as an area

to figure out: “In Wyoming we’re still arguing what this emptiness actually is, and whether and how to fill it” (284)

This notion of “empty” is a tricky one as the place, Rea notes, is in fact occupied: “The state’s already full: with sky, sagebrush, rocks antelope, cattle. Scraps of water” (284). That is maybe the point, as the “emptiness” concept of the West is too often referred to as an unoccupied space, void of people, of humans, of extractors, of improvers, an androcentric concept of the landscape. To Rea’s idea Asquith suggests that this empty West has always invited storytelling (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 6), to which I would add that authors such as Proulx have sought to “fill” that emptiness with narratives against that landscape. In *Red Desert: History of a Place* she states that in those vast spaces the person has to perform “a kind of “psychological double-think” as the point shifts between what is “close at hand to the far horizon line” (Proulx, *Red Desert* 78).

As seen in the introduction, Proulx’s move to Wyoming ended with the building of Bird Cloud, her second home, depicted in *Bird Cloud: A Memoir*. Before, her first home did not remind of a “Western” space. Edemariam describes it in her visit to interview the writer:

Inside her house [...] a wood fire burns the stove, and the lights are low, setting off the deep Mexican colours of the walls, the furniture, the rugs: orange, green, red, burnt sienna. There is art everywhere: paintings of the West by John Hull; a Cibachrome priest, bound and gagged, from Andres Serrano’s *A History of Sex*⁴⁶ series. “Not what you’d expect in a Wyoming house,” says Proulx, satisfied.” A house that “like her books,

⁴⁶ New Yorker photography artist Andres Serrano is a controversial artist whose provoking edge is no doubt of the likes of Annie Proulx. Her portraits recreate scenes of violence, sexual deviation or prisoners' torture. The picture hanging in Annie Proulx's home in Wyoming belongs to the collection “A History of Sex.” The image (*Leo's Fantasy*) shows a woman in a pulled-up skirt, one hand on her hip, the other behind the head of a naked young man, into whose open mouth she's urinating (Terzyiska). The image is not the type of art one would expect in a traditional Western household.

like her, opens out in expected directions, full of colorful stories, full of colorful stories. (Edemariam)

One of these stories connects her directly to the history of Wyoming, through her ancestors, what might be another reason to feel closer to the place. She often tells the story:

LaBarge is named after the maternal branch of her father's family. Her "great-great-great-great whatever Joseph LaBarge paddled from L'Assomption in Quebec to St. Louis on his 21st birthday where he signed on with General Ashley to trap in the Rockies. That he was dead, but he wasn't. He made it back to St. Louis and was involved with fur trading and charcoal burning for the rest of his life. Died in his 80s by cracking his head on the curbstone." "He was part of Ashley's big fight with the Arikara in 1823," Proulx said, "and he was part of Ashley's successful expedition over into the Green River country trapping beaver in 1825. It was there that he got partially scalped. Clymer write that he was dead, but he wasn't. He made it back to St. Louis and was involved with fur trading and charcoal burning for the rest of his life. Died in his 80s by cracking his head on the curbstone. (Proulx, "More")

This account of events could very well come from one of her own stories. Interestingly, *Loyal Blood*—the protagonist in *Postcards*—was partly scalped by the hitchhiking Indian, and accounts of scalping appear in some of her narratives.

Proulx's extensive research method in Wyoming did not change, once the first short story book was in motion. This time though, she specifically read and collected an enormous amount of newspaper articles to embed herself in the present local history. For Wyoming specifically, she tells how

these stories grew not only from observation and listening and hanging out in western bars and talking with people but also from five years of clipping Wyoming newspapers and filing the clippings under such

headings at the Bureau of Land Management: misadventure ranches, wildlife, domestic-abuse, wildfires, train wrecks, roads. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

As a matter of fact, the stories in the first volume, *Close Range*, are all inspired by real news that occurred in Wyoming: “Frankly, almost every single one of the stories that I write about Wyoming are founded on historical fact” (Proulx, “More”). When asked about the meaning of “close range,” Proulx explained not just the different levels at which the title can be read but also her concept of literary West, which, I argue, makes her case for the rest of the trilogy. Let us not forget that at this point she might not have had in mind yet to write the three volumes. In her explanations, it is easy to consider that the phrase “close range” could refer to all the trilogy. She starts by establishing the historical boundaries of the old cowboy West:

That was the great days of the West, when the Texas trail drivers drove those immense herds of cattle from Texas up to the lush grazing lands of Wyoming and Montana. And in those days ‘open range’ meant that there were no fences at all, everything was open, the cattle herds all mixed on this open range and they had yearly round-ups to sort out the cattle out of hundreds and thousands of cattle from many ranch owners, the great round-up, a cooperative effort by all of the cowboys riding for that particular brand, sort them all out, brand them, and release them again or drive them to market depending on what the season was. In the 1880s barbed wire was introduced and the range began to be fenced, very very quickly. First, what was fenced were the holdings of small ranchers and farmers along the trails, so that the cattle would remain straight off the trail and ruined their gardens and their fields. And then the land holdings in the north, in Montana and Wyoming themselves, began to be fenced off. The day of the open range, the day of the cowboy, the day of the free trail and the free grass lasted *fifteen years*. That’s as long as there were really cowboys and a real cowboy culture in the West. From those fifteen years, we have built this

enormous mythological structure that is carried by everyone in the country. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

The quotation is necessarily long as it illustrates Proulx's assertion on an idea that directly goes against the mythic cowboy hero: individuality. Proulx clearly states how the cowboy myth was constructed in such a short time frame, stressing at the same time the notion of cooperative communal work among ranchers, most likely as the only way that they could make it in the unforgiving landscape. As seen in the previous analyses, community, cooperation and togetherness are necessary affects (Neil Campbell) for a region to survive. The quote goes on to identify the moment of breakup:

And the days of the *closed range* or, as they say in Wyoming, 'close range', began with the fencing. It was the end of an era, it was the parceling out of land, it was the fragmenting of an immense grassy plain, and it has great meaning in the West, to say 'close range'. It means sorrow for that which is gone, it means an allegiance to the old traditional open range, and one can certainly feel badly that it no longer exists, because with it went a kind of work community, but for the novelist or for the short story writer it has another meaning. It has that meaning of being intensely close to something, [...] he shot at close range, the two of them talked at close range [...] This intimate face-to-face is not always a comfortable situation. When you're close range to someone as you are now sitting next to, perhaps, a stranger [...] That's why the short stories are called *Close Range*. There's another meaning to 'close range' in this particular context and that is they're contemporary stories. What I'm playing with here, one of the things that I'm interested in taking that overriding immense mythology of the West and the cowboy life and *tweaking* it a little, so that what we have here are a lot of rather grim or at least hard stories about not having many chances in life to do things in contemporary Wyoming. So, there's this element of time that's also dealt with here. We're talking about now but we're talking about the past as well. There's this constant back and forth between contemporary events and the old mythological past. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

In her own words, Proulx explains her approach to depicting a different and changing American West as one that does not fully dismiss old assumptions, myths or ideals, but rather “plays” with them. Her different perspective of the region acknowledges the existing narratives but shows its underside. Campbell suggests that “*Close Range* (is) suggestive of the metaphoric spaces across which the narrative moves, from the desire for the “open range” of self-expression to natural freedom associated with visions of cowboy life, untrammelled love, and wilderness landscape, to the “closed” social mores of a containing culture drawn by narrow definitions of identity, gender and sexuality” (Campbell, “From Story” 206).

In this short distance of observation then, Proulx is “intensely close” to her subject, and she joins in this allegiance to the old communal open range, suggesting that her approach to the region is best done with the short story form as, she argues, it is the most credible approach to explain her Wyoming. This “tweaking” to which she refers is her particular take on the West as a region that moves away from all traditional assumptions and fix notions, as the analysis has proved so far and this chapter will do too. She uses the interesting term “point of dissolution” or moment of change, the time when individuals are falling from that “wire of opportunity” (Proulx at John Adams 1999). This point of dissolution refers to the moment when “the economic tradition of a region starts to fall apart” (Proulx at John Adams 1999). Proulx is interested in characters that, “amidst this catastrophic economic misalignment are the ranch sons dispossessed of their western legacy, and the cash-rich, culturally poor roughnecks” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 26). The characters and stories in this “close range” are “located at the intersection between global economics and small-town western culture” (Asquith, *Lost*

Frontier 26). Interviewed for a Wyoming publication on *Bad Dirt*, she insists on the communal effort to face issues that derive from fierce global economics:

I like the cooperative attitude amongst rural people. I like the problems –I’m speaking intellectually and not as a voyeur– that beset rural persons. I feel a sympathy with the rural situation: regions have very little control over what happens to them or what’s done economically to them. They have to sit there and take it because all the decisions are made by people of power in large cities. Some people in some places just lie down and take it, some people fight back and some people go elsewhere. (Proulx, “More”)

Her Wyoming, as my analysis shows, replicates the ideas suggested by Neil Campbell that the American West is a space of fluidity and encounters that goes in many directions. Her West is the recognition and appreciation of difference, where social, economic and ecological factors are in constant motion, and *The Wyoming Stories* trilogy evidences it:

These stories are about contemporary Wyoming for the most part and the enclosing fences of tradition, the landscape, with its long sightlines, authority-restraint class, limited economic opportunities. All this is combines in popular thinking to a kind of half-wild freedom, but that landscape, that fenced landscape that is there now, not all of those fences of barbed wire or buck fence. Those fences are *fences of the mind* and fences of *opportunity* as well, and that forms part of this collection. (Proulx at John Adams 1999, emphasis added)

The holding on to old ideas of place –“the rural world is the most conservative and traditional of the worlds” (Proulx at John Adams 1999)– forcibly coexists in these narratives to open up new spaces and dynamics. These fences represent the tension between the individual versus the community, the “cooperative attitude” that Proulx so much misses and praises versus the isolated individual fight from the old West,

In short, Proulx's deep attraction and affection for the "sightlines" of Wyoming ultimately led her to become a resident of the state. There, she had the opportunity to witness the contemporary West at "close range," which would become central in the Wyoming trilogy. She describes this depiction of the West as "tweaked," a metaphorical expression to explain how she interprets it as a dynamic and distinct. This reading is attuned with Campbell's idea of region as affective critical regionality, the examining tool that I use in the analysis section.

I find it pertinent to close this section shifting my focus from the form to the thematic content of the narratives. I consider it pertinent to expand the understanding of Proulx's conceptualization and portrayal of the American West, a vision of the region that emerges with different layers of meaning and complexity interwoven within the trilogy.

In her own words, Wyoming is portrayed through "contemporary stories that examine rural communities and rural people in that West not having many chances in life to change or do things" (Proulx at John Adams 1999) in contemporary West. They partly still hold on to their old western practices: "In Wyoming, it's mostly smaller studies of various manifestations of rural life in this place. The common factor among all of them is that rural places are relatively powerless and that change in attitude is accepted very, very slowly and that the mythology of place – in each of these places – is a sustaining force for most residents and people" (Proulx, "More"). This "sustaining force" is what moves the region in terms of affects. Campbell's idea of "the minor at work" (*Affective* 3) resonates here. This change in attitude is directly related, I argue, to the "point of dissolution" or "moment of change" referred to before: the contemporary West is portrayed, again, "in the middle of" an economic, social and ecological process, where

the multiple layers intertwine in different ways and directions. In the same way as the two novels examined, the stories in this trilogy are essentially political, if we go back to her will to display the failing economic tradition of a specific region at the expense of the unresponsive abused yet enduring landscape.

The stress on improvers refers to the ongoing history of the West, as seen in the previous two chapters. The landscape is again the victim, and that is why it ultimately became the only subject: "A hundred years ago I would have written the great-fight-against-the-elements kind of books, whereas now the landscape has moved from being the great enemy to being the victim" (Proulx qtd. in Edemariam). In Wyoming, she transforms this environmentally victimized West into a space of change and opportunity, where "concepts beauty and squalor become blurred: for Proulx landscape is both the Yellowstone Park and the Coke cans lying in the car park" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 21), what reinforces the notion of the landscape as a dynamic relationship with people. Proulx admits being interested in "fragments" of the country, rural portions of it that speak out for the rest of the American territory. After the publication of *Bad Dirt*, she was innocently asked if Wyoming could be compared to Newfoundland in terms of land abuse and extraction:

Newfoundland got pretty well raped. Their forests are owned by outsiders and have been savagely cut. It's just a sorry story. Now many Newfoundland people have left the island to go work on the mainland because there's nothing at home. There's *nothing*. Very bleak future.

"Is Wyoming a resource cupboard? "

Are you kidding? Of course it is. It has been since day one. The whole history of Wyoming is one resource taken out after another. In the case of the Red Desert, it's heartbreaking over just the most recent years to see what's happened out there," she said. "It's massive, absolutely massive. It's the old boom and bust history of Wyoming, the kind of stuff

that happened at Jeff City and over near Wright and Bairoil. All of these places – uranium booms, oil booms, coal. (Proulx, “More”)

In this global economics and extraction context of *Wyoming Stories*, Proulx keeps on exploring and displaying permanent tensions between the old and the new (post-)West, between what is fixed and what changes, examining what role the imagined and mythic West plays in today’s West. Her Wyoming is populated by vacation urbanites, ranchers, Asian immigrants, eco-hipsters, farmers, female pioneers, gay ranch hands, yuppies, drilling companies, omnipresent trailer parks, and meth dealers alike. After all, there are no real or authentic cowboys in her West, even though many of the characters depicted are usually tagged as such in both reviews and scholarly work. We have read how “historian” Proulx explains that real cowboys disappeared after the barb wiring years and became ranch hands for good. With it, the real figure of the cowboy and the open spaces of the West ceased to exist and gave way to the myth. The historical fact that Proulx insists on confirms that the Western cowboy is mostly an imprint on people’s imagination, and the reductionist symbolic outfit of boots and hat with which she furbishes many of her characters carries along a connotation of the distance between the old and the often-misread new West.

Asquith notes that Proulx is more interested “in the incongruity between the sublime environment and the difficult lives of ordinary people living in it” (*Lost Frontier* 15). Differently to some of her contemporary authors, “the suspect nature of the (Western) dream that corrupts her cowboys, who tend to be vulnerable young men working in dead-end jobs trapped by a shared mythology” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 15). In fact, when questioned on TV about her admiration for cowboys, she remarked that she

finds “nothing admiring in cowboys” (Proulx, “Author”), as they are only used in her narratives as eloquent images from a West that is not real, but mythic, long gone if it ever –really– existed as such.

In these stories, the American West is inhabited by individuals –“ne’er-do-well antiheroes” (Kowalewski, “Losing” 253)– that have traditionally been perceived as outsiders or invisible in the American West. Asquith suggests that the trilogy intends to “provide a corrective to the myth by giving advice to those previously marginalized” (*Lost Frontier* 14) such as Indians, gay cowboys, women in control, the sexually abused, and the vulnerable, all of them at the expense of an ever-changing Western landscape and global economics that undermine rural communities, where the constant dialogue between the old and the new West, the now and the then is a persistent premise that constructs the contemporary Wyoming that many still resist to acknowledge. Let us not forget that Wyoming’s motto is “The Cowboy State” and that the state’s license plate has always included –still today– a rodeo scene of a cowboy breaking a horse and waving a hat in his hand.

5.2 Wyoming Stories: Proulx and the Short Story Form

Proulx’s bibliography exposes that her first contact with literary fiction was through the short story form. When the collection *Heart Songs and Other Stories* (1988) was published, some of its stories had already appeared in magazines individually, as Proulx occasionally needed to “find relief” (Proulx, “Author”) from the commercial how-to-do nonfiction that she was writing at the time to support herself –from *Making the Best*

Apple Cider (1980) to *The Gourmet Gardener* (1987)—, as explained in the introduction. *Heart Songs and Other Stories* handed her the contract with Scribner's to write *Postcards* and, eventually, the rest of her fiction up until now.

Heart Songs and Other Stories is a collection set in New England during the second half of the 20th century. Nine stories were published in the 1988 edition and two more were added to the 1995 version, renamed *Heart Songs* alone. The narratives were inspired by the economic situation of small dairy farms that had supported the New England region and started to decline after the Second World War, a topic that she would later expand in *Postcards*. She included stories of that first-hand experience in her native Connecticut (Rood 17), where pilgrims and improvers mix and encounter in Vermont, namely outsiders, residents and newcomers. She examines the themes of incest, rape, extraction, abuse, community, possession versus stewardship, always with the Vermont landscape playing a central role. The title story "Heart Songs" was included in the "100 Other Distinguished Short Stories of the Year 1986" list and selected for *The Best American Short Stories 1987*. It focuses on the misunderstanding of an urban outsider that comes into a rural community of outsiders in complete disjunction with the landscape and the community. Interestingly, by the end of the story, the protagonist, Snipe, fantasizes about running away from that East:

There were other things that he could do, maybe go out West, New Mexico or Arizona [...] He thought how it would be out west with the flat, sepia-tinted earth and the immense sky of a hard, lonely blue. Out there the roads stretched forever to the horizon. But there Snipe saw himself alone, driving a battered old truck through the shimmering heat, the wind booming through the open windows. The windshield was starred with a bullet hole. He wore scuffed cowboy boots, faded jeans, and a torn black shirt with a cactus embroidered on the back, and the

heel of his hand beat out of Tex-Mex rhythm on the cracked steering wheel. (Proulx, *Heart Songs* 86)

I find interesting to point out that, already in her very first fiction, Proulx's narrative direction was already aiming at the American West, as the quote exemplifies. Yet Snipe's dream is that of an outsider that idealizes the same country culture that he has damaged. It is a narrative that could well fit in any volume of Western stories.

In her move to the long narrative, she wrote *Postcards*, *The Shipping News*, and *Accordion Crimes*. Writing her first novel felt like "sinking into a warm bath" and "very very comfortable with it. The luxury!" (Proulx qtd. in Edemariam). When she returned to the short story, she admitted that the form was far more arduous than the longer fiction, as the number of revisions for each short narrative can go up to thirty per story. Besides, the number of plots and the intensity or compression of the story needs to coexist with the brevity factor. However, Edemariam believes that "it is maybe this intensity that brings many to the conclusion that the short story is really her medium," an idea that her fellow writer and friend Francisco Goldman shares: "I think she writes some of the bravest short fiction I know [...] She has made the American short story new" (Goldman qtd. in Edemariam). Actually, in an interview with *The Paris Review* in 2009, Proulx confessed that she preferred her short fiction to her novels. Proulx praises the quality of the condensed format as challenging for the writers when she says that in the conciseness of the format "lies the scope, or the possibility of allowing something to be truthful or brutal. There are some wonderful short novels, though, that manage to have a strange and excellent harshness" (Proulx qtd. in Edemariam). To that she adds that it fits the way in which she conceives her narratives in terms of time and space: "If a writer is trying to illustrate a particular period or place, a collection of short stories is a good

way to take the reader inside a house of windows, each opening onto different but related views -a kind of flip book of place, time and manners" (Proulx, *Missouri*). However, in terms of recognition or just to make a living, she admits that it is probably not the easiest form:

The short story medium is a difficult medium. Short stories are not particularly honored anywhere these days as a literary genre, they're hard to do well, they take a lot of time. To write these eleven stories took more time that it would have to have written a novel twice the number of pages, and this is the complaint of short story writers: that they're time-consuming, unrewarding monetarily, they are not widely read, etc. But then you start doing them they're extraordinarily interesting (and) demanding. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

Finally, I find it relevant to stress the fact that Proulx links the format to the way in which she looks at her close landscape, stating how the short narrative is the most adequate to address landscape intimately, to achieve connection –her own version of conjunction– as a writer. As a matter of fact, having written for so many years on Wyoming, she never shifted to the long form to write about it:

This intimacy can be extended to the shape of the short story. The short story itself is a close-range kind of writing, you don't have the distance and expansiveness of the novel, you don't have room to roll over and scratch your fleas. With the brevity and the intensity of a short story you are at close range and you're dealing with characters who must function within a very small form. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

5.2.1 Wyoming Stories 1: Close Range

Close Range comprises eleven stories, of which “Brokeback Mountain” is today globally known due to Ang Lee’s movie adaptation and its branching into all sorts of interpretations and forms of expression. However, from the collection, John Updike included “The Half-Skinned Steer” in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999) (Rood 154). One of the editions includes watercolors illustrating the stories⁴⁷, a novelty in the publisher’s policy, as it had not been done in a long time at Scribner’s: “It is the first piece of illustrated adult fiction Scribner’s has published in 60 years” (Proulx, “Author”). With it, Proulx challenges the stereotyped reading of the West already from the cover of the book. She notes how, when looking at it, someone from the East will simply notice a romanticized Western scene of a horse by a mountain river in a beautiful winter setting, whereas a Westerner will probably understand something altogether different:

An involuntary shudder [...] go down their spine because it means very big trouble. Something tragic has happened. That’s a saddled bridled horse standing and a dangerous landscape and there’s no rider. Something has happened to the rider the horse looks cold and lonely, and when you see that kind of situation in the West it means there’s a problem somewhere, yeah. So that speaks to a westerner in a much different way than it does to an easterner. (Proulx, “Author”)

In the book’s epigraph, Proulx includes a quotation of an anonymous retired Wyoming rancher that states “reality’s never been much use out here” (*Close Range* 15). The

⁴⁷ Proulx met painter Williams Mathews at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, who mentioned his interest in illustrating her stories. Proulx forwarded the idea to her publisher who, to her surprise, enthusiastically agreed to it, making *Close Range* the first book with illustrations at Scribner’s (Proulx, “Author”)

quotation is previously explained in the – again – long acknowledgments section, where she also expounds some of the origins of the stories: “The elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable, color all of these stories as they color real life. In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place” (Proulx, *Close Range* 11). Thematically, as Proulx has explained, most of them are about people leaving Wyoming after their dreams collapsed when they were trying to survive on the “dangerous and indifferent ground” (Rood 153) of the American West. The ubiquitous landscape is often evoked as “harsh” and “exquisite” as the language, and the stories are set in an “unmerciful Wyoming, evoked by Proulx’s pitch perfect ear-pitch ear for Western dialect and her affecting eye for detail” (Alpert), even though Proulx would correct Alpert by stating that it actually is a distinctive Wyoming accent, and that a Western dialect does not exist as such. Within this reality, the Wyomingites find themselves confronted with the realities of a situation, and they are actively dealing with it in terms of affects, connectedness, motion and opportunities.

The excellent reception of *Close Range* focused mainly on praising Proulx’s distinctive way of placing the Western landscape in the center of the narrative, an “unmerciful” (Alpert) Wyoming, which concedes the metaphor of “layer American brutality” (Alpert) that *Close Range* is. Millard reads it in terms of credulity, stating that the lines suggest that “the West is a place of fable and romance, an open space where the proliferation of western fictions is giving free range to continue to condition the lives of contemporary westerners” (92), while he may have missed on the idea that it is also a setting where those Western fictions might explain other Wests precisely for that same reason. Proulx was also praised for revealing “an extraordinary ability to telescope whole lives into just a few pages” (McGregor), and for her empathy with landscape

and characters, even though the initial reception of “Brokeback Mountain” was controversial. Proulx has explained in many interviews the personal response that she received from people working as ranch hands across the West, thanking her for publishing the story and how it helped them deal with their isolation issues:

I’ve had several hundred letters from men in Wyoming who work on ranches saying that’s how it is for me. I’ve lived a life of secrecy here, I’ve had drawings, I’ve had photographs, I’ve had bags of rice of the most diverse people pouring out of extraordinarily moving and heartfelt. Response to that story, people are glad that it was written, and many many many many men felt it was written for them, personally. I have had not one, not one single letter who said what a rotten story what disgusting person you are for writing it, not one. People may say otherwise, verbally but I haven’t heard it yet. And I’ve only had to conclude that there are many people in Wyoming communities leading very quiet, very careful lives. I know a number of gay men in the state who are extremely cautious. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

This is a clear and open statement on acknowledging that the “other Wests” are there, under the surface, needing to emerge, even though conservative locals were not happy about it. The story achieved relevance a year after its publishing, when the brutal murder of Mathew Shepard⁴⁸ happened in 1998.

Beth Loffreda, professor at the University of Wyoming at Laramie and a (Laramie) local, admits to the lukewarm response to Mathew Shepard’s atrocious crime on

⁴⁸ The story can be found in many online sources, as it arose –and still does– nationwide concern and was internationally covered. However, I consider relevant here to include Annie Proulx’s own account: “Matthew Shepard was a Wyoming native. A very slender small youth who was gay. He was in a bar in downtown Laramie a year and a month ago and was decoyed, apparently, out of the bar into a vehicle with two men who pretended to be gay, who took him just outside of town tied him to a buck fence –which is a wooden fence with cross members supporting it– and very savagely beat him to death. (They) left him there to die on the fence. He was not found for eighteen hours and it was very very cold, so he froze as well, he lingered for a few days at Fort Collins Colorado Hospital and then finally died. The town of Laramie was turned upside down the entire state of Wyoming felt that an enormous terrible thing had happened to them that they were being pilloried for a kind of homophobic attitude they felt that they had to show” (Proulx at John Adams 1999).

campus, as it “is another way of saying it’s a western place” (Loffreda 159). However, she does not consider it different from anywhere else, making this homophobia a global issue: “It made sense to think of the West as distinctive but not unique when it came to sex and politics” (Loffreda 159). She questions the old Western ways as they are embedded in the global world: “A group of University of Wyoming students started a page on Facebook devoted to decrying the very idea of gay cowboys; an impossibility, they claimed, since cowboys irrefutably the apotheosis of American masculinity in all of its heterosexual splendor” (Loffreda 170). “Brokeback Mountain” came to challenge all that in the face of American globality. Loffreda explains the interesting shift in local economics regarding the downtown local hangout, the Cowboy, a spot that “enshrines Laramie’s wish to cling to a mythic regional past” (Loffreda 170). In 2005, the Cowboy offered a drag queen show, where the crowd could enjoy a distinctive and open “western” night as well. Optimistically, Loffreda concludes that queering the Cowboy bar in downtown Laramie, “queered the cowboy on a national level” (170). Maybe this struggle between a nostalgic West and a fresh, reinvigorated “queer remaking of it” (170), as Loffreda puts it, is finally going to “grow as spacious as it should be” (171).

The widely positive critical reception then clashed with a part of the Wyoming readers, who would not agree that this “impure” array of personalities –not only in “Brokeback Mountain”– populated their idealized state: “People from a place do not like to hear unpleasant descriptions or descriptions of people with bad problems,” she told an interviewer in 2005. And she follows in the same interview: “I think I first mentioned meth addictions in a story years ago, one of the first stories about Wyoming I ever wrote. People were very angry. Of course, now it’s common news in the paper, but people couldn’t admit it. People here don’t take drugs. We’re pure. We’re perfect” (Proulx,

“More”). However, reviewers found the collection “powerful and expressive” (Lehmann-Haupt); “gripping, showing her talented sights on a fresh subject” (Grinnell); or “her masterful stories with an earthy wit and aching, redeeming compassion” (Tobias). Some scholars acknowledged her influence on changing the perspective on the short story form, although the reception was mixed, as Asquith reminds that a few of them considered that her West “was written out” (*Lost Frontier* 19). Milner summarizes the mixed feelings that a few critics had: “*Close Range* conveys some hard truths, fine yarns and musical language, but how much of the book has to do with Wyoming?” (Milner). The question answers itself with a deeper reading in terms of examining Proulx’s underlying or suggested West that lies down under the surface, even though it is all about landscape, as Proulx would affirm.

It is interesting to note that even though in the publisher’s information page there is the standard disclaimer that reads “any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental” (Proulx, *Close Range* 7), the stories are set in natural places that actually exist. The Tetons Range, the Shoshone Indian Reservation, Yellowstone National Park, or towns like Sliding, Ten Sleep or Tie Sliding, coexist with fictional towns and characters, both past and present. Kenneth Millard argues that these real places add honesty, integrity and trustworthiness in valorizing the West, yet we must not forget that this same Wyoming is equally filled with trailer parks, junkyards, oil and gas rigs, dirt roads, dude farms, big ranching corporations and small communities enduring the hardships of the present while keeping an eye on their past (Millard 92).

5.2.2 Wyoming Stories 2: Bad Dirt

Bad Dirt was published in 2004, two years after the release of *That Old Ace in the Hole*, when Proulx continued alternating the writing of short and long narrative. Focusing again on Wyoming, after her literary incursion in the Texas panhandle, she was now a resident and in the process of building Bird Cloud. The collection, “a companion piece” (Potter qtd. in Edemariam) to *Close Range* consists of eleven stories, again, all set in Wyoming, five of which are set in the fictional Wyoming town of Elk Tooth. “The Wamsutter Wolf” appeared in *The Paris Review* (Fall 2004) a few months before the collection was published, and was awarded the Agha Khan Prize for Fiction.

If, according to her British publisher Christopher Potter, *Close Range* is about people “damaged and leaving Wyoming,” *Bad Dirt* is about people moving to Wyoming (Edemariam). It seems like the characters’ dynamics replicate Proulx’s establishing herself in Wyoming –at the time⁴⁹– for good. The “bad dirt” of the title refers to the back roads and dusty trails that make up the seemingly invisible network of connections and encounters that might not be visible at first when getting into a region. Bad dirt is also the soil of which the state is made, in the name of the ranchers the soil on which they live, the earth they struggle to keep alive. Bad dirt is also where run-down trailer parks stand, and the useless material in which abandoned buildings and exhausted machinery lie. Here again, Proulx demythologizes the American West in “sharp-as-shattered-glass” (Braille) stories.

⁴⁹ At the time of publishing *Bad Dirt*, 2004, Annie Proulx had just started the process of building Bird Cloud, her –referred to often– dream home in Wyoming, not far from her previous house in Centennial, 20 miles southeast of Laramie. When *Bad Dirt* was published Proulx was still considering to become a permanent resident of the state. Eventually she invested a lot of money in her new home. The rough winters, and the not being able to leave her property in the harsh winter weather, made her sell the house and move out, destination Washington state. Her personal experience with Bird Cloud resonates as a tale of inability to adjust to the landscape that she so much praised and admired, and aimed to protect, preserve and raise awareness about. In her narratives, she stresses on the fact that isolation is not the easiest way to deal with the unforgiving landscape.

Even though the epigraph to the collection sets a dark and somber tone –a warning– for what is to come, the truth is that the stories do not lack humor, irony, and, in some cases, hope. The book opens with a quotation selected by Annie Proulx which is taken from a 1958 confession by serial killer Charlie Starkweather, who murdered eleven people on a 1957 spree through several Western states, including Wyoming. His story inspired Terrence Malick’s 1973 acclaimed movie *Badlands*⁵⁰. The quotation reads as follows: “They say this is a wonderful world to live in, but I don’t believe I ever did really live in a wonderful world” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* xi). The proleptic sentence anticipates a reading of the region that diverges from romanticized ideas or nostalgic notions. The brief quotation predicts a confrontation with an alternative concept of region – Wyoming–, one that will disrupt conventional assumptions or expectations of happy endings.

The reception of this collection was in most cases based on a comparison with *Close Range*. That is why, I believe, the reviews were not as positive as before. Critics that had highly praised the first collection, considered this second collection of stories darker, “macabre flights of fancy” even though they “hold together beautifully” (Upchurch); and others considered this Wyoming “a harsh and silly place” (Rafferty), missing the point that she was writing about exactly the same dynamic West as in *Close Range*, with its motion and permanent change. It looked like critics and journalists expected lighter and more digestible tales from the West, and did not fully get Proulx’s call of attention on a landscape that has been abused from the day the first pioneers set

⁷ The movie, in turn, inspired Bruce Springsteen to write the album *Nebraska* (Columbia Records, 1982), whose central theme is a fictionalized account of Starkweather’s crimes across Wyoming. The title song “Nebraska” is a fictionalized account of Starkweather’s spree across Wyoming. The last two lines are closely aligned with Proulx’s choice of quotation. Springsteen writes: “They wanted to know why I did what I did, Sir / I guess there is meanness in this world” (Springsteen “Nebraska”). The lyric suggests an unromanticized and excluding West, aligning with the concepts to be explored in the analysis.

foot on it, and that when *Bad Dirt* came out, she had taken a “close range” look at the region from being a resident. Even when some reviewers immediately locate the improvers in the stories, they at times fail to figure out the pilgrims, their attitude to landscape, and the communal affects leading to conjunction within the communities. Wyoming “would be a paradise if it weren’t for the people who lived here” (Hoover) is an interesting statement from someone who adds that “the harsh weather the endless miles of emptiness, [...] the shabby settlements of trailers, junked trucks and smoke bars seem to steal the joy from the beautiful landscape” (Hoover), missing completely the point that *they are* the joy, *and* the landscape. Reviews such as calling the collection “a parade of the American bizarre” where the stories “read like whacked-out tone poems” (Maury) are common, as it seems like the tone does not make it “a happy book.” Jenny Shank warns her fellow Wyomingites about Proulx’s “eccentric West” –a repeated adjective– that is “more colorful than the one you and I inhabit.” These are just some examples of how Proulx’s characterization blurs at times deeper analyses, and why some of them merely stay on the surface, instead of examining the reasons for such impressions. This might be the reason why she hilariously warns us against critics: “They’re not good readers. They’re not widely read. They’re badly educated. Book critics, you can have them” (Proulx, *Vice*).

Other critics venture in examining the different West that Proulx depicts –a West in constant motion, change, looking in all directions –, which challenges its widespread pastoral concept. Markovits indirectly refers to pilgrims and improvers when he mentions that “their use of the land is loaded with mixed intentions” where coping with nature is not “a move towards simplicity.” He acknowledges the shifts and flows in all directions, encounters and possibilities of Wyoming’s West: “Her characters run away to

it, run from it, or get stuck in it (where) the frontier has been layered over with tourist kitsch and industrial sears” (Markovits). This “incomprehensible and inconsequential” West is located in the “in-between” and “overlapping” spaces that Campbell refers to (*Affective* 39), the distance between the imagined one and the real one, the space between the expectations and the outcome, where the flows and encounters take place, opportunities lost and found, with space for the supernatural, like many stories display. Bedell also reads the dynamic and multi-layered West, describing Proulx’s Wyoming as a “place where everything is unraveling: the economy, family, old ways. New people -the rich who buy up ranches and the poor who come for the methane gas work and live in trailers- move in and make more or less laughable attempts to understand the place.” Braile summarizes it: “Proulx works this cultural divide between the West as perceived and the West as lived.” All in all, despite the mixed reception and ongoing comparisons with *Close Range*, many critics and scholars increasingly seem to understand that Proulx represents a distinct and unprecedented perspective of the West, a fresh and unique interpretation that had not been depicted like this so far.

5.2.3 Wyoming Stories 3: *Fine Just the Way it Is*

The third volume of the Wyoming trilogy was published in 2008 and, as the title suggests, seems to reply critical accusations of the dark Wyoming of *Bad Dirt*, by saying that there is no much to do about it “other than suffer and endure” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 19). According to Proulx, the title includes many overtones: “well, that’s said with a sardonic note. Obviously, things are not fine just the way they are,” she admits referring to the

title, “but that’s the gloss that everyone in rural life puts on things. They say they wouldn’t exchange it for anything, they wouldn’t live anywhere else, they wouldn’t want their lives to be different. It’s fine just the way it is” (Proulx, *Vice*). This volume closes the trilogy, and it is probably the last fiction that Proulx will ever write on Wyoming, as she has admitted several times. It is also likely that this last volume was a way of articulating a farewell as a resident too: “I moved to Wyoming for the long sightlines and the walkability,” she says, making coffee in a kitchen of steel surfaces and brightly colored cabinets with antler handles. “But I’ve had enough” (Proulx qtd. in Salter Reynolds). She made a similar statement when answering about *Bird Cloud*: “Oh, of course. I’m pretty much finished with writing about Wyoming. I’m trying to finish up the last thing right now, which is something of a memoir about my house there with the drifted-in road. And then I’ll go back to fiction and it will not be about Wyoming” (Proulx, *Vice*).

Even though as the three collections can be considered, as I stated above, as a sole opus, reviewers rarely assess it as such, for obvious publishing reasons. Delia Falconer described the stories as a “patchy collection, much less satisfying than *Close Range*.” The stories set in Hell have also been criticized as “—while being witty and well-written—ill-fitted to a book of Wyoming stories,” “a grim and satirical perspective on the human condition, portraying life as a Mortality Machine of wildly imaginative proportions.” (*PopMatters*). Yet critics such as Michael McGregor acknowledged the “insider” role of Proulx when writing the stories, considering the previous *Bad Dirt* a “transitional work” to *Fine Just the Way It Is*, and calling Proulx “a knowledgeable insider” (McGregor). On the whole, the critical reception of the third volume of short stories on Wyoming was generally positive, denoting a sense of acceptance to Proulx’s sense of Wyoming and the West.

5.3 Wyoming as an Affective Critical Space

The two previous analyses, on *Postcards* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*, have focused mainly on establishing a difference between the two narratives that depart from the same premise in different directions, studied in terms of humans' relationship with the landscape. The concepts of pilgrims in conjunction and improvers in disjunction from Slovic and Barry Lopez together have been widely discussed and analyzed within the context of those two novels. I have established the two attitudes that Proulx's characters take on the land, those of conjunction and disjunction. Together with it, Proulx displays a genre-stretching concept of post-Westness, an understanding of the regions that transcends any symbolic or artificial representation of the American West. Proulx's political stance depicts a region as a dynamic space of constant change, where the perpetual mark of humans is layered over and over, often by extracting improvers that ravage, take and go, understood as a process across history and never as a fix space. I have argued that hers is a post-West if we understand the term as precisely that dynamic interpretation. For Comer, it is a West that purposefully challenges every single notion of pastoralism, or traditional Turnerian views, and "that encourages us to assume less and to question more" (Comer, *Landscapes* 13), an idea that Neil Campbell fully develops in *Affective Critical Regionality* (2016). From now on, I am not using the term "post-West," even though I associate its broader meaning to the West that Proulx attempts to represent, as developed in the theoretical framework section. The term is a theoretically charged notion that would require a lengthy discussion, irrelevant in the context of this analysis. Instead, from now on I will refer to it as "new" or "contemporary" West.

Within this framework, and specifically for this section of my analysis, I suggest a reading of the West in *Wyoming Stories* through Campbell's concept of "affective critical regionality" (*Affective 4*), a theoretical new approach to the studies of region that, I argue, suits the reading of the West that Proulx exposes in these narratives. Structurally, the analysis that I carry out in this section does not follow a linear approach, following each of the three volumes, but rather it is an examination that is consistent with my theoretical approach.

To clarify my steps, I need to go back to the concept of "affective critical regionality" (Campbell, *Affective 4*) that Campbell proposes as a tool for reading a region. Annie Proulx has insisted many times – as it is quoted in this dissertation – that she writes about a specific place in a specific time, and that the region that she writes about is in the middle of a process of becoming, changing or being. One cannot forget that her Annales School training during her college years and her method of research (a technique that she permanently invokes) are aimed at investigating a time frame in that process, the *longue durée* of events, as stated in the introduction. Being the landscape the point of departure of all her narratives, I find Campbell's reading of region as affective critical regionality an accurate and suitable tool for my analysis.

As seen in the critical framework section, affective critical regionality explains region as a movement or process that explores how that region comes and becomes alive. Campbell explains the shift from the concept of "regionalism" to that of regionality, where the suffix (-ity), which implies "being and becoming" substitutes the fixed and static "-ism." The notion of "affective critical regionality" works as a "pass-word" rather than a "fix-word", based on the idea that a region is a process of "something which happens" (Deleuze qtd. in Campbell, *Affective 37*). This active concept of place, I argue,

matches Proulx's idea of region in all her narratives. Campbell's point of departure is Deleuze's concept of "state of continuous variation" (*Affective 3*) to conceive a region. He proposes a "new cartography" to explore the multiple intersecting points and lines, going in all directions -with interferences, influences, experiences and affects (Campbell, *Affective 2*). It goes against the concept of a straight line to define a place, a concept that regionalism has traditionally used to describe regions such as the American West. Campbell had already suggested the challenging idea of reading the West as a dynamic process in *The Rhizomatic West* (2008), a theoretical volume precursor of the definitive *Affective Critical Regionality* that he published later. Campbell's concept "challenges and *detritorializes* these perceptions of a narrow, "rigid regionalism" (*Affective 4*). The concept, he clarifies, "resists understanding region as straight lines, neat borders, simple rootedness, or fixed points" (Campbell, *Affective 2*). It defies understanding the monolithic American West as a static idea, rooted and unmovable. He conceives the West as a "state of continuous variation" (Campbell, *Affective 3*) that takes into account "flows across borders," meaning an interaction between the local and the global, thus implying a mobility and porosity of spaces that is hard to refute today. This perspective considers the interconnectedness and fluidity of spaces, which result in a reading of the American West as a territory without borders, and a political "way of diagnosing" the region incorporating factors such as mobility, economy, race, gender, and many more.

This political take on the concept of regionalism (regionality) "might be seen as dynamic, critical and potentially questioning the accepted norms and practices, especially those that emerge from presupposed, universal, or global structures and systems" (Campbell, *Affective 36*), as the traditional idea of the American West. Regionality, Campbell argues, reads regions as "always a mix of the abstract *and* concrete

through their relationality and plurality” (*Affective* 38). Quoting Massey, Campbell states that “*regionality* captures this dynamic contingency as a potential ‘multiplicity of trajectories’ working across space, ‘woven together’ as concepts that are themselves ‘a heterogeneity of practices and processes” (*Affective* 39). He sums it up with the notion that affective critical regionality responds to this call, “gathering up regionalities not to reduce their differences and singularities but to appreciate them as forces within a dynamic set or intersecting relations with the world” (Campbell, *Affective* 40). By opening up this sense of region –Campbell borrows the term “global sense of place” (*Affective* 40)– we expand our understanding of it. He explains how in “regions, contrary to (a) cultural deficit [...] cannot be easily ‘represented’ as they are a complex and shifting presence of forces, rhythms and relations that come together and disburse” (Campbell, *Affective* 42).

The term “affective” refers to the affective relations that have to do with regional agency, both inward and outward, namely the performative activities and practices that make these places. Campbell considers agency as crucial in the formulation of a region through, among other things, the history of places (as Proulx vehemently defends), a layering that occurs across time, devoid of sentimentality. These performative critical affects are connected to a critical self-consciousness. He refers to these affects as “fields of potentiality” (Campbell, *Affective* 198), a term borrowed from Guattari, found in regions made up of “forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost and found” (Campbell, *Affective* 198). The quotation stresses on the affective aspect of region by stepping over any boundaries, where the local, Campbell claims, relates to the global without “falling into the normative binaries” (Campbell, *Affective* 199) that regionalism supports, such as the inward looking

out concept of the traditional reading of the American West. This relationship to the “near and far” is understood as the possibility of having “an identity embedded in the local circumstance and a role in the global dialogue” (Rebecca Solnit qtd in Campbell, *Affective* 199), where the borders of region are open, “porous, always connecting, [...] complex entwined lines rather than a sealed container” (Campbell, *Affective* 201). Two relevant ideas are associated to this notion and, for my purposes, to Proulx’s reading of the West. First, Campbell quotes Matless about the always incomplete movements within regions, that is why “regional identity cannot help but be provisional; provision denoting not only tentativeness but sustenance” (Campbell, *Affective* 208). The other idea, using O’Sullivan, connected to this notion of sustenance is about human interaction: “each of us interact with each other. And the world in a specifically *different* manner [...] to become an active participant in changing our lives as they are at the moment, not to wait for an event that might force us to change” (Campbell, *Affective* 208). This approach confronts the deterministic approach on which many critics and reviewers lean when examining Proulx’s characters against the landscape, missing on the agency and the experience of being participants in the construction of the region, as well as on that same provisional regional identity that she provides with most characters in the stories.

This stance is obviously a political one: it shifts beyond established parameters of region, not aligning with the established order, a suitable reading of Proulx’s West. This reading “signals a move from *representing* place as something already there like a static, bounded and reductionist text, and towards *experiencing* it variability and uncertainty as something *in process* and, therefore, fully dynamic and alive” (Campbell *Affective* 30). I argue that this is the idea of West that Proulx displays in her fiction. Concepts of

nostalgia, sentimentality, sameness or borders do not belong in such a perception. Let us remember Proulx's term "fences of the mind," the idea of self-imposing cultural borders based on historical assumptions of region and identity. This is a recurring theme in quite a few characters that are stuck in this idea of the old West, ranchers, self-called cowboys, that are stuck between that in-between space that separates myth and reality.

Thus, in this section, I analyze Proulx's short narratives on Wyoming taking Campbell's theory as a point of departure and developing the idea that she conceives the West as an active concept of place. To analyze the stories under the lens of affective critical regionality, I am following Campbell's procedures supporting his theoretical framework. This is, Campbell proposes three main practices to carry out this reading of region, which are the three items that I am borrowing and following to examine Proulx's West in *Wyoming Stories*.

The first practice is what Campbell describes as "a redistribution of the sensible" (Campbell *Affective* 4), which understands region as a state of continuous variation. This basic concept challenges what "the sensible" in regions has meant so far: the discursive assumptions on region, its cultural stereotypes, a rhetoric of region based on traditional and patriarchal notions of place, and an inward looking at region, self-referential, static, reluctant to change. A redistribution of the sensible proposes a political and dynamic reading of region, frontally dismissing those old discursive notions and basing it on motion and change, something that Proulx reflects in many of her stories. That state of continuous variation is based on connectedness, dynamic relations, sensations, movements, forces and practices, stretching the concept of the West into a post-West. Proulx's West is, as seen, by definition a region that blatantly defies the old static romantic concept of the West in every story in the collection, as my analysis shows later,

and Wyoming is just a specimen under a magnifying lens. Her stories and characters reflect the tension between the old and the new use of the sensible, a distance between a process of change and the willingness to stick to an inward-looking concept of the West. In her narratives Proulx establishes distances between characters that hold on to the old ideal of the West and are unable to accept or comprehend the active component of the region, confronted to characters that represent the real contemporary West. Ranchers, male stereotypes attached to old Western myths, or improvers with a pioneer mindset that drain the West of its resources, they all fail to grasp the dynamic relations of the place, hence their failure.

The second practice is what Campbell calls “the radical potential of the minor” (*Affective 4*), referring to

the local, small-scale, and fugitive to erupt into and disrupt regionalism’s smooth-running, established ‘languages’; and a hopeful, human relatedness emerging from a recognition and appreciation of difference, connection, and responsibility through contingency, precarity and vulnerability—of seeing one’s self in others, asserting the potential of a ‘people to come’, and interrupting “the self-conscious account of ourselves (Campbell, *Affective 4*).

As stated, Proulx’s Wyoming is filled with small communities in the middle of or after economic downfall, with their inhabitants struggling to overcome those difficulties in an unforgiving landscape by trying to preserve local identity without being isolated. The narratives show how they do so across the active process of “regioning,” or ongoing product of interconnections that Campbell describes (*Affective 5*).

Within this concept of region-as-process or state of continuous variation, the local and small scale evidently disrupts established languages of what the West is. The

“marginal or the fugitive” (Campbell, *Affective* 8) –subcultural– is engaged with the major and the global, renewing the sense of what the local or regional means. The practice does not dismiss local color or traditional practices as part of the same process. The local is a bounded fragment, a part of a larger process that disrupts established languages. The local in Proulx’s stories is often depicted as –to use Campbell’s terms above– the “marginal and the fugitive” where this “appreciation of difference takes place precisely as “precarity and vulnerability” (Campbell, *Affective* 8), as the short stories on Wyoming portray, but without any sentimentality. The minor and local, widely mentioned, unsentimental, introverted, and often “overlooked” (Campbell, *Affective* 8) carry along –using Ace Crouch– “gentle politics” (Campbell, *Affective* 19). The stereotyped local of the American West, not only inward-looking but excluding and fix, presumes a closed sense of region, without paying attention to the wider global processes of region,

by asserting its differences, and by implication achieved this through its interest in local details, tactility, and unheard stories. The phrase Frampton uses to describe this intervention is ‘the bounded fragment’ of critical regionalism (Frampton 1983a: 162), which suggests something bounded by its sense of place and identity and yet, simultaneously, a ‘fragment’ because it is a component of a larger process, capable of adding to, joining, and becoming as well as unsettling in relation to existing, assumed forms. The ‘bounded fragment’ is awkward and irreducible because it might remain or break out, being connected to other elements, things, and affects and yet still capable of forging new connections and relations.” (Campbell, *Affective* 19)

The third practice that supports a reading in term of affective critical regionality is based on “human relatedness” and an “appreciation of difference” (Campbell, *Affective* 4). This practice refers to the affect (hope) of seeing oneself in others, the practice of a set of

relations that lead to a “an active agitating presence, [...] a *becoming*” (Campbell, *Affective* 4). A place that, he argues, rather than representational is about the being there. To know it one must participate in its creation, go through a threshold, by means of connections, encounters, radiations, lives, relates, becoming. This appreciation of difference refers to a connection and responsibility, the diversity of local place. Ultimately, Campbell argues, people perform agency in the creation of a region, “showing the different ways in which they act in, use and relate to the region” (*Affective* 35). Proulx’s *Wyoming Stories* formulate such relations, exposing new affective practices in the West. This new feel or sense of the local and regional, in constant shift, is defined by a myriad of multiple relations that, again, disrupt any preconceived abstraction on what the West is, as my analysis shows.

In this section then, I draw on examples from *Wyoming Stories 1, 2, and 3* following a different order than the chronological one in the trilogy, as stated above. For my purposes, I deal with examples from stories illustrating the three practices that support a reading of the West through Campbell’s affective critical regionality as a theoretical framework.

In *Wyoming Stories*, Proulx constantly confronts the old idea of the static mythic West with what the region is going through. Through her characters, stories and specific events, she displays a set of dynamic forces that are permanently confronted with –and challenged by– such assumptions. Ultimately, this “West in motion” is the history of a landscape that has permanently been used and abused by improvers that are now global, as the previous two analyses show. Rather than just on improvers and pilgrims, this last part of the analysis is focused on the people and the forces that move the West forward, the implications of misreading the land and, last, the tensions between the way in which

the characters approach that West. These characters are aligned on either side of the concept of region, between the romanticized patriarchal West, that some imagine it to be, and the dynamic space of those who live and struggle in it. Eventually, they are all confronted with an exhausted landscape that, as one of the stories reflects, is symbolically trying to get rid of human agency for good and slowly go back to its original state: “the country wanted to go to sand dunes and rattlesnakes, wanted to scrape off its human ticks” (Proulx, *Close Range* 68).

5.3.1 Redistribution of the Sensible: A Cowboy Kitchen for Urban Bachelors

The stories in this section deal mostly with the distance between old stereotypes and new representations of the West, thus, challenging the Western rhetoric of region with the notion of the redistribution of the sensible. It refers to the repositioning or replacing of old Turnerian concepts and visions with a West that has to do with an in-motion region of economic shifts, struggle and failure. The ideas, values, and fix concepts on the West, are confronted by characters and situations that show a region in a process of permanent variation, where some of the characters, still clinging to those old ideas, fail to understand the reality of the region, while others reflect this moving-forward process. Wyoming, as a symbol of the American West of cowboys, surfaces as a region full of insecurities, economic hardship, gender shifts and connectedness to the outside, despite the opposition of a few. Proulx warns the reader about the uselessness of holding on to an “inward-looking” (Campbell, *Affective* 8) concept of place as she makes a political reading of it, based on improvers and newcomers misreading the land, most of the time.

Asquith points out that her “characters are continually crushed by a landscape that prevents them from becoming architects of their own destiny. There are no heroes, only survivors” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 39). This motionless quality of the characters defines most narratives. The romanticized idea of the ranch, coming from the homestead approach to the West is amply dealt with in the analysis, where modern-day ranchers that inherited the family property are at odds with both the harsh and un-tamable landscape and global economics in which the West is immersed.

In “The Great Divide” (in *Fine Just the Way It is*) Proulx explores the symbolic division between an illusory and imagined West around the 1815 Great Divide Homestead Act, by which a number of immigrants –mostly young couples– came by train out West to start a new life in an unknown landscape. Hi and Helen Alcorn have succumbed to the selling tricks of Antip Bewley, a ruthless first-generation of improvers who is selling plots (and the West) for a so-called colony “The Great Divide” (Proulx, *Fine* 93), offering them “a dream pre-packaged by unscrupulous speculators” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 76). Hi is nine years older than Helen, and he has suffered from mustard gas and a wound in his leg, what has left him with a limp.

Proulx sets the lens on this historical period of Western settlers with no attachment to the land other than a romanticized vision of it, and a motivation to tame and possess. It is a moment when the West was already “driven” through, as the car industry was booming and, as a consequence, it was the new vehicle in the West. This symbolic substitution of the old horse by the faster, always-ready, iron horse/automobile, suggests a West in motion entering into modern times that many were not able to catch up with. Proulx recounts the figures regarding those car pioneers:

“By 1927, 26 million cars stank and jarred around the country, each driver a pioneer” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 17).

Hi Alcorn is unable to adapt to this changing West, and his endeavors lead him first to economic failure –ranching to bootlegging– and then prison. He symbolically ends up working in a mine, an improper activity, under the surface of the West that he idealized so much: “The coal mines were hard for a man who’d once owned his place and worked all his life outdoors [...] The man loved the wild country and it was a bond. Now, to go down in the metal cage with men in stinking garments and change for weeks or months, to work bent over in a cramped space in them light was misery” (Proulx, *Fine* 114).

The story clearly expounds the “great divide” between the imagined, unreal West in Hi’s mind, packed with wild horses, fences and happy pioneering homesteads, and the new West in motion, at a speed that he is unable to catch up with. Out of prison, he decides to join forces with his brother-in-law, Fenk, an expression of the cooperative work that Proulx repeatedly praises in her fiction. However, Hi is disappointed to see that the West has become fragmented after two years underground: “he could see changes had come in two years he’d been digging coal. There were fences where no fences had ever been, and the old White Moon trail had become a county road, complete with culverts and ditches” (Proulx, *Fine* 117). The West had been fenced and barb wired, a close rage, reminding the time of the end of the open range that Proulx referred to in the introduction. The job is capturing wild horses, reenacting old open range of the old cowboy West, an endeavor that he gives up when he realizes that the horses are sold for pet food. Ironically, Hi is killed by one of these fence posts while he is pursuing a wild

horse with his lasso, while mounting Senator Warren⁵¹, suggesting that he has been defeated by a changing Western landscape that has no place anymore for open range cowboys happily riding on the prairie.

The story ends when Fenk goes to tell Helen about Hi's accident: "Her mind snarled like a box of discarded fiddle strings. Civilization fell away and the primordial communication of tensed muscle, ragged breath, the heaving gullet and bent fingers spoke where language failed. She knew only what Fenk had not yet said and didn't need to say. And shut the door in his face" (Proulx, *Fine* 120). The "great divide" symbolically plays out as the division between expectation and achievement, between the old idealized image that Alcorn bought and visualized, and the harsh reality that the land which they have bought is. The redistribution of the Old West ideals is depicted as a failure of the dream in front of the major forces that push the shift on the West, a great divide between the old myth and the harsh reality of the land.

At the beginning of "Them Old Cowboy Songs" (*Fine Just the Way It Is*), as a preface, Proulx inserts a few lines to remind the reader of the pioneers who did not take part in the building of the myth of the West, the majority, as they were excluded from the narrative, due to the fact that they did not succeed in their endeavor, they either perished or left the West: "There is a belief that pioneers came into the country, homestead, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded ranch dynasties. But many more had short runs and were quickly forgotten" (Proulx, *Fine* 47). Proulx addresses "the sensible" here by preceding the story with a direct reference to the pioneer's conquest of the West and the many failures that went mostly unmentioned, historically.

⁵¹ The name of Hi's horse, Senator Warren, is full of symbolism. Senator Francis E. Warren was a famous and respected Wyoming politician who was charged with corruption in 1905. His political decisions were akin to developing companies in the West as well as the Gould and Dillon Pacific Railroad.
Source: https://sites.rootsweb.com/~wytthp/history/bartlett3/francis_emroy_warren.htm

The story tells the struggles of one of these forgotten young couples, Rose and Archie, to establish themselves in an idyllic Wyoming landscape in the 1880s. They will try to survive at a modest homestead in the harsh unproductive environment. They have both run away from troubled family backgrounds, and their idealized Western landscape soon becomes a troubled battle for survival. It is the peak of the expansion to the West, when the ethnic cleansing had taken place on the plains and the settlements were carried out at a very fast pace, and developers were selling the “pre-packed Western dream” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 69). Archie and Rose are part of this group that were taken by train to settle in areas next to the railroad. They represent two disjunctive versions of the old homestead dream as none of them is fit for the task: he yearns for the cowboy life that he sings in his songs, his only talent, but he is trapped by the homestead duties that the property demands. He longs for the open range, as his songs tell. Rose is interested in her appearances in the community and she is unable to perform any work to keep the place going.

They soon learn about the difficulty of the enterprise: “The first summer they lived in a tent while Archie works on a small cabin. It took him a month of rounding up stray cows for Bunk Peck before he could afford two glass windows” (Proulx, *Fine* 47). The quest for the West has been done in terms of dominion and ownership as their settlement is a direct reference to the Turnerian discourse of possessing and taming the land, but with lack of attention (pilgrims) to the landscape.

The homestead contrasts with the “old cowboy songs” that Archie sings on life on the open range, prior to homesteaders, with lyrics that praise motion: traveling, moving, leaving, in contrast with the attention to the soil and the project of ownership that he is supposed to put up with. He transforms his farming responsibilities into songs and Rose

is “overwhelmed by the dictates of good housekeeping as by the hostile environment” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 20). She is not interested in the pioneer dream but in keeping the social appearances in the community: “She did not want to become like a homestead woman, skunky armpits with greasy hair yanked into a bun [...] her personal wash and the dishes and floor took four daily buckets of water lugged up from the little Weed, each trip disturbing the ducks who favored the nearby setback for their business meetings” (Proulx, *Fine* 53).

Archie is a victim of the system by succumbing to the dream of owning a piece of the West on which he does not wish to work. He has bought a piece of land –instead of getting it from the government– that turns to be arid, what has terrible consequences for the couple. Proulx also challenges here the myth of the female pioneers (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 69) with the portrait of Rose. She does not fit either in that arid West, as she is more interested in appearances than in Archie’s pioneer ideal. When her pregnancy is filled with complications, in the middle of a rough winter, she has no means of getting help. In the end, Rose loses the baby that she has to later bury by herself with “a silver spoon” (Proulx, *Fine* 65-66), that she got from her mother at her wedding, a symbol of the eastern family origins. Right after, Rose dies alone in agony due to childbirth complications, in the cabin. Tom Ackler, the man who finds her some months later, with parts of her body missing, is unable to figure out the tragedy that she has gone through and simply assumes that she has been “raped and mutilated by Utes, sometime in the winter, god knew when” (Proulx, *Fine* 75).

The story exposes that Archie and Rose are not in tune with themselves, as none of them embodies the supposed pioneer values so, as a consequence, they are not attuned with the dynamics of that Western landscape either. In “Them Old Cowboy

Songs,” Proulx demolishes the old pioneer dream: those who failed to read it as a dynamic process of relations and, instead, struggled on their own while in the hands of –already then– abusive corporations, like the land and railroad investors. At the same time, she challenges the idea of the successful conquest of the West, by questioning the real protagonists of that quest, and by exposing the irreversible damage on the landscape. On a contemporary note, the story again reflects the disjunction with the landscape by outsiders that view the idyllic side of the Western landscape, oblivious to the need to paying attention.

“Men Crawling out of Trees” (published in *Bad Dirt*) is a satire of Western pioneers through a New York City couple, Mitchell and Eugenie Fair, who attempt to retire in Wyoming and “their difficulties on being a newcomer” (Upchurch). They come full of cultural stereotypes that might help them renew their nearly broken relationship, yet they are “superficially sophisticated [...] but, also, unavoidably ignorant” (Bedell). They appear as modern-day pioneers who, once in Wyoming, rapidly assimilate those cultural stereotypes:

Before they looked for a house they outfitted themselves at a Western Wear store. Eugenie buying two fringed suede skirts, some high-necked Cattle Kate blouses, and a pair of Rocket-buster boots featuring turquoise skeletons. Mitchell got into jeans, a western-cut shirt with pearl buttons [...] He stumbled a lot, unable to get used to high heels, especially as he’d just got his first pair of bifocals. He bought a twenty-year old pickup with four-wheel drive, dark green and dented, something he had always wanted [...] He marveled at the truck’s lack of rust. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 107)

None of them understands the dynamics of the place, misreading all the signs, even though Mitchell displays an interest. Proulx labels these newcomer type “urban

bumpkins” (Proulx, “Urban”), who are “ignorants of weather, the cycles of season and climate (and) cannot tell an elm from an oak” (Proulx, “Urban”). They had traveled in an *Infinity* car, a symbolic name that matches what Mitchell imagines when he sees the West up close for the first time, an alien vision of the region:

They made a trip around to scout around, Mitchell was stunned by the beauty of the place, not the overphotographed jags of the Grand Tetons but the high prairie and luminous yellow distance, which pleased his sense of spatial arrangement. He felt as he had stumbled into a landscape never before seen on the earth and at the same time he had been transported to the *ur*-landscape before human beginnings [...] The unfamiliar grasses vibrated with light, their incandescent stalks lighting the huge ground [...] His heart squeezed in, and he wished for a celestial eraser to remove the fences, the crude houses, the one he bought included, from this place. Even the sinewy, braided currents of the wind, which made Eugenie irritable, pleased him. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 106-107)

The obvious reference to “ur-landscape” reinforces the idea that Mitchell sees the landscape as a work of art, a static painting, from which he is detached. He wishes to remove anything man-made –fences, houses– fantasizing about seeing the land in its original state, both ignoring and misunderstanding the ongoing process of the West under human agency across time. Their plans are to “westernize” their new home and have “a terrific view of the mountains” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 109), a project that replicates the static stance of their view of the West, which is reduced to a version of a television screen: “‘My God,’ said Mitchell sotto voce to Eugenie, ‘all of this to *look at*’ –he gestured at the tawny landscape, the distant mountains– ‘and he says ‘home theater?’” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 109). However, he rationalizes and reorganizes what he sees in his mind, as “his architectural training means that he is attuned to the contemplation of the basic structure of the landscape rather than its functioning as a lived space” (Asquith, *Lost*

Frontier 81). This is one of the central ideas in Campbell's reading of region as affective critical regionality as, he states, participating in "the ongoing creation of that place" is the way to know it (Campbell, *Affective* 17). The couple misses this practice, the dynamics of the place, with their voyeuristic stance. Their closest neighbors, who are trying to establish relations despite their conservative views, are dismissed by Eugenie, who considers them rough Western stereotypes, ironically, like the ones that have drawn the couple to Wyoming: "Wyoming had seemed civilized when they first moved out, but gradually evidence appeared that forced them to recognize that they were in a place people in the east would regard as peripheral to the real world" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 110). The quote challenges the established languages or assumptions of an idyllic West, and pays attention to the local and marginal that defines the region. The conservative, right-wing yet friendly and welcoming neighbors, representing the community, who stand for some of those values and stereotypes, work as contrasting characters showing them a West of relations and encounters that they fail to grasp. The "man crawling out of trees" of the title refers to an incident that reflects the –at times selfish– urban lack of understanding not only of the West but of the basic principle of communal help. When a skier gets trapped in the woods around their house and then falls, he approaches the house crawling due to a broken leg. Eugenie takes him for a prowler about to break into their house and fails to assist him. Out of place in a misread environment, she breaks "the cardinal rule of the country –that you give aid and help to a stranger, even your bitterest enemy when he is down" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 122).

Through contemplation and ownership, the couple holds on to an aesthetic ideal of the West, and their already damaged relationship fractures expectedly under the lack of conjunction with a new and challenging environment. The duplicity of failure, with

each other and with the place, shows their inability to live in a space that they only try to grasp through screens: the living room window, the car windshield, or Eugenie's view from the plane window on her way back home in the East:

On the plane she looked down on the last of Wyoming, the black mountain ranges capped and splotched with snow, roads like crumpled lengths of yarn from unraveled knitting [...] Was this what Mitchell saw when he went on those long drives, the diminution of self, a physical reduction to a single gnat isolated from the greater swarm of gnats? The absurdity of living one's life? She thought she would ask him, but of course that did not happen, and any current subject was buried under two new ideas -a cowboy kitchen for urban bachelors, and a kind of ranch kitchen with crossed branding irons over the raised hearth to replace the ultramodern German style. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 124)

This detached vision of outsiders replicates Proulx's idea that "from inside the automobile the landscape was transformed into a swiftly mass of soft color [...] Individual trees, small animals, and lesser streams disappeared in the blur [...] The framed but vague windshield view, replaced the particular and the specific" (Proulx, "Dangerous Ground" 18). In this case, the couple's failure to adapt to the demanding landscape that they had romanticized back East⁵².

⁵² Another story that exposes the disconnection between urban dwellers and the land they take for granted -as they fail to understand its dangers- is "Testimony of the Donkey" (*Fine Just the Way It Is*). It follows the progress of a foolish solo hiker in the wild, an urban character type that Proulx confronts with the landscape, with expected fatal consequences. silly argument over washing the lettuce mounts up and ends up with Marc and Catlin -outdoor devotees, for whom "the rough country was their emotional center" (Proulx, *Fine* 155)- breaking up, with her taking an ill-advised trip into the wild on her own. The story again exposes the disjunction of urban improvers with a West that they take for granted, as they fail to read it, just like the Fairs. It is also a recurrent theme of urban couples in disjunction with the land and with themselves, ending in breakups, a favorite theme in Proulx's. Angry and stubborn, Catlin -"the great-granddaughter of a Basque shepherd from the Pyrenees" (Proulx, *Fine* 154)- ventures alone into unknown territory, where she gets her foot stuck in a granite rock crevice. She goes from suffering to agony under the unmerciful scorching sun and freezing nights, with the narrative moving from her useless painful efforts to free herself and her hallucinations about being rescued. The cycle of the landscape around her goes on, indifferent and harsh. To warm herself and possibly wriggle free, she releases her bladder, "but the warmth was fleeting and any lubrication went unnoticed by the rock, which had now passed from inanimate object to malevolent personality" (Proulx, *Fine* 172). This portrayal of Catlin's entrapment and her inability to

“The Half-Skinned Steer” (published in *Close Range*) tells the trip back to Wyoming of Mero Corn, an eighty-three-year-old retired man in Massachusetts who drives back to his childhood ranch in Wyoming to attend his brother Rollos’s funeral, and dying a mile away from his destination. Mero had left Wyoming during the Depression and had never been back in sixty years. Flashbacks summarize Mero’s life, from economic hardship to the ecological and financial ruin that the family ranch has gone through. He has never had any contact with the family during the time that he has been away. He became a successful easterner who achieved success away from the West: “He’d got himself out of there in 1936, had gone to war and come back, married and married again (and again), made money in boilers and airduct cleaning and smart investments, retired, got into politics and out again without scandal” (Proulx, *Close Range* 21).

Now retired, he drives his Cadillac back home cross-country but, once in Wyoming, gets confused and lost, misses the entrance of the ranch –even though it was “so clear and sharp in his mind” (Proulx, *Close Range* 35)– and he dies in the snow trying to free the car. Mero is in disjunction with the landscape after so long, his senses failing him in the unforgiving and –by now– unknown landscape, as he is trying to invert his original successful flight East: “The map of the ranch in his memory was not as bright now, but scuffed and obliterated as though trodden. The remembered gates collapsed, fences wavered, while the badland features swelled into massive prominence” (Proulx, *Close Range* 38). His trip out West is an inversion of the Western pioneer quest, a “narrative of regression into an impossible past” (Magsamen 80). Mero had left the patriarchal

free herself –with fatal consequences– and “becoming” the landscape highlights the disjunction between urban yuppie residents who live in this new, different West.

structure of the ranch after he saw his father's failure as a rancher: "his old man wangled a job delivering mail, but looked guilty fumbling bills into his neighbor's mailboxes" (Proulx, *Close Range* 21). Unknown to him, the family ranch has long ago been taken over by different owners, among which Proulx includes an Australian millionaire that transforms it into a Western theme park, where emu and buffalo graze, for the recreation of urban outsiders. Here Proulx transmits against her dislike for wealthy urbanites who wish to "save" the West, displaying though a new distribution of values and uses in contemporary West, such as dude ranches that merchandise it:

That's what the ranch was now, she said, Down Under Wyoming [...] the Banner Ranch next door ran cattle on it for a few years, then unloaded it on a rich Australian businessman who started Down Under Wyoming, but it was too much long-distance work and he'd had bad luck with his manager, a feller from Idaho with a pawnshop rodeo buckle [...] The place had done real well. Course we're not open now. (Proulx, *Close Range* 22-23)

The parallel narrative –based on an Icelandic folk tale– is that of Tin Head, an unskillful rancher who partially skins a steer that eventually runs away alive, what will mean a curse for the family, as the folk tale suggests. Mero has been told this story as a young man and it haunts him throughout his whole life. He has nightmares of it the night before leaving the ranch, as a young man, and now at 83. The two stories merge in the last moments of Mero's life, as he dies in the cold: "He walked more slowly and the animal lagged. He stopped and turned [...] It tossed its hand and in the howling, wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching for him all this time" (Proulx, *Close Range* 40).

Proulx told *Wyoming Library Roundup* magazine that her short story “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” (also in the collection *Close Range*) “involves the neighbors’ castration of a guy who had been hurt in a train wreck. He came home pretty badly maimed and very peculiar, and the neighbors behaved as they would if they had some kind of a bad animal in castrating him. And that really happened. It happened here in the late 1800s” (Proulx, “More”). It is a narrative about a community and it is the one that contains the expression “dangerous and indifferent ground” (Proulx, *Close Range* 99) that so many critics and reviewers have borrowed to analyze or explain Annie Proulx’s work. Against this “indifferent” landscape, “tragedies of people count for nothing although signs of misfortune are everywhere” (Proulx, *Close Range* 99).

The story portrays two disjunctive takes on the West through two families of ranchers with opposed views about farming and ranching. Isaac Dunmire and his eight sons run their ranch as they are “of one mind” (Proulx, *Close Range* 103). They are improvers who come to possess —“get as much as he could” (Proulx, *Close Range* 100)— in an hyper-masculine West where women are absent. Their life is horses and cattle and they “measured beauty and religion by what they rode through every day, and this encouraged their disdain for intellect” (Proulx, *Close Range* 103). Their narrow scope of vision makes them disregard any of the alternatives that the new West offers —“intellect, social”— and they are trapped with their own mythology: violence, right-wing and misogyny.

This symbolic, violent and “distorted masculinity” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 93) strongly clashes with the Tinsleys, a family of newcomer ranchers. Coming, as they came, from an urban space, they are alien to the Western landscape. Through them, Proulx explains a new West of affects, against the fix rhetoric of the Dunmires. The Tinsleys feel

attracted by the “idea” of the West, even though they lack the highly trained skills from the Dunmires. Horm Tinsley, the patriarch, is “inattentive” (Proulx, *Close Range* 103) to the landscape. He fails to understand the seasons and he gets twice bitten by a snake, or he buys the wrong cattle. They had come from Saint Louis “with the expectation of a quick success” (Proulx, *Close Range* 103) after a series of unsuccessful cattle enterprises. Yet he fits in a community of relations and affects that accepts their difference. In exchange, he connects through other relations: “His failure as a stockman was recognized, yet he was tolerated and even liked for his kindly manner and skill playing the banjo and the fiddle, though most regarded him with contemptuous pity for his loose control of home affairs” (Proulx, *Close Range* 104). Horm’s wife is mentally unstable – she drowned her crying baby in the river Laramie during an anxiety attack –, a symbolic portrait of an urban woman to fit in the Western domesticity. Her eldest son, Ras, represents the intellect that the Dunmires lack:

He was smart with numbers, read books. He asked complicated questions no one could answer [...] Trains were his particular interest and he knew about rail connections from study of the timetables, pestered travelers at the station to hear of distant cities. He was indifferent to stock except for his flea-bitten grey, Bucky, and he threw the weight of his mind in random directions as if the practical problems of life were not to be resolved but teased as a kitten is by a broom straw. (Proulx, *Close Range* 105)

The quotation discloses an opposite mindset to the fix Western practicality of the Dunmires. Ras shows a connection with the contemporary global world, insisting in the motion of things and the flows of people. Furthermore, his interest does not lie in getting things done but in asking questions “in random directions,” looking for connections in

that state of continuous variation of the place, and against the fix inward-looking concept that the Dunmires represent.

During a trip to the East, Ras gets disfigured in a car accident. When he comes back to Wyoming, his deformed face frightens the locals. His only pleasure is riding his horse and –to his family shock– exposing his genitals suggestively to young farm girls. His father, Horm, is urged to take action, at the possibility of something bad happening to his son, although his inability to display any patriarchal power within the family leads to disaster.

In a violent old Western revenge, the eldest Dunmire son castrates Ras with a dirty knife, who dies of gangrene. Proulx's landscape is clearly indifferent to anything that happens to humans, who are just a part of the cycle, even despite the inflicted pains and marks on the landscape:

No past slaughter nor cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at the isolate crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen, or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns delays the flood of morning light. Fences, cattle, roads, refineries, mines, gravel pits, traffic lights, graffiti'd celebration of athletic victory on bridge overpass, crust of blood on the Wal-Mart loading dock, the sun-faded wreaths of plastic flowers marking death on the highway or ephemeral stop other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter. (Proulx, *Close Range* 99)

This compelling quotation at the beginning of the story is poetically reinforced during Ras's agony in the last scene: "The morning light flooded the rim of the world, poured through the window glass, colored the wall and floor, laid its yellow blanket on the reeking bed, the kitchen table and the cups of cold coffee. There was no cloud in the sky. Grasshoppers hit against the east wall in their black and yellow thousands" (Proulx, *Close*

Range 117). When the narrator closes with “That was sixty years ago and more [...] We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen. If you believe that you’ll believe anything” (Proulx, *Close Range* 117), Proulx again brings together the old and the new West, as two concepts that are part of the same process, with memory and history as an essential part of the “constellation” of processes when reading a region (Campbell, *Affective* 39). What dies here is a symbolic new West in the hands of the narrow-mindedness of the old myth, exposed here as cruel, senseless and practical. Ras’s personality stands for an open, changing and opposite West, a West that looks “disfigured” in the eyes of the patriarchs of the myth⁵³.

Before moving on to the next selected stories in this trilogy, it is relevant to pinpoint some considerations regarding the topic of ranches in the West. The redistribution of the sensible is clearly exposed by the new uses of ranches in the West today, as suggested in these stories. Scholar and rancher Nancy Cook expresses her concern for the constant change in ownership in ranches in the West and their uncertain future. To survive, many of them have turned into dude ranches –where tourists enjoy

53 The issue of the future of ranches and small communities in the West is paralleled in “What Kind of Furniture would Jesus Pick?,” another short story that describes a redistribution of the sensible. Rancher Gilbert Wolfscale struggles to keep his old family ranch afloat while his estranged sons prefer to work in the video and restaurant business, escaping “the scorching obsession of land ownership” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 72). He is living in an old ideal of ranch, yet his attempts to adjust to contemporary economics have failed, and the poison wastewater has seeped into his irrigation ditches. A right-wing Republican, Gilbert is torn between briefcase ranchers who want to buy his land and environmentalists that might be able to help him fight for compensations. He asks himself if he has “drunk from some magic goblet brimming with the elixir of ownership” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 72). When he feels a pressing desire of driving out into the landscape, he gets stuck in town by a community parade that exhibits a mix of old West icons and surreal ones: horses, kids in cowboy attire, an outlaw and a sheriff: “the town’s women in pioneer regalia [...], a few trick riders in neon satin [...] The last of all was a CPC. Pickup, three hard-hatted methane gas workers sitting in back smoking cigarettes and joking with one another” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 85-86). Confused with this display of “artificial” West, he realizes that “there had been something wrong with the parade, something seriously wrong, but he couldn’t think what” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 86). Gilbert realizes later “that there had been *no ranchers* in the parade –it was all pioneers, outlaws, Indians, and gas” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 86, emphasis added). What is left from the mythic West in Gilbert’s mind, and the ignorance or disinterest in the figure of a rancher, which he represents. Like Diamond Felts in “The Mud Below,” he drives out in a Western landscape that is invariably full of signs of human presence: “The buildings in traffic fell away and he was on the empty road, the dusty sage flying past, the white ground. The sky was a hard cheerful blue, empty but for a few torn contrails. Blasting the bags impaled on the barb fences flapped in the hot wind. A small herd of antelope in the distance had their heads down. He saw his neighbor’s cattle spread out on the parched land, and it came to him that there had been no ranchers in the parade –it was all pioneers, outlaws, Indians, and gas” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 86). Proulx again deals with the redistribution of the sensible by bringing up the controversial issue of the new uses of ranches and farms in the West.

“authentic” old West amenities—, trophy ranches —hunting—, and view ranches —a type of rural hotels in the West. Cook stresses on the irony that “tourists may find that the working ranch hand looks inauthentic compared to the amenities ranch” (Cook, “Romance” 237). Cook admits that these “New Western ways” (Cook, “Romance” 236) are not completely out of place in terms of environmental land management practices, even though the use of ranch area for these amenities is reduced if compared to the space formerly needed for cattle practices. This resulted in losses of jobs within the ranches workforce and in leaving areas neglected, as Proulx often expresses, letting nature take care of itself, “towards weeds” (Cook, “Romance” 236).

Drawing from her own experience, Cook admits to an ownership issue connected to these new uses of ranches in the West. The ranches change hands constantly, often along political decisions and economic changes. Among the new owners of the West exist large corporations that manage large-scale production, and wealthy visitors who, “when (they) get bored and leave, they sell out to other rich people” (Cook, “Romance” 237). The affluent do not take part or join the community, whose “kingdom in the sticks offers relief from metropolitan lives” (Cook, “Romance” 237), and when they find themselves isolated, they fly their friends in “just to have people around” (Cook, “Romance” 237).

Another narrative that evidences a redistribution of the sensible is “The Mud Below,” which can be found in *Close Range*, a story that follows the progress of young rodeo bull-rider Diamond Felts who, against her mother’s wishes of him going to college, joins rodeo school in California and later takes part in the riding Mountain Circuit. The narrative exploits opposing views of the Western myth, by depicting a new version of the West that Diamond resists to understand. In contrast, his mother Kaylee runs a tourist

store from a Denver-based chain that commercializes “cowboy memorabilia,” an image that suggests the concept of a “merchandized” West, “a contemporary inflexion of the new West” (Millard 92). Kaylee is well aware of the distance between her son’s unreal myth and the real West in which she struggles to make a living. In fact, she is the only one who “grew up in a ranch and hated it” (Proulx, *Close Range* 46), that is how she knows about what it really means working around ranches – “my momma grew up on a ranch and hated it” (Proulx, *Close Range* 46). Diamond has a vivid memory of the mud at his uncle’s ranch from when he visited it with his mother, yet his attachment to bull riding is artificial. It sparked when his (absent) father took him to a carousel in his childhood:

He was crazy about the merry-go-round, not for the broad spin which made him throw up [...] but for the glossy black bull, the only bull among the ruined horses, tail intact, red saddle and smiling eyes, the eye shine depicted by a painted wedge of white. His father had lifted him on a stool with his hand reaching across Diamond’s shoulder, steadying him as the bull went up and down and the galloping music played. (Proulx, *Close Range* 50)

Kaylee is permanently trying to get Diamond “out of the mud” (Proulx, *Close Range* 51) and she takes him to a former rodeo star, Hondo Gunsch, hoping that he will talk some sense into her son. At twenty-six Hondo was thrown out and stepped on by the bronco horse that he was riding and now he makes a living by cleaning up saddles and can barely speak, but the visit does not leave a mark on him, to his mother’s despair: “I would take you to see a corpse to get you out of rodeo” (Proulx, *Close Range* 63).

Kaylee’s determination stretches to domesticity –she tries to make him eat salad and cereal, against his carnivorous appetite– and she challenges the rodeo masculinity that Diamond is supposed to stand for. However, he is part of this “merchandized” West

that his mother sells, “a product of contemporary West” (Magagna 177) that has little or nothing to do with ranch life. He sees himself as the cowboy myth impersonation, with no need for relations with women.

Against the environment of rodeo life Proulx deals with issues of violence, rape and identity. Diamond ‘s fascination and attachment to the bull contrast with his inability for steady relationships: “He almost always had a girl in the motel bed with him when he could afford a motel, a half-hour painkiller but without the rush and thrill he got from a bull ride. There was no sweet time when it was over. He wanted them to get gone” (Proulx, *Close Range* 67). He rides women in the same way as he rides bulls, displaying a violent sexual behavior, sometimes even raping them. Bull riding represents an act of fighting and possessing nature, the landscape represented in the bull. Underlying the story, Proulx suggests the uselessness of the venture. Riding a bull is a purposeless effort to tame nature for eight seconds, where the result is always loss, as an endless history of improvers in the West has shown.

Once the bull throws Diamond down, breaking his back, it seems that life's affections win him over and steer him away from this cowboy dream. The bad injury makes him lose his passion for it. Dealing with issues of not knowing his father, later on, he drives through the night and starts to regain a part of his disposition for riding again. The story ends with a note of hope in the process of healing and, maybe, with Diamond having a second chance in unforgiving Wyoming. His process of healing parallels his mental alignment with the dynamic interactions of the West:

The course of life’s events seemed slower than the knife but not less thorough [...] there was more to it than that, he’s supposed to, and heard again her horse, charge voice saying everything. It was all a hard

fast ride that ended in the mud. He passed a coal train in the dark, the dance rectangles that were the cars gliding against indigo night, another, another, and another, and another. Then slowly, slowly as the light comes on the clouded morning, the euphoric heat flushed through him, or maybe just the memory of it. (Proulx, *Close Range* 80)

There is a distance between his ideal perception of the landscape and the non-fictitious landscape that he is now driving through. The imagined West from childhood memories and the real West clash in the same household. Diamond's previous life as a bull rider, a sport connected to the cultural stereotype of the drifter and loner in the old West, is at odds with the real life that Kaylee urges him to lead. His demystified West stands for a redistribution of the sensible, showing the distance between myth and reality. Diamond does not find any of the signs or landmarks that his childhood's distorted sense of the West expects. Through Kaylee, the true hero of the story, Proulx shows the uselessness of the myth, described in terms of merchandise or souvenir, a fixed, static image, like the ideal that her own son is in pursuit of.

In *Close Range*, we find the short-story entitled "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," a one-page necrophilia narrative in an isolated West. Despite its subject, it is told in a humorous dark tone. It indirectly deals with the topic of sexual predators. The title suggests motion as well as distance: we are not as close to or as far from the global, the gas, the force that propels us to relate. It tells the story of a rancher's wife that discovers the corpses of murdered missing women in their attic, a crime perpetrated by her husband. Once the husband commits suicide by jumping off a cliff, his wife cuts a hole through the roof of the attic and finds the corpses of those women, whose stories she knew from the newspapers. Surprisingly, she seems to enjoy the view as the description of the bodies suggests:

Just as she thought: The corpses of Mr. Croom's paramours -she recognizes them from the photographs in the paper: MISSING WOMAN- some desiccated as jerky and much the same color, some moldy from lying beneath roof leaks, all of them used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels, some bright blue with the remnants of pin used on the shutters years ago, one wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee. (Proulx, *Close Range* 251-252)

The narrative exploits the dangerous combination of remoteness and patriarchy that can lead to violence and sexual abuse. Proulx seems to suggest that isolation and lack of affection go hand in hand in the West, where people –men mostly– might look for an escape in violence: “When you live a long way out you make your own fun” (Proulx, *Close Range* 252). Proulx stresses one more time the idea, by absence, of how important community and communal work is in the West. She explains it: “There’s one story I wrote [...] about a man and his wife, and I think the story is two sentences long. What I was trying to do, and very few people got it, was show that in an isolated situation the imagination can flare wildly. That’s all there is to that story, the flaring imagination of two remotely dwelling persons who aren’t very fond of each other” (Proulx, *Vice*). This “wildly flaring” is taken to the extreme, to put it mildly, as it takes us to the mentioned Starkweather’s quote “I don’t believe I ever did live in a wonderful world” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt*).

In the end, Proulx plays with fantasy and twists Western mythology. When the husband commits suicide, by jumping over a cliff, he does not die. Right before hitting down, his body stops and elevates up in the air: “He dismounts and looks down on tumbled rock, waits, then steps out, parting the air with his last roar, sleeves surging up windmill arms, jeans riding over both tops, but before he hits he rises again to the top of

the cliff like a cork in a bucket of milk" (Proulx, *Close Range* 251). Proulx deals with the interrelated process of not dismissing the myth completely as it is always there as a part of the process of the region too; it always comes back, even though it is a place in which sometimes women are the ones that, in the end, stay on, and others, the ones that rot in the attic.

The protagonist of "The Wamsutter Wolf" (in *Bad Dirt*), Buddy Millar, is an unambitious man that drives the bad dirt roads of the West "enraptured by the wide open spaces" (Maury) and goes back to his hometown of Wamsutter. There, he confronts the lack of opportunities in the West, one of Proulx's main topics across the collection. He finds a different town from the one that he left some years ago, a West in motion that has mutated into a huge trailer park bordering Interstate 80: "a desperate place" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 148). The beginning of the story opens with a statement by Buddy's successful brother Zane, attuned with a reading of region in motion:

"Nothing is really *balanced*. Try to think of it as an ongoing poker game, say five-card draw, but everything constantly changes –the money, the card suits, the players, even the table, and every ante is affected by the weather, and you're playing in a room where the house around you is demolished [...] Truth is, [...] most of the time we don't know what we're doing. Just tinkering, is one view, another view." (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 144)

The poker quote suits a metaphoric definition of a region in motion, and actually out of balance both economically or in terms of landscape. Against his brother's success, Bob has been drifting through "bad dirt" roads and has come back home to live in a trailer park, inhabited by a white-trash community. He is a loner, what makes his name ironic,

as he has no friends. By looking at the trailer park where he is going to rent, the huge sea of mobile homes attached to Interstate 80 has dramatically changed the landscape of the town of his childhood:

Faded into the desert was a second cluster of trailered streets. The whole town, he saw, was a huge trailer park, pickup trucks in front of every mobile home, license plates from Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Nebraska, California, identifying the migrant gypsies of the gas and oil fields who followed the energy booms. This, he thought, was the real Wyoming –full of poor, hand-working transients, tough as nails and restless, going where the dollars grew. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 148)

This is another layer of Proulx's new West in explicit exhibition. This narrative depicts a new sense of region, that of trailer park communities changing the landscape of the West, where opportunities come and go. Trailer parks are undoubtedly an extended sight in the landscape of the new West, where rootless drifters work for extractionist corporations of natural resources anywhere (gas and oil mostly). For them is a "movement in hope" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 176) to economic prosperity that contrasts with the "bad dirt" West in Buddy's imagination, where he aims to replicate pioneer ways. Driving the back roads, he fantasizes about following old Indian trails, but reality comes up right away:

A few hundred yards beyond the ruined park rat trailer he was surprised to find the faintest of trails, the barest suggestion of narrow-set wheel ruts. He thought he might be on part of the old Overland Trail or one of its many side shoots. It was almost full dusk but his headlights picked out the ghostly ruts and for now they headed in the direction he wanted. But after half a mile the ephemeral track disappeared into a deep and brushy draw and he turned north, looking for level ground. By the time he cleared the draw it was dark but a hundred yards away he could see

the lights of a truck on the gas road. In ten minutes he was in Wamsutter. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 164)

The real world of the trailer park constantly clashes with his romanticized ideal. His neighbors are “trailer-trash losers” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 175) that live in trailers due to their inability to adjust to the economic motion of the West. Buddy moves to a trailer next to Cheri and her family. She and her violent husband are old acquaintances from school times living in poor hygienic conditions with her three children. They both drink a lot, and relate with each other with violence and frustration. The place traps Buddy with old relationship dynamics, although he acts more as an observer than a participant, detaching himself from it. After one snake bites him and he has to be convalescent in the reduced space of his trailer, he observes the same masculinity and misogyny of the old West. Asquith suggests that “roughnecks are the new ‘trailer park’ cowboys” (*Lost Frontier* 177) in this “update of the pioneer struggle” (Markovits). The reading might reflect the idea of trailer parks resembling former pioneer or gold rush camps and frontier towns, which were abandoned once the extraction was over, the modern version being big corporations’ practices. The place looks artificial and “dystopic” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 179), as the domestic spaces described lack any basic kind of hygiene and habitability, yet it is the real and in-motion West that confronts Buddy’s dream, whose idealized dirt roads have led him to that dilapidated place. This dysfunctional area reminds of the run-down trailer park into which the Bloods’ farm in Vermont turned. Buddy feels an outsider inside that tight community as he cannot understand how it came to that. In his primitive idea of driving across the West, he fails to understand the process in motion through the economic pulse that the region is, and Wamsutter is a flagrant example. One night Buddy sleeps with Cheri and he is about to

break loose, but in the morning, when Buddy is about to run away, scared of Ras's rage, he finds out that Ras has disappeared. The story, unclear to the reader, suggests that a wolf has "eaten" Ras in the middle of the night.

The symbol of the wolf in the story reads at many layers. First, Zane the biologist (Buddy's brother) is an expert in wolves, who is "helping to preserve the balance of nature" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 144). Buddy himself is a kind of lone wolf, with his self-isolation from both family and neighbors. The Wyoming wolf is a species that Zane is protecting against the American wolf, a larger predator, a metaphor for Buddy being taken by the violence in the trailer park community. Eventually, wolf practices carried out by gas and oil corporations in the West are the ones to be held responsible for the economic downfall of small communities when they are unable to resist, due to the lack of common effort.

The trailer park reflects what many communities in the West have been turning to in this continuous shifting process under global extraction economics of mostly gas and oil, "a methane gas boom that promised to equal the happy oil years of the '30s and '70s" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 147). The huge trailer park is inhabited by individuals who find jobs by going through these opportunities and move on once the extraction is over. The example contrasts with the Woollybucket of *That Old Ace in the Hole* in terms of lack of communal effort. Ultimately, Buddy's image of the West is challenged and transformed by the new reality of trailer parks and tight economic opportunity. He decides to move on, leaving his pioneer ideal of driving the back roads, and find a job in Alaska through his model brother.

The last example that I am including as a redistribution of the sensible in *Wyoming Stories* is the recognition of appreciation of Native Americans –Indians– as an integral segment of Wyoming and the West. As seen previously, two hitchhiking Indians appear in both *Postcards* and *That Ace in the Hole*, analyzed through their indirect relationship to the main plot. “The Indian Wars Refought,” however, explores the loss of cultural heritage. The Native American that appears in the old concept of the West has been homogenized by the cultural global imagination, and here Proulx challenges all these preconceived assumptions and stereotypes.

“The Indian Wars Refought,” inspired by research at the Buffalo Bill Historical Centre (Walker), unfolds to parallel narratives. One follows Linny, a half-Sioux woman. She is the daughter of a ranch foreman, Charlie Parrot, who was brought up on a reservation and now does not want to accept his heritage. Georgina Crawshaw, a rich widow who comes from a family of polo players and lawyers is a new symbol of womanhood in the West: she owns and manages the ranch, ignores appearances –an underlying theme in the narrative– and makes her own decisions. She decides to marry Charlie despite his background, a commitment based only on honest attraction: “Then, suddenly, she remarried, her surprise choice the ranch foreman, Charlie Parrot, considerably younger than she and part Oglala Sioux, or so he claimed, though she figured Mexican and something else was in there but what of it? Parrot, with a tight, hard body and buttocks like cantaloupes, had a long swatch of black hair, glittering black eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 24). Proulx stresses the representation of a Western woman who is independent and free for leading her own life, with passions and feelings traditionally attributed to male sexuality: “Georgina found Charlie Parrot more than attractive. There had not been much sex with Sage in the last years, but once

Charlie got going he was insatiable and she found herself heated to the point of abandoned vulgarity” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 25). However, he is not the romanticized Native American warrior: “He was the classic irresponsible, passive guy, no Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull fired with resistance, but letting the whites push him around, believing that he had some kind of decent life” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 44). One day, when his daughter Linny is cleaning the old lawyers' office, she accidentally finds reels of the 1913 film *The Indian Wars Refought* –produced by William “Buffalo Bill” Cody. She is prompted to discover her hidden heritage: she reads *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and asks her father to take her back to the reservation where he was born.

Proulx uses the parallel overarching story of the film to denounce hidden brutality on Native Americans. The movie exposes manipulation. The distance between Charlie’s rejection of his heritage and the interest of Linny in finding out about it ends up in an argument that he tries to put away: “Remember all you been reading happened a long time ago –more than a hunderd years ago” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 43). But Proulx, through Linny, reminds us how essential it is to remember cultural heritage, often neglected when referred to minorities: “No Dad. To me it happened last week. I never knew any a that stuff. They don’t teach it in school. It gets me” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 43). Stressing the point of redistribution of the sensible, the narrative shows a West where an interesting crossing of bloodlines takes place. Georgina, childless, is the last one in a family of lawyers, the Brawls, that came to the West in the 1900s, during the pioneer years. In contrast, Charlie and Linny, who have retraced their ancestors’ lineage. Linny, a Sioux in the process of figuring out her cultural identity, becomes the sole heir of the ranch.

In short, the narratives explored in this section present a challenging perspective on the old West, all reflecting a “redistribution of the sensible.” The narratives here are stories of pioneers or urban dwellers failing to live up to their idealized visions of the West. The urbanites often misinterpret the signs of the Western landscape, as exemplified by outdoor lover Catlin in “Testimony of a Donkey” or the Fairs in “Men Crawling out of Trees,” whose Western plans are thwarted by their misconceptions of cultural stereotypes. Proulx’s portrayal of the West emphasizes its dynamic nature, a reality that is overlooked by ranchers clinging to past practices and being unable to keep up with global economic trends. Characters such as Gilbert Wolfscale, Mero Corn, or the violent Dunmire brothers are trapped in a monolithic patriarchal past of white pioneers unable to perceive the shifting social realities of the West. The narratives also highlight the role of the new women of the West, who hold control over their decisions and take over ranch management, such as Ottaline, Kaylee Felts of the four women in “A Lonely Coast.” Additionally, Proulx redistributes the sensible by reminding us of the Native Americans who inhabited the West before the arrival of settlers, whose voices were silenced and now occupy a marginal social role and place in the West. Finally, the depiction of homosexual cowboys in the West is probably the most indisputable example of that redistribution of the sensible that I have explored here: a political lens through which Annie Proulx examines the region.

5.3.2 The Radical Potential of the Minor: “In Elk Tooth everybody tries to be a character with some success”

This section deals with a selection of Wyoming stories that reflect the idea of how, following Neil Campbell, the local, small-scale disrupts and interferes with established notions of the West and challenges its reduced geography through its attention and connection and connection to the world (*Affective* 4; 46). The idea includes breaking up with the “self-perpetuating *turning circle*” through what he calls a “new gentleness” based on affects, empathy and relationality (Campbell, *Affective* 205). Proulx pays special attention to the minor and local, always relating it with external forces, mostly economic, but affective as well. Her seemingly isolated communities, often economically vulnerable, as the analysis will show, perform encounters and interactions as part of her dynamic process of becoming, breaking traditional boundaries of place.

I have selected a group of stories from *Bad Dirt* all centered around one specific community. I consider them appropriate for my purposes and more pertinent for the analysis. As I have just explained, this single geographical grouping of stories only takes place in *Bad Dirt*, the second volume. These stories are set in the fictional Wyoming town of Elk Tooth, “a sort of Wyoming Yoknapatawpha” (Shank). The five stories could be read as different chapters of the same whole narrative, as some of the characters appear across the five narratives, in the same way that I have considered the three volumes of *Wyoming Stories* as a single conceptual unit.

This set of stories on Elk Tooth have often been reviewed and described in terms of “eccentric” or “grotesque,” both by critics and reviewers, adding that they are twisted expressions of routines in the West, where Elk Tooth is a place far from opportunity or

fancy. This perception comes not only from the uncommon names of the characters but also from the series of peculiar and uncommon events that take place in Elk Tooth. Paradoxically, it is exactly this so-called eccentricity what makes us pay more attention to the local, the distinctive, the specific, and the flow of relations and connections involved. I consider it also a deliberate device that Proulx uses as magnifying lens on local communities, their individuals, practices, affections, relations, and the breaking of traditional boundaries. The interplay of a community –the local– with the global display is how I understand what Campbell calls a “renewed sense of the local and regional” (*Affective* 18). Proulx displays these “gentle politics” (Campbell, *Affective* 19) of exchanges, encounters, affects, responsibilities and vulnerability, which show the changing variation of the local as a relational process. This process is part of a larger process, and this is, I argue, the common feature that bonds these stories.

As the analysis of *That Old Ace in the Hole* has proved, Proulx pays special consideration to small rural communities in front of global economic change and, in her literature, she exploits the need of community bonds to overcome the lack of opportunities. This general idea, common in most of her short stories, is a background in which she confirms, on the one hand, the inevitable state of motion, conditioned by economic factors, and together with it, her challenging of the old imagined –and exhausted– model of the old West.

Character Amanda Gribb is the bar owner of one of Elk Tooth’s three bars and she exemplifies the constant dynamics of the place through powerful expressions of affect. Interestingly, the narrator explains that Elk Tooth “has little going for it beyond the junkyard” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 127), meaning exactly the opposite: there is a lot going between and around the eighty inhabitants who are tied to it. Their numerous

encounters show the shifting quality of the region. Gribb is also the main character of one of the stories, "Florida Rental," but her role across the five stories works out as a bond, nexus or matrix of affections and relations that materialize the process of the relentless conversion of the region. Elk Tooth is a small community, seemingly isolated, yet related to the outside world through the consequences of global economics. Its inhabitants suffer from the lack of opportunity and economic downfall, yet they struggle through affections, encounters and distractions. Ranches have gone to the hands of the banks in the time of Reaganomics. It is the 1980s and right-wing economic practices are plaguing small communities. The narrator's description in "The Summer off the Hot Tubs" summarizes it: "In Elk Tooth everyone tries to be a character with some success. There is little more to it than being broke, proud, ingenious and setting your heels against civilized society's pull" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 179), including in the same sentence economic downfall, sense of community, and local distinctiveness. The quote relates the global with the national, as the success is measured by established degrees of economic stability and personal happiness.

A sense of community underlies in the fact that nobody talks about leaving Elk Tooth, as they all know about "the red hell that lies beyond the state's borders" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 180). Endurance is dealt with optimistically. Willy Huson, the towns repairman, keeps on working on cars even after they are repaired: "Sometimes, in a burst of energy, Willy continues to work on a vehicle after the problem is repaired [...] Little that Willy Huson fixes runs longer than five days o fifty mile, whichever comes first, but the general feeling is that sometimes that is all you need -it will hold together long enough" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 180).

The economic power of Elk Tooth is summarized by a quote in “The Contest:” “The only businesses in Elk Tooth were the Elk Tooth bank, the Western Wear & Feed Store, and the three bars -Pee Wee’s, Muddy’s Hole, and the Silvertip” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 127). The Silvertip, in turn, is the only bar with a flatscreen, what suggests that the community is not alien to technology and that it is still connected to the global. There, customers can watch the Tour de France bicycle races, a big deal in the community:

The Silvertip had had a monster flat-profile television call more than a year, but the only time the owners, Jacques and Martin Rondelle, who had somehow straight from Quebec to Elk Tooth, turned it on were for hockey games and French bicycle races. It was the only bar in Wyoming where one could watch the Tour de France. Erwin Hungate actually abandoned Pee Wee’s the entire month of July to follow the great race. For weeks afterwar his conversation flourished with Frenchy words and references to l’Alpe d’Huez. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 215)

In “The Trickle Down Effect⁵⁴,” we meet resident and regular drinker at Elk Tooth's three bars Deb Sipple –name suggesting a drinking habit–, who has been unlucky in the West. He had lost the ranch that “he believed would someday be his” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 49) to the banks. He has divorced twice and he lives in a trailer: “in search of the famous solace of open spaces⁵⁵ he’d upbuilt a drinking habit” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 49). During a time of a terrible drought and after so much personal hardship, he finally feels the rush of a lucky strike. Fiesta’s ranch is in desperate need for hay for his hungry horses, which she otherwise cannot sell. Reaganomics are ironized in this story with the premise of supply

⁵⁴ “The Trickle-Down Effect” is a neoliberal economic theory that states that if financial advantages and benefits are given to corporations, the poor classes will eventually benefit economically. This right-wing economic model encouraged young entrepreneurs to create their own businesses, what brought them to financial distress in times of economic crises. This trickle-down ideology became prominent during the years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

⁵⁵ This is a clear allusion (and probably recognition) to Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, her 1985 essay collection on her personal journey into Wyoming and the West in search of serenity after her partner had died. Eventually she developed an intimacy with the place, where she started a new life. She still lives there. Source: www.gretelehrlich.com

and demand. The dealings conform to the “too good to be true” ideal. Deb explains: “It’s good hay. You can drive up there, look at it. But you better be fast, he won’t have it long. So far you’re the only person who knows about it” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 52). Fiesta asks suspiciously: “So how come I’m the lucky rancher gets to hear about this great hay?” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 52). When she flies to Wisconsin to confirm the good quality of the hay, the deal is in motion. As the only owner of a flatbed truck in town, Deb possesses monopoly of ownership, so Fiesta and Deb agree on a deal of five thousand dollars for the job, given her vulnerable position in the deal. Deb is just “a player in an economic system” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 167). If all goes well, he will “make out like a pig in a feather bed” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 54). Deb’s greed while taking advantage of an acquaintance in the community exposes the lack of affections when money is around, what stands for the same attitude that corporations exhibit in the face of locals when taking out their resources. Deb displays a lack of empathy and generosity towards Fiesta, a neighbor and acquaintance, but disaster awaits.

Deb drives drunk and chain smokes. The drives in the narrative are reduced to a few cigarettes and a couple of drinks, what suggests how fast and short the distances are from local communities to the interstate and highways of connection, despite the six hundred and fifty miles that he travels each time. In those drives, he stops at bars along the road, picks up hitchhikers, and keeps on throwing his burning cigarette butts out the window of his truck. The bars and joints that Deb visits on the road back and forth read like a connected line of encounters. He raises empathy along the road and becomes a regular during his trips. His greedy and careless behavior is a fable of bad economic practice and global economic abuse in the hands of faceless monopolies.

In the end, the whole hay deal has terrible consequences, both for the individuals and the community. Even though Deb understands the region and knows the possible dangers of the roads⁵⁶, he is careless regarding his job. In his last trip, on entering town, one of the butts sets fire to the hay in the back, resulting in "the closest thing to a meteor ever seen in Elk Tooth, his truck a great fiery cylinder hurtling through the darkness. Those who missed seeing it have to depend on the reports of the fortunate few who were awake at that hour" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 56). The fire spreads to the rest of Fiesta's hay, even burning the grass into town and out. In short, besides the humorous tone of the narrative, Proulx exposes the inevitable engagement of small communities with the major global economies, which explain the dynamics of the story as an example of this other West.

"The Contest" is another humorous-on-the-surface tale that narrates how a group of men in Elk Tooth spend the long winter by engaging in a beard-growing contest, as "Elk Tooth residents can take no more of reality" and they "no longer take interest in the winter" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 127). This apparent apathy for the landscape establishes a new gesture towards the West, and it stresses the value of the relations within the community, a sense of togetherness. The deal of the beard growing contest includes signing an oath "in Guinness, for its ink-like color" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 127), an action that suggests common celebration and interaction. The prize is established the rodeo way, "the rule of law in Elk Tooth," (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 127) by collecting ten dollars from each participant.

⁵⁶ Proulx introduces another criminal in the narrative, related with the type of crimes from Charles Starkweather. Deb picks up a hitchhiking woman, who was in prison with famous killer Aileen Wuornos, a prostitute who murdered seven of her male clients between 1989 and 1990 and was later executed in Florida. Her story was made into a movie starring Charlize Theron (*Monster*, 2003), for which she won the Academy Award for best actress. Source: www.imdb.com

The competition involves twenty-seven participants, whose creativity surfaces once the contest is set in motion. The contestants spend the winter looking for “unguents and lotions that would impart vigor to their hair” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 135) and even “urged the druggist to order new imported products” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 135). One of them rinses his beard in “a Viagra solution, immediate results not known” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 135). The game follows a dynamic process of affections within the community, including a distant rancher who decides to partake in it. The beards mimic the aesthetic of old pioneers, exposing an inverse meaning to it, as they grow it to pass the time, and not *as a consequence* of time. The excitement at the growth (a process that symbolically parallels the town’s communal growth) spreads all over town. Wyoming Game & Fish warden Creel Zmundzinski, for example, “could see his beard in the mirror and he was not displeased. It had grown in thick and had a tendency to curl under, thereby disguising its true length. He thought that when the tape measure came out on the final day he would be a front runner” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 137).

The narrative also exposes a theme that Proulx often mentions, traditionally – externally– disassociated with Western practices: the love for reading as a relational practice. Proulx, in interviews, has observed that most small communities around Wyoming have a library and an interesting and considerable number of readers (Proulx at John Adams 1999). Amanda Gribb goes to Mercedes de Silhouette’s house looking for a book on beards, to illustrate the contest. There, she is amazed to find an interesting library organized by colors. Another character, Erwin Hungate, “the reader,” interprets people in literary terms: “You sound like Umberto Eco” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 134).

This changing quality of the place, with its exchanges and encounters, surfaces in the last scene of the narrative. Creel Zmundzinski –more on him in “The Hellhole”– is sitting at Amanda’s bar when he notices a biker parking his V-Rod Harley Davidson, an obvious symbol of globality and movement. Creel realizes that he is a distant traveler, as his Rhode Island license plate announces, “a state he imagined the size of a Wal-Mart parking lot” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 138). To both Amanda and Creel’s astonishment, the biker uncovers an extremely long beard from under his scarf, much longer than any beard that the locals have grown during the winter. The outsider has come into town to stay: he is a retired teacher and former Princeton graduate –a recurrent reference in Proulx’s significant use of apparently secondary details–. His name is Ralph Kaus and he is planning to buy and fix the line camp on Mercedes de Silhouette’s place and move in. His arrival represents a connection between the national and the local going both ways, as he is automatically interacting with the community through the length of his beard, the most important activity in town that winter.

Through this narrative, Proulx reflects Campbell’s concept of the potential of the minor reinforcing it by the “engagement with the major” (Campbell, *Affective* 9) as a part of this larger process that creating a region is. The beard contest is a process in itself, relational and affective. The intersection between the local and the national, regional and global is evidenced here through Ralph Kaus, who is actually joining the dynamic process by fixing an old ranch and bringing it back to life. As most yuppie outsiders, the question of external money saving the West appears again with an affective mutual process of relations, triggered by an outsider. His project of becoming a member of the community is an example of this process of region as a state of motion and change that might, or might not, prove beneficial in the long run.

“The Summer of the Hot Tubs” narrates another communal venture in Elk Tooth, similar in concept to the growing-beard contest. The story falls out of the residents’ attachment to “the old tradition of pioneer wayside eating houses” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 179). One summer, “a kind of madness swept through Elk Tooth, a passion for outdoor hot tubs” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 181). Just like in “The Contest,” the lack of economic resources, yet abundant local creativity, stirs the residents’ inspiration and creativity. They will build the tubs themselves, out of scrap metal from the Cowboy Junkyard, an interesting name that symbolically suggests the uselessness of the cowboy myth. The sense of community is expressed through affections and relations in building and sharing their experiences, again through an illogical process (hot tubs for the summer), where this small-scale and local practices define the place. This notion conflicts with stereotyped Western communities and contributes to defining the West as Campbell calls it “a region of something else,” quoting Olson, “life as something else, with ‘what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it” (Campbell, *Affective* 58). The community is in permanent motion and change, reaching out and changing into something that it is not, “mutating beyond itself at its edges,” just not a static entity but with instability of boundaries.

Willy Huson, a solitary man, feels the pull of the community’s affects and also succumbs to the idea, building his tub out of an “enormous inch-thick cast-iron pot, three feet across and last used in 1912 by some unknown biscuit hurler [...] with a crust of ninety-year-old dried son of a bitch stew” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 183). The giant pot connects the present with the old West, its heritage, but also with its danger. At the contact with the hot water in that giant iron pot, “of the sort you’d see cannibals using in old cartoons”

(Rafferty), the stew softens and starts to float, turning into a living shape similar to a black jellyfish, the scene reminding the image of “a missionary in a cannibal stew” (Maury). Huson runs away and lets it in there until the tube dries and “once again the son of a bitch stew lies dormant at the bottom” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 185). Proulx metaphorically brings up the idea of old and new in terms of safe distancing. The old boiler from pioneer days might have been useful in its time, although one must look ahead and go on with the process of building the region and not getting stuck in a past that might burn you or eat you alive, Proulx seems to suggest.

In the “The Hellhole,” Proulx uses a magic realism solution to raise the ecological problem of reckless hunting improvers in the West. Creel Zmundzinski discovers a sulfurous spot along the roadside that swallows illegal hunters or other improvers-predators that leave carcasses on the side of the roads, clogging irrigation ditches, once they have loaded the animals’ meat onto their SUVs. The magic tale deals with the use of public and common space together with the moral implications of illegal uncontrolled hunting. This mix of tale and magic realism originated in a real conversation, as Annie Proulx tells:

The story grew out of a conversation I was having with a game-and-fish biologist friend. He was talking about some terrible people who were a part of his professional life. Mean ranchers, outrageous poachers, all of that sort of thing. And he said, “I just wish there was something that could be done with these people.” Immediately I saw them disappearing into a hole in the ground and suggested to him that a pit straight to Hell might be quite fun. And we both laughed and went about our business. (Proulx, *Vice*)

Creel spends his days between the Pee Wee's and his job of checking hunting licenses and finding city poachers or hunters without permission. During hunting season, the area is filled with improvers that rapidly display their disrespect for the land, an intrusion into the local by external forces beyond the locals' control. As in the conversation, Proulx comes up with a solution to the problem that recalls the literary resources of magical realism: the flow of abusive hunters with the landscape can only be stopped, symbolically, by a magic opening in the ground that becomes a sort of friend for Creel, and swallows whomever he takes there into the ground forever.

The story depicts an interesting relationship between the global and the local through "the gentle politics" of the vulnerability and the marginal (Campbell, *Affective* 13; 19). A priest refers to an external solution to a local problem when he vehemently protests at the fine that Creel is writing: "What! Hunting license! For your information, as a man of cloth of often received the kindly nod of local game wardens,' the Reverend Jefford J. Pecker roared in his clogged-nose voice. 'That must've been in California. Sir, you are in Wyoming now and it's different'" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 7). This relational item of Wyoming with the rest of the United States establishes how local practices, even though subject to global ones, define the potential of the minor in terms of defining the region.

Old Western justice is substituted by a personification of landscape:

"What?" he said as the gravel sagged beneath his feet. There was a sound like someone tearing a head of lettuce apart. The gravel heaved and abruptly gaped open. The hunter dropped down into a fiery red tube about three feet across that resembled an enormous blowtorch-heated pipe. With a shriek the preacher disappeared. The whole thing had happened in less than five seconds. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 9)

This simple moral to the story is closely linked to the thin line between fantasy and reality in the West, a relationship that Proulx uses in a number of stories. The fact that the fire from hell is invoked stresses the religious angle of the old West. Other wardens, colleagues of Creel, are in line to use the magic hole until, in the end, it is unconsciously covered again by the Forest Service. Creel Zmundzinski is in rage: “‘The Forest Circus screwed up the best deal I ever had.’ And he told him the complete story about the Hellhole, about the line of wardens waiting to use it, about the unearthly shrieks of malefactors as they slid down into the brimstone” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 13). A magic and external factor helps the community get rid of outsiders whose negative practices give way to empathy and hope within the community⁵⁷. At the Pee Wee’s, Creel Zmundzinski, a steward of the land, is rewarded by recognition and gratitude by the community: “‘Give us two of those. Doubles. In honor a my friend, Warden Creel, who pulled the devil’s tail all last year and wats a do it again’” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 14).

“Florida Rental” is the last narrative on Elk Tooth and the one that closes *Bad Dirt*. The narrative focuses on Pee Wee’s beloved bartender Amanda Gribb, a single vegetarian woman who lives on a trailer park on her own. She represents a new model of womanhood in the West, a clear renewal of the sense of the local. She is independent,

⁵⁷ “The Sagebrush Kid” (*Fine Just the Way It is*) is a story directly connected with “The Hellhole,” as it shares elements of magic realism and explores the issue of disjunction with the landscape. Symbolically, the landscape in the story is something that humans should take care of as something valuable, in the same way as the hunting areas around Elk Tooth, depicted in “The Hellhole.” Set in Wyoming’s pioneer days, the story revolves around a childless couple –the Furs– who live in an area along the stagecoach route, in the Red Desert, and take care of an unanimated sagebrush plant that becomes giant and becomes a menace to travelers, when they look for shelter from the sun, eating them in the same way as the hellhole did. The plant was “nurtured and cosseted as neither piglet nor chicken nor few human infants had ever been” (Proulx, *Fine* 84). The sagebrush has the appearance of a child reaching upward as if begging for attention or love, being lifted from the ground. a symbol of the neglected landscape begging for help and attention when nobody was listening. The landscape is symbolized by the plant as a neglected child, which is still a menace to this day. There is no human trace or any remnants from the old West but the: “The Sagebrush Kids stands out there still. There are no gas pads, no compression stations near it. No roads lead to it. Birds do not sit on its branches. The man-camp, like the old stage station, has disappeared. At sunset, the great sagebrush holds its arms up against the red sky. Anyone looking in that direction can see it” (Proulx, *Fine* 91).

autonomous and self-sufficient. Her role in the community confronts the myth of the lone male cowboy image. This contrast is illustrated by June Bidstrup, a young ranch hand that Amanda hires to fix her broken fence. When Bidstrup's picture appeared on the cover of *Western Cowboy* (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 210), he was called by a Hollywood producer to make a historical movie on the West, as he embodies the aesthetic cowboy archetype. Once in Hollywood, ironically, he is not finally hired, as he does not fully fit their plans: his authenticity disappears once they see his image through the camera, as they fail to see him as an authentic cowboy. He comes back to Elk Tooth and fixes Amanda's fence.

In her demystified trailer park, Amanda survives "surrounded by beef mentality" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 212), a clear reference, not just to nutrition practices, but to the whole symbolic meanings that bulls represent in the West. She is literally "surrounded by beef," as she has to deal with cattle that illegally graze her land and destroy the garden outside her trailer: "She had a full look at her ruined garden, pocked with huge hoofprints that had mashed the young tomato plants into paste torn the plastic watering pipes. The apple tree had snapped and was trodden into fibers. Nothing was salvaged" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 213). The cows (an animal that, as established above, is alien to the West) belong to his neighbor, a corporation CEO rancher in Denver. The humorous tale is told in terms of local versus global economics and it states attitudes and encounters from the inside to the outside.

She tries all kinds of solutions to get rid of the invading cows until she gets the idea of renting alligators from Florida, a suggestion that she got from television. Her determination is stronger and firmer than the power that the big rancher, absentee owner and improver, might have. This reverses old Western gender and social roles.

Amanda deals with a creative and imaginative solution to a neglecting use of the land by, again, unfit animals for that type of landscape. With the help of her Florida cousin and a trucker friend, she will have the alligators taken there: "Amanda called her Florida cousin Don, [...] on the weekend, [...] described Elk Tooth, her problems with the Fishhooks cows, and told him the idea. He laughed, said it could be done" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 216). Interestingly, the type name of the cows suggests that they are bait for the fish, which is exactly what they become. The alligators, predators out of their natural environment, will take care of the cows, which are not in their environment either, and arrive in Wyoming hungry:

The long ride from Florida had pitched the reptiles' appetites to the extreme. Although the ginger cow had never seen an alligator before, the sight and smell of these two awakened some deep atavistic terror. These were no umbrellas! She turned and swam for home, raced up the bank, and burst through the Fishhooks fence like a locomotive (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 219).

When Amanda finally frees the Florida alligators into the pond where the cows graze, with the help of Creel Zmundzinski, her ex-boyfriend, he is amazed and astonished at the idea:

"Jeez," said Creel, almost falling in love with her all over again, "that was worth getting waked up for. But what about when winter comes? Bring them in your trailer house?"

She laughed. These are *rental* alligators. They go back to Florida in September. I got a trucker acquaintance who's goin' a pick them up. Ready for coffee?" (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 219).

Amanda understands "the interconnectedness of the contemporary West [...] geographically and notionally with its various paths" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 169). She

finds a solution to her invading cows problem –more later– thanks to technology and the global communications network: television and her mobile phone. The animals grazing outside Amanda’s trailer park are a ridiculous aesthetic recreation of the old West, even though they did not exist in the original open range days. The alligators on the loose reinforce this artificial postmodern pastoral scene around Amanda’s trailer park.

Last, that the West is now a place for encounters, “at work alongside and within the major” (Campbell, *Affective* 3) and where exchanges take place, is illustrated in the narrative by an interesting scene that discloses the relational sense of continuous variation referred to above, when a group of colored people enter Amanda’s bar, nobody reacts until they use a funny southern expression:

And when two boisterous couples in an old sedan with Louisiana plates came in and asked for tequila, a request Amanda got no more than twice a year, no one said anything nor looked directly at them, but when one of the women jokingly called to Amanda, who was rummaging at the back of the shelf where she kept the rarely use bottles, “Whip it sister!” the remark registered. (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 209)

In the constant every day affections and flows the remark stays until the end of the last narrative. It is the same expression that Amanda uses to encourage the alligators to attack and kill the invading cows in her lot: “Whip it sister!” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 219).

To finish this section, I will go back to *Close Range*, and abandon *Bad Dirt* and Elk Tooth for a change, showing that these aspects do also emerge in other short stories by Proulx. The recurrent theme of the lack of opportunities appears again in “Job History,” a very short story. This time, the story is told in the present tense, what conveys motion and a fast pace of events. There are no dialogues and the characters are not fully

developed. A lot of episodes are told in this succinct narrative space. It explores the struggle of Leeland and Lori Lee to get a successful job in a place of no opportunity from the 1960s and through the 1990s. This story is told with a perspective full of irony and humor. Leeland is the former son of a rancher father who, at present, lives in a trailer with his family, “jammed between two rioting neighbors” (Proulx, *Close Range* 92) in the town of Unique. His family has been left aside by the global economic turns of the times. There is an endless account of failed businesses, unsuccessful jobs, and miscalculated bad decisions in a place that offers little to no opportunities to people with no economic resources. In Proulx’s words,

it is the kind of life that someone who grew up in a place with very restricted economic opportunities, what kind of career would they have, what were the chances of commercial success, of individual expression, of self-identification, freedom. Of all those things that fall so lightly from our lips when we speak of cultural identity [...] What a life might have been like for a particular person in Wyoming. (Proulx at John Adams 1999)

Unique is on Highway 16, on the way to Yellowstone, which at first made a lot of travelers stop by, helping the businesses flourish. With the construction of Interstate 90, the town’s economy resented it and many establishments had to close down. The narrative establishes the duality between regional and global. In that historical context, Leeland tries a number of enterprises to adjust to the global economy: his garage has no customers due to the newly built Interstate outside town, later a freezing winter kills the hogs of his farm and, finally, an economic crisis makes him close his frozen meat business. In the end, he has no option but to join the pace (literally, the highway) of global economics and get a job as a long-distance truck driver, still passing nearby Unique

on the interstate. The job reenacts the nomadic way of old cowboy life, contrasting to his wife Lori's static job "in the kitchen of the Hi-Lo Café in Unique" (Proulx, *Close Range* 86).

Ironically, on the road, Leeland reads progress in terms of homogenized "walmarted" America, looking at the consequences on small places in terms of regional identity: "every place is the same" (Proulx, *Close Range* 86). However, Unique maintains its singularity. Even though the town is not "unique" in most senses, its inhabitants hold on to a sort of isolation that suggests resistance to homogenization. The short narrative is often interrupted by radio news reports that inform about most of the relevant global events in the 20th century (the Vietnam War, the anti-segregationist march at Selma, the hole in the ozone layer), a sort of "umbilical cord" from Unique to the world that establishes this relationship between the global and the local.

By the end of the story, Lori has passed away from cancer, his children are gone, and Leeland is working as a cook for "a middle-aged woman from Ohio" (Proulx, *Close Range* 89) who "buys the café, paints it orange, renames it Unique Eats" (Proulx, *Close Range* 89). Through this connection, Leeland discovers a new aptitude: "he has never cooked anything at home and everyone is surprised at this long-hidden skill" (Proulx, *Close Range* 89). He and his returned son come up with new –unwise– business plan in the old gas station where they had previously failed in two business endeavors: "The oldest son comes back and next year they plan to lease the old gas station and convert it into a motorcycle repair shop and steak house. Nobody has time to listen to the news" (Proulx, *Close Range* 89).

The fact that locals do not "have time to listen to the news" that come from the outside world reflects the irony that they are so busy trying to make it in difficult times

that precisely originated in that outside world that they do not have time to pay attention to, reflects the “regionally distinctive consciousness of difference” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 167).

5.3.3 Human Relatedness and Appreciation of Difference: “Whip it, sister!”

The stories chosen for this section illustrate the third practice that Campbell suggests for a reading of the West as affective critical regionality: “human relatedness” and “appreciation of difference” (*Affective 4*). The selected stories for this section exemplify affective relations that challenge the fix ideas of the old West, by exposing an appreciation of difference, a concept that diminishes the homogeneous patriarchal and narrow-minded notion of the West. It is a democratic and inclusive stance in the sense that it takes into consideration individual participation in the process of creating a region, which cannot be done without taking into account social groups and practices, conventionally unmentioned or unseen in regioning the West. Campbell includes here the action of “seeing one’s self in others” (*Affective 4*) through encounters, flows and forms that make of region something “more-than-representational” (*Affective 5*) and instead the focus is on the “being and becoming” (*Affective 6*).

This leads to a new concept or sense of the local, discussed above, represented in this case not by the people that came to tame, extract and possess the West, as the examples of improvers have shown, but by others that so far have not been traditionally represented in the narratives of the Western communities: pioneer women who work

the land and run ranches, gay ranch hands who happily work and love each other in the protecting landscape, meth dealers and addicts, drifters who move around and live in trailer parks, Native American ethnicities whose stewardship and identity have been erased from national Western discourses, and an array of outsiders, peripheral to the myth; all of them an essential part in defining the place by, Campbell stresses, “the being of a place” (*Affective* 25). It is within these differences and relations that the West “comes alive” (Campbell, *Affective* 15). In short, in a reading through a renewed sense of the local, “‘to know a place’ one must ‘participate [...] in the ongoing creation of that place’” (Douglas Reichert Powell qtd in Campbell, *Affective* 17). The stories and characters from *Wyoming Stories* that I include in this section reflect this practice, confirming my argument that Proulx’s literature of the West demands such a reading.

“Tits up in a Ditch”⁵⁸ (in *Fine Just the Way It Is*) is a hard story of female emancipation in a contemporary West. It depicts, again, the distance between the resistance to change and the dynamic process that configures the West, depicted through the lives of a few characters around the homestead of rancher Verl Lister. He is, in fact, the character that verbalizes the title quote, “Wyoming is fine just the way it is” (Proulx, *Fine* 189), a clear statement on that opposition to change. It is an answer to Carol Match, an independent Californian young woman that mentions the need of change, longing for a new conceptual map of the West, objecting to the static nature of the local: “‘The place needs some new people,’ she said. Vern understood that she just didn’t mean importing strangers. She meant an exchange” (Proulx, *Fine* 189). Carol is demanding new flows of people and other ethnicities in Wyoming: “(Carol) had endless

⁵⁸ To get tits-up in a ditch is an a phrase used by Wyoming ranchers that means that something has gone terribly wrong. The fact that it is also an army slang expression with the obvious connotations of a bad outcome is very relevant to the story. Source: www.slangdefine.org

recipes for Wyoming's betterment: bring back the train or start up a bus line for public transportation; invite black people and Asians to move in and improve ethnic diversity; shift the capital to Cody; make the state attractive to moviemakers and computer commuters" (Proulx, *Fine* 188). Proulx introduces here an element of motion and change as well as an element of diversity, an appreciation of difference against the patriarchal and narrow-minded notion of the West that Verl represents: "The whole world, except this California bitch, knew that there were no more frugal, thrifty, tough and hard-working people on the face of the earth than those in Wyoming. Work was almost holy, good physical labor done cheerfully and for its own sake, the center of each day, the node of Wyoming life" (Proulx, *Fine* 189). Carol's millionaire husband has made his fortune, ironically, through the Cowboy Slim program of weight loss, an anti-western enterprise in the eyes of a masculine West, more suitable for body-oriented Californians, who prioritize physical appearance. The irony lies in the program's success despite its alteration of the stereotypical Western male ideals.

The central character in the narrative is Verl's granddaughter Dakotah, a woman who, in people's eyes, does not conform with the ideal of Western femininity that they expect of her: "In school she learned again what she already knew; that she was different from others, unworthy of friends" (Proulx, *Fine* 190). Due to the untimely death of her parents, she has to be brought up by her grandparents, who raise her "technically" but with no affection of feelings: "The Listers did their *duty*, raising Dakotah, Bonita making peanut butter sandwiches for her school lunch while listening to *Morning Glory*, the pre-sunrise program of advertisements, a little news of the sensational kind, prayer and weather reports" (Proulx, *Fine* 190, first emphasis added). Verl and Bonita live in the West of the past, anchored to old ranch ideals and resisting alteration, by the end of the

20th century. The domestic space is a patriarchal trap from which Dakotah feels the urge to escape. She marries Sash Hicks, a sexist husband to whom she clearly states her freedom:

Get it yourself. I been bossed around since I was a kid. I didn't agree to be your maid. I worked a full shift and I'm tired. You should be getting *me* a beer. You act like a customer. Go on, talk to the manager and get me fired! She surprised herself. Where had this attitude come from? It was something in her, and it must be from her rebellious, unknown mother. (Proulx, *Fine* 200)

When she gets pregnant and leaves Hicks, Dakotah becomes a single mother, a prospect at which she is genuinely excited: "kept working at Bib Bob's, enjoying the apartment, having all that room for herself" (Proulx, *Fine* 201). As soon as her boss finds out about the pregnancy, she is immediately fired: "All the jolliness had dried up. She understood she was being fired" (Proulx, *Fine* 202). At this point, facing her lack of options, she decides to enlist, leaving her son, baby Verl, with her grandparents, Verl and Bonita. Dakotah sees the military career as the last opportunity to escape the suffocating domestic environment in which she is trapped. It is the aftermath of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks that left the world in shock, and the United States took up a Western quest to get the bad guys, when George W. Bush invoked in a Western sheriff-like speech that "there is a poster out West that says dead or alive" (George W. Bush on CNN), stirring national sentiment and feelings of revenge.

In Iraq, Dakotah is a Military Police officer, suggesting that "she is going to play sheriff and set the rules on this new frontier" (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 101). However, she soon realizes that the American army is still "a man's army and women were inferior in all ways" (Proulx, *Fine* 206), paralleling the old patriarchal Western ideal of power codes.

Besides, she misses the vast and empty Wyoming landscape when in “constant presence of so many people [...] So homesickness took the shape of longing for wind, an empty landscape, for silence and privacy. She longed for the baby and came to believe she was homesick for the old ranch” (Proulx, *Fine* 207). She only finds affection through a new friend, a soul mate called Marnie: “For the first time in her life, had someone to talk to, someone who understood everything, from rural ways to failing at tests. Marnie said that maybe they were in love. They talked about setting up house together with baby Verl after they got out” (Proulx, *Fine* 212). Away from Wyoming, an imagined West of affections comes into being, projecting a future with Marnie and baby Verl. When she reads in a letter that “two lesbians” have opened a store in town back home, she feels ready to come back and carry out those plans for the future. The West is presented here as a process in motion, acknowledging the diversity that Carol Match was demanding.

On duty, she carries out practices that she despises, such as searching Iraqi women under their burkas, a procedure that relativizes her previous misfortunes: “Never had the world seemed so vile and her problems so mean and petty” (Proulx, *Fine* 213). The relational global affects set her perception of home right before a personal tragedy takes place. In a mission, a bomb explodes under their car, Marnie is killed and Dakotah loses an arm. Proulx criticizes here the foreign policy of the Bush administration that left many –on both sides of the war– feeling abandoned and betrayed⁵⁹. Dakotah is sent home after learning to wear a prosthetic arm, grieving for Marnie. Once there, she learns that baby Verl has died after falling off her grandfather’s truck, who was carrying him in the back.

⁵⁹ Proulx’s political stance refers here to the torture and abuse of prisoners at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq during the Gulf War, an incident that raised international awareness and concern.

The proleptic trait from the title takes profound and full significance with the dramatic resolution of the story. To make matters worse, the story suggests that she will still have to take care of her –also wounded– husband, lying in a hospital bed, and unable to speak. She never finished the process of divorce and now it is her duty as a wife to take care of him, following old patriarchal practices. However, despite the torn dreams and lost opportunities, Proulx establishes a local space where individuals such as single lesbian mothers make use of their freedom by leaving traditional domestic spaces where they were conventionally assigned a purely tending role. The end scene might suggest that Dakotah, as in the scene with her husband, will again make use of her freedom, however, her dream for freedom seems to collapse again into ranch life, a life from which she wanted to escape.

In *Close Range*, “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” appears as another narrative on a woman who unexpectedly finds emancipation from Western men’s legacy and finds her space in the land of ranches, usually passed through ownership in a patriarchal way. By using magic realism at two levels, Proulx’s West here depicts an inversion of Western roles, as men, traditionally assumed to inherit and take care of ranches, decide to run away from the Western rural world, leaving no option to women but to take over. The two elements of magic realism, a magic bunchgrass seed that fixes an area outside the ranch, and an old abandoned tractor that comes alive and starts a relationship with the daughter of the ranch, carry symbolic meanings. The seed never dries or dies, suggesting the rural domestic space where the action takes place and symbolizing Ottaline’s resilience and endurance. The tractor, on the other hand, stands for a reconnection with the past, suggesting the importance of preserving heritage –old West– while accepting change.

The new Western womanhood here, represented by the protagonist, Ottaline, is far from the Calamity Jane stereotype of Western girlhood or the idealized sexist “cowgirl” image of “a young pretty squeezed into tight jeans and stacked boots” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 93). Rather, it embodies a type that has taken up ranch affairs and become “default men” (Asquith, *Lost Frontier* 93). Proulx confronts the stereotype with Ottaline’s description: “(She) was the oldest, distinguished by a physique approaching the size of a hundred-gallon propane tank” (Proulx, *Close Range* 125).

Through her, Proulx portrays a feminized West. Her father, Aladdin, leans on to an idea of an old West that he has learned about not from birth or direct ranch experience but from movies and books. In this imaginary West, he has never been on a horse. Old Red, Aladdin’s father and patriarch, had come from the East after a string of odd jobs to establish himself in Wyoming. The postwar new times proved lethal for his sheep wool business, when “peace and thermoplastic resin yarns ruined the sheep market and they went to cattle” (Proulx, *Close Range* 122). Aladdin, his son, had two girls who play with “plastic” cows (Proulx, *Close Range* 124).

At Aladdin’s wedding, guests throw wheat seeds –instead of rice– that magically grow into wheatgrass (“bunchgrass”), symbolically delimiting an area around the ranch that never dries. The area works both as a symbol of the old ranch practices as well as a sign of motion and change, a process. Aladdin dresses to impersonate the old Western past with cowboy boots and hat but lacks his father skills in managing the ranch. Proulx also confronts the masculine Western type with his lack of knowledge, and she makes him unable to take care of technology. The machines that he uses and puts aside –like the tractor– show his inefficiency and incompetency in keeping the ranch working. To his disappointment, his sons are uninterested in and “displeased” (Proulx, *Close Range*

146) with the ranch, and go away to live in Las Vegas, another artificial Western creation. This rejection of the old ways by her brothers leaves Ottaline stuck at home, with the burden of her own physique, seeing her dreams of leaving the ranch dissipate: "It's so lonesome here" (Proulx, *Close Range* 136). Proulx focuses again on the issue of lonely women in isolated areas here, although she is not alone, as the woman in "55 miles to the Gas Pump." Ottaline is not allowed to go into town as she might damage the car suspension; her only contact with the outside world comes from the conversations that she listens to on the police scanner radio, an artificial connection with the outside world, through technology, in which she does not take an active part.

Ottaline takes up a task traditionally restricted to men, father and son, often. She is in fact very good with animals and heavy ranch work, unlike her father. She asks Aladdin to let her repair the old "a treacherous John Deere 4030" (Proulx, *Close Range* 131) that he carelessly had left to rust in the middle of the land some time ago. This "appreciation of difference" in the responsibility roles within the ranch environment also exhibits a bonding father-daughter relationship, in which she takes up the traditional role of the son. By letting her do it, Aladdin unknowingly grants the tractor of magic powers, a metaphor of magic Aladdin's lamp. The tractor starts talking to Ottaline, questioning at first her role as a repairwoman. The flirting between the two projects the relationship between women, technology and their active role in the West, challenging patriarchal and masculine stereotypes. The connection reads like a love affair. When she pours "penetrating oil" (Proulx, *Close Range* 141) into the tractor for lubrication, the sexualized scene shows Ottaline taking the initiative: "You know what? I was you I'd lay back and enjoy it" (Proulx, *Close Range* 141). The tractor complains to Ottaline that her dad had

poured beer in his tank some time ago: “If your daddy was a get up here today I would hurt him for what he done a my brake system” (Proulx, *Close Range* 137).

Eventually, Ottaline meets and marries a cattle buyer’s son, Flyby Amendiger, but the inverted roles and the responsibilities around the ranch do not change. Flyby does not interfere with Ottaline’s management, as he does his job dealing with cows, outside the ranch. Aladdin, who has bought a small plane –1948 Aeronca Sedan–, tries to land it in his field, catches the plane’s wheel on the old John Deere’s iron frame, and is killed in the plane crash. Ironically, it feels like a revenge on Aladdin, who abandoned him on the field and “substituted” him by a more modern piece of technology.⁶⁰ “The plane soared up, shaking in the wind. It rose in a steep climb, leveled out and sailed away. When it was only a distant speck it turned and came to the ranch again, curving and sliding, coming low. At a certain angle it resembled a billboard in the sky” (Proulx, *Close Range* 147). During his showing off the plane Aladdin’s wife urges him to come back. “YOU GET DOWN HERE!” (Proulx, *Close Range* 147). Both the use of the imperative and the capitalization suggest that female power has taken over. On obeying, Aladdin meets his fate: “As though obeying her, it touched the ground, sending a puff of dust, bounced back into the air, and made two more prodigious hops before the left wheel caught the iron frame of the abandoned tractor and the plane fell off on its face, crumpled in a mash of cloth, metal and rancher” (Proulx, *Close Range* 148). The technological innovations have not helped Aladdin in keeping the male dominance of a ranch that a “different” type of female rancher challenges.

⁶⁰ Proulx casts here an inquisitive eye on big ranches whose owners fly planes over their fields for spraying chemicals on their fields –crop dusting– or simply for supervision, replacing manpower. This practice reached its peak after the Second World War: a 1948 survey estimated that 20,000 U.S. farmers and ranchers had their own plane (Lambertson).

Old Red, watching from the porch, predicts the future: "They'd plant Aladdin. Ottaline and her scytheman would run the ranch. Wauneta would pack her suitcase and steer for the slot machines. The minute she was out of sight he intended to move out of the pantry and back upstairs. The main thing in life was staying power. That was it: stand around long enough you'd get to sit down" (Proulx, *Close Range* 148). The fable of Aladdin's lamp –by which, whether poorer or rich, the true wealth lies within us– ends with Ottaline inheriting wealth. This wealth, as it turns out, has been part an active force of affections, of which her "staying power" made her succeed in front of old failing patriarch attitudes. The lack of opportunity for women is central to the story, however, Ottaline and Old Red are the survivors, despite both being marginalized, due to that "staying power." They both represent opposing views on a West that reads as an active process of region that does not fully dismiss those old views.

In the end, the magic has symbolically granted Ottaline the ranch and a voice of stewardship. Ottaline inherits a ranch that she did not want to possess. However, through hard work and determination she takes over a place traditionally reserved for men. This relevant shift in perspective signifies an appreciation of difference, as the Western narratives have traditionally ignored and neglected the contribution of women. Ottaline's journey as a pilgrim, reading the surroundings and assimilating the environment of the ranch, suggests that women are better equipped to address the lack of opportunities in ranching. She is a pilgrim that reads the signs of the surroundings and fits in the landscape and environment of the place. The fact that it is a woman and not a man who inherits the ranch shows this appreciation of difference in a West that has traditionally ignored and neglected the role of women, representing the reversal of roles in the West that I identified in Proulx before. To insist in this appreciation of difference,

it seems that Proulx suggests that women solve the lack of opportunity better than men in the ranches of the West. By showcasing the capabilities of female characters, Proulx emphasizes this appreciation of difference and challenges traditional narratives by highlighting the potential of women in the context of the American West⁶¹.

The same lack of opportunity in times of economic hardship is the central theme in “A Lonely Coast” that was part of the selection in *Close Range*. It is a first-person narrative about four women in the West and their issues with relationships, place, self-respect, identity, and underlying violence connected to the passion that the four of them feel. The story has continuous references to the ocean—hence the title—, which contrasts with the suffocating or enclosed feeling that the narrative projects. The narrator remembers a trip to Oregon with her husband and she still visualizes a foggy coast with waves rolling in: “Up the lonely coast a stuttering blink warned the ships away. I said to Riley that was what we needed in Wyoming—lighthouses. He said no, what we needed was a wall around the state with turrets with machine guns in them” (Proulx, *Close Range* 193), a clear allusion to the open and closed spaces and the “fences in the mind” (Proulx at John Adams 1999). The narrator’s second job, to make ends meet, is working as a night waitress at the Wig-Wag Lodge, where a Japanese-American owner, Jimmy Shimazo, serves Japanese food to Japanese visitors and sells them Western souvenirs. The woman

⁶¹ “Dump Junk” (in *Bad Dirt*) replicates the same appreciation of difference in the West. It renders the hostility between Bobcat and Christina, long-estranged siblings that need to sort out their parents’ affairs after not having seen each other for forty years, “although the old animosities flared up immediately” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 190). Bobcat had verbally and physically abused her: “He had taunted constantly, telling her she was ugly, that she smelled bad, that she would do the world a service if she shot herself in the brain” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 190). In an old patriarchal system, Bobcat inherits the house and Christina a leaking kettle—her mother’s prized possession and the junk inside the house. It looks like Christina has not inherited anything valuable, yet “there had been an old sentence appended to the teakettle bequest: “Less is more” How many times had she heard her mother say that?” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 195). The story takes a turn when Christina starts having wishes when she discovers that the old kettle has magical qualities and grants wishes. However, the story has a sour ending, when Christina wishes “her brother was dead” and who dies is a secret brother whose identity had been unknown to her: “The teakettle played no favorites” (Proulx, *Bad Dirt* 205). The story also projects the notion of appreciation of difference through the dynamic of wish-granting and the role of women in the story, when Christina is symbolically empowered by the magic teakettle, in the same way as Ottaline.

finds out that this reality of Asians taking over the West is on its way: "He was talking about getting a real Jap cook in from California. 'That's all we need around here,' said Justin. They say now the Japs own the whole southwest part of the state, refineries, big smokestacks" (Proulx, *Close Range* 202). The story ends up tragically after a car chase and a gun battle, leaving two dead and a few wounded: "it's easier that you think to yield up to the dark impulse" (Proulx, *Close Range* 207).

The narrative follows more than one plotline and it focuses on the active role of women in today's West by exposing the distance with the Western myth. The main story focuses on Josanna and her lover, a story that ends in their deaths in a road accident, after a rage outburst. The second plotline deals with the end of the narrator's marriage after finding her husband having sex with a minor. As many characters in the collection, she had left the family ranch, unattached to it, and became a cook. The narrative flashbacks on her grandfather, another old West patriarch who, after being in World War II, took up ranching and was unsuccessful. Proulx inserts a humorous and grotesque element in an episode of animal "dwarfism" of the horses, a symbolically diminishing idea of the myth.

The three women in the narrative have all suffered "rough marriages full of black eyes and sobbing imprecations, all of them knew the trouble that came with drinking men and hair-trigger tempers" (Proulx, *Close Range* 195). They will not adapt to that conception of the West that they are somehow "selling" as a cultural stereotype, and they struggle to find and connect through affects. They go out on Saturday nights in a predatory search for men. They seek sexual release with no attachment. They dress in boots and tight jeans, taking over that role of masculinity in making decisions and being predatory by listening to their sexual impulses only, a clear inversion of the Western male

role. The narrator describes their prays by summarizing the combination of violent sexual behavior from which the three women have escaped:

Wyos are touchers, hot-blooded and quick, and physically yearning. Maybe it's because they spend too much time handling livestock [...] This instinct extends to anger, the lightning backhand slap, the hip-shot to throw you off balance, the elbow, a jerk and a wrench, the swat, and then the serious stuff that's meant to kill and sometimes does. (Proulx, *Close Range* 195)

Different stories by Proulx depict this rough and violent sexuality (Diamond Felts, Mero Croom). Here, Josana, in the end, finds a partner, a tempered cowboy that she can tame, who, in turn, might mean the annihilation of her new independent identity and a return to a submissive role to the myth.

Annie Proulx does also address here her recurring theme of the lack of opportunities, which aligns with the third practice of Neil Campbell's of appreciation of difference. Through the stories of these women Proulx explores their issues with relationships, connection to the land, development of their identities, and themes such as self-respect and the underlying violence intertwined with passions. These experiences reveal the shaping force of human relatedness and appreciation of difference that Campbell highlights as referential to elaborate on his understanding of the American West.

The appreciation of difference portrayed in these stories remains a relevant and highlighted theme, the most overarching story of the whole collection. It was precisely this focus on the appreciation of difference that made the book global and contemporary. "Brokeback Mountain" closes *Close Range* and it is undoubtedly the one that has been the most reviewed, studied, and analyzed from Proulx's bibliography, due

to the global hit of its film adaptation in 2005. This success granted it the status of cultural phenomenon and the story gave way to a big number of publications, discussions, scholarly work and interpretations, mostly due to her continuous challenge of Western –gender– stereotypes.

The narrative was first published in *The New Yorker* as a single short story on October 10, 1997 and it was selected for the O. Henry Short Story Award. Putting things in perspective, it is interesting to consider now Proulx’s initial plans of not including it in *Close Range*, after the worldwide praise that it finally achieved. With it, Proulx raised mainstream awareness on the existence of “other Wests” with the breaking up of taboos and conventions of that violent and hostile West by openly representing repressed gay love.

It might appear anomalous that such a discussed and analyzed story, with its global repercussion, takes up a relatively small space in this dissertation in terms of literary importance. However, for my purposes, I am only using it to illustrate one aspect of Proulx’s West that matches the reading of the region within the theoretical framework of Neil Campbell’s ideas. Questions and remarks on “Brokeback Mountain” are common in interviews with Proulx, and she does not avoid them. However, for her, the narrative is simply a story “about homophobia in a place” (Proulx qtd. in Salter Reynolds 2008). She has also explained numerous times how the story came about, in 1997, when she noticed a young hand observing some young cowboys in the middle of a pool game:

There was something in his expression, a kind of bitter longing, that made me wonder if he was a country gay. Then I began to consider what it might have been like for him, not the real person against the wall, but for any ill-informed, confused, not-sure-of-what-he-was-feeling youth growing up in homophobic rural Wyoming. A few weeks later I listened

to a vicious rant of elderly bar-café owner who was incensed the two 'homos' had come in the night before and ordered dinner. She said that is her bar regulars had been there [...] things would have gone badly for them (Proulx, *Brokeback* 130).

On publishing it, she unwrapped a taboo topic in the West: homosexual love in a strongly heterosexual male-dominated region. It is true that Thomas Savage's *The Power of the Dog* (1967) had been published decades before, a Western novel that suggests love between an older rancher and his brother's young stepson, –now also in revision after Jane's *Campion's* movie adaptation– yet it did not reach the vast audience that *Brokeback Mountain* did. Savage's book did not openly challenge male stereotypes as it did not depict homosexuality in the West in such an open way. In its afterword, Proulx reminds how, despite the positive reception and critical praise, reviewers in the 1960s “dodged the homosexuality issue by reporting a simplistic contest of good versus evil” (Proulx, “Afterword” 274). However, after closer reading, she herself realized Savage's talent in not offending yet getting his message across: “(I) saw how this highly skilled writer had craftily transmuted what might have been an explicit physical scene in the hideout willows into a nature description that could offend no one but was quite obvious to those in the knowing” (Proulx, “Afterword” 292). Even before “*Brokeback Mountain*,” through *Rope Butt*, the open-minded cowboy poet in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, Proulx had already expressed how appearances are kept in that narrow-minded West regarding homosexuality: “He didn't much care for the two nancy boys who had lately come up from Dallas, but he was willing to live and let live, for certain bunkhouse friendships were not unknown, though little talked about” (Proulx, *Ace* 138).

“*Brokeback Mountain*” develops the story of two young ranch hands, Ennis and Jack – “high school dropout boys with no prospects” (Proulx, *Close Range* 256)– that

consume a homosexual love on Brokeback Mountain while they are taking care of a herd of sheep in 1960s Wyoming. The two have found each other in their desperation of finding work in a culture and lifestyle that apparently does not have a place for them, becoming “perpetuators and victims of the cowboy myth” (Campbell, “From Story” 212). The two fight their insecurities, their own homophobia –just like Phil Burbank’s character in *The Power of the Dog*– and the need to keep it secret in a violent West that lynches anyone who steers away from the norm: “Once Ennis said, ‘I’m no queer,’ and Jack jumped in with ‘Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody’s business but ours’” (Proulx, *Close Range* 262). At the same time, they try to stick to the faded old cowboy ideal of the open range –lengthy discussed here–, an unfenced place that no longer exists, except for an old illusion in people’s minds. Campbell notes that 1960s Wyoming is a kind of “limbo, a cold repressed space determined by strict codes and duties” (“From Story” 212), curiously, oblivious or disconnected from what is going on in the world (Vietnam is indirectly mentioned in the story). Their “one-shot thing” cowboy language is contradicted by their decades of deep, intimate love.

Jack and Ennis carry on their secret affair all the way through 1983 on fishing yearly trips. Jack’s “accidental” death at the end of the story suggests that he has been killed for being homosexual with a tire iron, something that Ennis immediately figures out: “Jack was pumping up a flat on the truck out of a back road when the tire blew up. The bead was damaged somehow and the force of the explosion slammed the rim into his face, broke his nose and jaw and knocked him unconscious on his back. By the time someone came along he had drowned in his own blood [...] No, he thought, they got him with the tire iron” (Proulx, *Close Range* 279). He has been violently murdered by the consequences of the Western mythology. Ennis remembers the time when his father

had taken him to see the corpse of a neighbor who had been beaten to death with a tire iron for living with another man, a lesson on the patriarchal and prejudiced values and violence that have been a central part of the myth of the West.

The story manifests the distance between the closed domestic and work spaces that Ennis and Jack inhabit with the openness of the landscape that protects them. If we pay close attention to Proulx, Brokeback is the real character here, protecting Jack and Ennis from the changing West, in which they do not want to have a part. Brokeback is also the place where “they owned the world and nothing seemed wrong” (Proulx, *Close Range* 255). The mountain, a powerful symbol of the old days of the open range, becomes an ideal to which Jack and Ennis can barely hold on, contrasting with the type of sexuality that the myth despises. Only in Brokeback they assumed the change on masculinity codes with their sexual deviance, as once back home both Jack and Ennis are victims of social configuration. At home, they both exhibit social sexual stereotypes by having a family with kids, a consequence of social conventions, yet at Brokeback they develop their own domesticity as a couple.

“Brokeback Mountain” reads as a powerful and global practice in appreciation of difference as, perhaps, sexual masculinity is the most “untouchable” quality of the narrow-minded Western myth. Proulx’s contemporary West draws attention to this difference as a way to expose this other West. “Brokeback Mountain” is an obvious challenge to all those repressed in a patriarchal West by stating appreciation of difference through the love of Jack and Ennis as a symbol of the new West, an acceptance of equality and diversity. This depiction of an “other West” has made the story a cultural phenomenon, stating the big distance between the brutal consequences of the myth and the acceptance of the reality of “other Wests” one more time.

5.4 Final Remarks: Ginger Cows and Alligators

In this final section of the analysis, I have examined Proulx's Wyoming trilogy as a cohesive unit, selecting short stories from all three volumes in a non-chronological order. The analysis has dealt with an organic and mixed approach and it has shown that Proulx depicts the West as a changing region that does not fully dismiss old myths or ideals. Her different perspective of the region acknowledges existing narratives and it also highlights the usually overlooked underside that has traditionally been dismissed by mainstream narratives.

The selection of stories has been analyzed through Neil Campbell's theory of "affective critical regionality" (*Affective 4*), one that he proposes as a tool for reading region. This theoretical approach aligns with Proulx's portrayal of the West, as she writes about regions that are in the middle of a process, changing, or being transformed. I have used the "new cartography" (Campbell, *Affective 2*) that Campbell suggests for analyzing region to examine Proulx's short narratives on Wyoming, by following three main practices that support this theoretical framework.

First, "a redistribution of the sensible" (Campbell, *Affective 4*), which understands region as a place of continuous variation. This concept challenges the cultural stereotypes associated with the American West. Stories such as "The Great Divide" or "Them Old Cowboy Songs" highlight the uselessness of holding on to the unreal myth of pioneers, as defined in Turnerian terms. "Man Crawling Out of Trees" or "Testimony of the Donkey" expose the maladjustment of urban newcomers coming into rural areas and trying to relive old Western practices, while disregarding or ignoring the landscape. "The Half-Skinned Steer" and "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water" shed light on the

vanishing world of old Western ranches, which have often turned into tourist attractions in the West, debunking the romanticized myth associated with them.

The second practice involves exploring “the radical potential of the minor” (Campbell, *Affective 4*), by which the local disrupts and challenges established notions of the West. The set of stories around the fictional town of Elk Tooth and the relationship between its characters and the connections around them, both within the community and with global economic forces on which they depend, illustrate this practice. Stories such as “The Summer of the Hot Tubs,” “Florida Rental” or “The Contest” –to name a few–, expose the dynamic process of affections within the community. The stories also outline the connections and interplay between local dynamics and global economics that shape the town’s circumstances, stating the relevance of those attitudes and encounters –from the inside to the outside and vice versa– to understand and define the West.

The third practice –“human relatedness” and an “appreciation of difference” (Campbell, *Affective 4*)–, again, challenges the stereotyped local of the inward-looking American West. Stories such as “Brokeback Mountain,” “The Bunchgrass at the End of the World” or “Tits Up in a Ditch” show a West where women and Indians are in charge of ranches, and homosexual cowboys or Asian landowners populate the region holding protagonist roles in both social and economic affairs in the West. This appreciation of difference completes this challenging post-West that Annie Proulx conveys in her *Wyoming Stories*, through a powerful statement about human relatedness, where submission to the patriarchal myth is just as imaginary as the success of the pioneer dream, and the relationship of the characters with landscape defines, in most cases, their degree of failure or success.

Chapter 6. Conclusions: "Place Makes Us What We Are"

Come out West and see the best it'll ever be
I know you won't stay permanently
but come out West and see
Climb up on a rock and stretch out in the sun
I close my eyes and let my imagination run
I'm tracing your initials in the shining sand
I'm counting out the days till I see you again
Who knows what the future holds
Or where the cards may fall
But if you don't come out West and see
You'll never know at all

–Lucinda Williams, *West*

In *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America* (1981), William Least Heat-Moon writes that “there’s something about the desert that doesn't like man, something that mocks his instinct and makes his constructions look feeble and temporary. Yet, it’s just that inhospitableness that endears the arid rockiness, the places pointy and poisonous, the men looking for its discipline” (160). The quotation offers multiple readings, one of which highlights the persistent nature of human beings in exerting their agency repeatedly. It takes me back to a quotation by Proulx: “the country [...] wanted to scrape off its human ticks” (*Close Range* 68). Proulx warns us on dismissing our natural surroundings. The notion of humans continually reenacting practices of shaping the landscape calls for critical attention and examination. This repetitive approach of interacting with and

molding the natural environment raises a need for critical attention and examination of such practices.

In “The Rediscovery of North America,” Barry Lopez states that “the true wealth that America offered, wealth that could turn exploitation into residency, greed into harmony, was to come from one thing –the cultivation and achievement of local knowledge. It was in the pursuit of local knowledge alone that one could comprehend the notion of a home and its attendant responsibilities” (“Rediscovery” 12). Lopez is alluding to an enduring approach of humans, viewing landscape solely in terms of what can be gained from it, how it can be “used,” and where settlements should be established. This mindset, which has persisted across centuries and civilizations needs to be addressed as well, urges us to reconsider our relationship with the land, moving beyond an extractive utilitarian approach to one that acknowledges the need for change and deeper understanding of our responsibilities and connection to it, a sustainable and harmonious coexistence that, more than ever, demands action.

The American West has been portrayed as the last “contemporary” land –the last frontier– to be conquered. It has not only appeared in literature as an empty space, with its mysteries and complexities, it has always been full with “something” though that fueled fantasies and justification to continue exploring. This idea of region –particularly fixed during the era of the Manifest Destiny– established a limited and self-serving perspective that is still alive today, with its dramatic environmental consequences. The empty landscape was probably never empty, as this concept appeared in that Turnerian era as opposed to “filling it up” with people. The approach, though limited, is the one on which the scholarly work and criticism is dwelling. From those first pioneers to the contemporary “trailer-parked” West, irreversible and dramatic “marks” on the land have

taken place at the dictate of social and economic forces. The extractors are the same, nameless and absent. In fact, the 20th century alone witnessed more drastic changes, depletions of natural resources –water, wood— fossilized fuels- and erasure of ecosystems than the preceding twenty centuries combined.

As communities formed in the West, small towns or local entities, they became part of that same process of region. The question is not, after all, how they got here, but rather, where we go from here. Local distinctiveness has slowly given way to a sameness in the Western American landscape that cannot be disregarded. I have used the term “walmarted” America a few times in this dissertation –other authors have used “macadamization” or “starbucked”— to describe the homogeneity of the landscape after human action, one that has filled the regions with photocopied malls and trailer parks, artificially embellished with hundreds of franchise buildings. The global picture suggests a key disappearing feature: the essence of towns, cities, and neighborhoods. In short, the role of the small communities in front of the unescapable monsters of globality. Kowalewski warns that people lose their sense of care for the places in which they live and work (“Contemporary” 12). Beneath the surface, beneath the prosperity of America, there is an underside made of peripheral landscapes, marginalized communities, and their associated struggles. If the spirit of place is intimately connected with the spirit of time.

Time and place, community and struggle are a focal point in Proulx’s literature. Annie Proulx’s fiction addresses all these hybrid and multi-layered concerns through her Western narratives. Her main concern is landscape, if understood in terms of the relational spaces where humans perform agency through a period of time in history or read as interaction between humans and the natural world. Landscape is always her

main character and serves a political purpose in terms of ecological and environmental awareness. She urges us to listen and pay close attention. Her direct and intense relationship with the American landscape –encompassing the East, West and Northwest– explores specific moments in history when small communities are undergoing a decisive process in their specific geographic and economic contexts, always pushed around by larger national and global economic forces.

This essentially political approach to landscape has been extensively explored in this dissertation, highlighting how landscape is not just central to the story but it is “the story.” Her characters experience landscape in various ways, including its climate, weather, geology, environments, and, undoubtedly, its history. The natural environment is never portrayed sentimentally or nostalgically, as an unspoiled state untouched by human presence. Instead, Proulx envisions the recreation of an isolated landscape as a practice of the mind, acknowledging that everything is connected. In her narratives, she travels back and forth from the times when the West had slight nomadic marks –but marks after all– to today’s West of trailer parks, pump jacks, and rusty machinery. The descriptions of the landscape are often “interrupted’ by economic corporate landmarks –gas stations, agribusinesses, pipelines–, reminders of the current extractions, depletions, and wounds on the land.

I have established how her methodology in completing her fiction is closely linked to her own life and experience as a “professional outsider.” By focusing on the lives of ordinary people, and often referencing real or historical characters to set a credible historical background to her stories, Proulx captures the evolution of everyday life within the context of larger social, personal, economic and even geological change. The vast amount of research only serves to prove the point on the inflicted changes on nature.

Such complex and multiple issues can only be dealt with, I argue, from a hybrid and multiple examining approach. The first tool of analysis used for examining the Western corpus that I selected here has focused on the exploration of how characters interact with the landscapes that they inhabit, and how they perceive that natural world around them. The two potential approaches that I found come through exploitation and possession, what I distinguish here as disjunction (experienced by those that I targeted as improvers); or through attentiveness, and respect, what I distinguish here as conjunction (experienced by those that I targeted as pilgrims). My argument is that Proulx's characters follow one of the two mindsets towards landscape, and they can all be classified into pilgrims or improvers, terms that discover my theoretical framework and methodology, for which, as thoroughly explained in the introduction, I relied on the work by authors such as Scott Slovic, Barry Lopez and Mark Tredinnick. Characters move at times from one mindset to the other, as the examples of Loyal Blood and Bob Dollar have shown. Other characters dwell between the two, displaying a complex and dynamic attitude towards the land, by shifting back and forth from being in conjunction to being in disjunction.

The main inflictor of irreversible changes on the Western landscape, as portrayed in Proulx's fiction, is the improver type, which describes a myriad of individuals that populate Proulx's narratives. Improvers focus their target on natural resources, whose extraction leaves an irreversible mark on the landscape. This is the economic turning cycle of the West. Their attitude towards landscape is based on economic gain through possession and extraction, with the obvious environmental consequences for the land. This is the core of Annie Proulx's literature, and the one, I insist, that cannot be lightly dismissed. With the American West as testing grid –to be used as a global model— her

narratives tell the story of the West through detrimental effects of that exploitative mindset on the landscape. For that, Proulx does also consider time and travels back to the beginning of the pre-pioneering times. An improver mindset supposes disjunction from the natural environment, disregard for the species and natural processes and seeing the land in terms of use and abuse. Early settlers depicted in stories like that of the Dunmires or the Shears in *Postcards*, show a violent attitude towards the land. These are blatant fictional examples of disregard for the soil that supports them. Mining extractors or racist farmers like Kortnegger abuse the land as a lifestyle, with no attention paid to the consequences. The same lack of attention is performed by urban dwellers such as Witkin in *Postcards*, the Mitchells in “Men Crawling out of Trees” or a myriad of newcomers. Among all, Loyal Blood and his transformation into an improver and his fatal road to disjunction across the landscapes of the American West stands out. Loyal, the main character in *Postcards*, starts out the novel in conjunction –a pilgrim– not just with the land, but also attuned with the changes that the new postwar times are bringing. Proulx represents the situation of rural farms on the East as a symbol for all rural America, reading thus the economic upheaval of the last forty years. Loyal starts his journey as someone who reads the signs around the landscape and pays close attention to the natural world. He perceives the relations, understands the shifts, the weather and the seasons, and he knows exactly how to take care of the land, make it more fertile and adjust the farm to the times. When Loyal flees the farm, he symbolically abandons an old way of looking at the land but he also detaches himself from the community and falls into the economically transitional times of postwar opportunities by abusing the land to remain alive. To survive, he carries out a long list of jobs, all related to extraction, which slowly numb his senses and detach him from the natural world. His old learnings

regarding the land in rapid motion and change only allow him to survive in jobs that steer him further and further away from the landscape. Even though Loyal is the first case study in this dissertation, Proulx portrays innumerable improvers throughout her narratives, both individuals and corporative improvers. One such example is Global Pork Rind, a modern-day archetype of absent landowners that exploit the land and move on, and that we can find in *That Old Ace in the Hole*.

A pilgrim mindset, on the other hand, is the individual attitude that Annie Proulx proposes for achieving connection –conjunction– with the natural environment. This mindset is typified through the narrative of Bob Dollar, main character in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, through whom the reader finds how the premise in *Postcards* is reversed. Bob Dollar comes in the West with an improver mindset in search for land for his employer to exploit. However, he gradually comes to achieve conjunction with the landscape through an awakening of the senses and by paying “deep attention” to the landscape. Proulx uses Bob’s journey to illustrate the potential for individuals to slow down the depletion of the land process by fostering a sense of community and cooperation. Intimately Bob joins the efforts of the community of Woollybucket in opposing Global Pork Rind’s plans and working towards the establishment of a sanctuary that replicates the concept of buffalo commons, allowing the land to return to a similar original state and introducing the original buffalo of the plains. Those pilgrims that populate as well the narratives of Annie Proulx confront the disjunctive nature of improvers with attitudes of awareness, understanding and observation, a practice that Proulx carries out as well in the process of preparing her narratives.

By emphasizing the importance of a pilgrim mindset, the analysis shows that Proulx urges her readers to a deeper connection and responsibility towards the

environment, suggesting that a shift in perspective and behavior is mandatory for addressing the ecological issues faced by the American West –specifically– as a model for the global regions. By focusing on the American West, Proulx finds a useful setting in which her theories about landscape and human relationships can be easily tested within the powerful and inspiring frame of Western history and the contrasts between romanticized, mythic representations of the American West and the more realistic and contemporary approaches to the region. However, the myth has fallen. Proulx’s approach denounces the prevailing mindset of viewing the land solely in terms of what we can extract from it and how we can utilize it for our benefit. A closer look at Robert Adams’ photographic essay in *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range* –previously referenced–, provides further evidence of the transformation and imprint of human presence on the American West. The collection captures the changing landscape of the West, including urban and rural areas, suburban neighborhoods, desert ranches, and the prevalence of cars –predominantly new ones, suburban Denver, churches, car dealers, restaurants and motels with pristine signs. It collectively conveys a sense of a “West in construction” or in a state of progression, as it includes a number of pictures of buildings, roads and city areas literally “under construction.” Those evocative black and white photographs are often devoid of people, yet their presence is constantly alluded to through that new agency –marks– on the apparently virgin landscape. That new West depicted in Adams’ work has already become an old West, with its contradictions and the amplification of those marks on the natural environment. Not surprisingly, the introduction in Adams’s book refers to pilgrims and improvers: “Thus even to preserve our national parks we must learn to use naturally the land that lies outside their boundaries, it is not likely that we will manage this as long as we

consider ourselves nature's natural enemies. As a step in the right direction, we might think of ourselves not as rapists of the landscape, but as its clumsy and naïve lovers" (Szarkowski vii). The distance between the quotation and the images lies in the seemingly optimistic tone of the collection through a magnificent mastery of the light in the West. The point here is that, similar to Annie Proulx, Adams depicts a changing West driven by postwar economic impulse and prosperity, a time when improvers are taking over the land at a rapid speed, yet another moment of change. His photography possesses a deeply ecosocial sense and can be easily situated within the framework of this dissertation. The fact that I am referring to this essay has to do with the fact that more often than not we are faced with readings of the West that hold a contemporary take on landscape and its use. This inclusion of Adams' work provides additional support for my examination of the West as a region undergoing transformation and underscoring the need to critically analyze cultural representations of the American West.

The American West that Proulx depicts in the works of the corpus –explored through my literary analysis– is a region in permanent motion and constant change, attuned with the widely-discussed concept of post-West, which challenges traditional views of the American West and emphasizes the dynamic ever-changing nature of the region. As a matter of fact, "change" is one of the most referred concepts in Proulx when she attempts to describe her works, reflecting her departure from traditional Western narratives. Her trademark as a writer is her engagement in political issues. Regardless of whether it is a Vermont farm, a ranch in Wyoming, or simply the backyard of a humble home in the metropolitan area of a city in Wyoming, her landscapes are always subject to motion and change, pushed around by global economic forces.

To read the American West that Proulx puts forward in her Western narratives I have used Neil Campbell's concept of affective critical regionality. Campbell's examining concept serves not only as a narrative tool for deconstructing traditional readings and assumptions regarding the American West –or any region, by extension– but it also explores any region in politically and contemporary terms. Campbell's theoretical framework consists of three practices that resonate with Proulx's portrayal of the American West as a dynamic and evolving entity. Through a meticulous examination of Proulx's Western corpus I have scrutinized these practices, namely the disruption of Western cultural stereotypes, the depiction of affective relationships that challenge patriarchal norms, and an alternative perspective on the landscape that transcends extractive practices.

Within Proulx's narratives, the potential of the marginalized communities emerges as a pivotal element in the preservation of the natural environment. Local rural communities, exemplified by Woolybucket –or Elk Tooth– assume a significant role in the process of land healing. The perpetual state of change and continuous variation within the region is not divorced from larger structural forces but it rather represents a fragment of the region's ongoing developmental trajectory. Proulx introduces the concept of community and togetherness through Woolybucket, a place that embraces former-improver Bob Dollar and facilitates his harmonious integration with nature, as a main example. Furthermore, she delivers a seemingly viable solution to counteract the exploitation of land by corporate entities.

Campbell's theoretical frame concurs with Proulx portrayal of American West as a region, challenging any traditional assumptions and representations of the West as region. That is why, again, to explore Proulx's description of the West in her literature I

have followed Campbell's procedures supporting his theoretical framework, the three main practices lengthy discussed and analyzed. I explore how Proulx's stories disclose a "redistribution of the sensible" (Campbell, *Affective* 4), that she depicts in terms of breaking up Western cultural stereotypes, portraying affective relations –unheard of in patriarchal West– and defining the landscape in conjunctive terms rather than strictly extractionist practices. Then, the "potential of the minor" (Campbell, *Affective* 4) surfaces in Proulx's narrative through one of the main land-healing solutions for preserving the natural environment: local rural communities. The state of permanent change and continuous variation is not detached from major structures but it is a fragment of the process of the region in motion. This notion of community and togetherness has been exposed through both Woollybucket, the community that has embraced former-improver Bob Dollar, contributing to his process of conjunction with nature; and Elk Tooth, a small town that Proulx characterizes through different and apparently independent stories. Woollybucket finds a solution to reverse the fatal process of the land being abused by corporations. Proulx offers sustainable and conscious ecotourism to help revert the land back to its former state before the times of the open range. Proulx's sense of the local –and regional– is completed with the practice of "appreciation of difference" (Campbell, *Affective* 4). Her portrayal of the West encompasses women assuming managerial roles in farming, Native Americans asserting their cultural heritage and land ownership –a quality granted only to the white Anglos, in traditional pioneer views–, gay ranch hands, and southern African Americans crossing the West in Cadillacs. This depiction extends beyond a mere multicultural "representation" of the West; rather, it highlights a cooperative landscape where affective relationships offer a glimmer of hope amidst Proulx's own personal pessimism.

In her own words, “what we hope will happen, which is mostly to go backward, is not going to happen. I mean, you can keep some part of how things were for a while. But change is going to win. And we are not going to have much to say about it at this point. We already did what we did” (Proulx at NYPL). Not exactly a hopeful note, even though, at times, she will admit to some kind of faith: “My feeling for forests is partly one of sorrow and partly one of rejoicing when I see the brilliant green of new young trees pushing up despite the shadow of climate change” (Proulx, “Powell’s”).

My examination verifies that Proulx’s representation of the West epitomizes it as a region in perpetual state of motion and metamorphosis. It is a region that defines itself through the existence of local communities and the profound affective bonds that they forge. Furthermore, the comprehensive understanding and acknowledgment of diversity and difference appear as integral elements that complement Proulx’s portrayal of the West within her Wyoming literature. These practices implore us to be acutely observant and attuned to the intricacies and nuances that shape this multifaceted depiction of the West in Proulx’s works.

Undoubtedly, Campbell’s theoretical framework, as an emerging trend in literary studies pertaining to the American West –and its potential extension to other regions, as stated before–, means a significant expansion of scholarly exploration. It is poised to encompass many works beyond literature, as Campbell advocates. This approach opens up avenues for interdisciplinary analysis, inviting diverse fields that might transcend its scholarly boundaries. Various disciplines that capture their own essence –in all directions– of the American West, such as music, cinema, photography or YouTube influencers, stand to benefit greatly from this interpretive lens. More importantly, I believe that it fosters the expansion and broadening of the global understanding of the

American West, providing an entry point into uncharted territories. Through the application of this hybrid lens, not only will these disciplines benefit from a deeper understanding, but the global concept of the American West itself will move on into new realms of exploration. Campbell's new theoretical work introduces the concept of "worldling" the West, a new political approach to the West, a new tool to explore and integrate into the studies of the West as an analyzing strategy, in tune with the concept of regionality, and with which I consider taking my research further.

With my focus on the dynamic landscapes of the American West, my aim is to establish innovative parameters that not only incorporate other fields and disciplines but also unravel the intricate, intertwining and interactive dynamics between them. At the same time, a focus on nature and ecosystem preservation is imperative, by staying away from traditional ecological practices –which undeniably include action and active contact with the landscape– and moving on to new realistic pilgrim attitudes, both locally and globally. The global West, imagined, real, conceptualized, even though read through German tourists on a Western train in the Mallorca August scorching sun, or through a Chinese paper cowboy hat factory in Guangzhou, is as real as anywhere else.

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C O D A

The American West has historically been represented, interpreted, and explained through music, mostly across the 20th and 21st centuries. In the same way, as in literature, the multiple readings of the West through music reflect and align with the distinct viewpoints from which the region has been read. Popular music is just one more approach –as is photography, journalism, or architecture, to name a few – but one that cannot be lightly dismissed due to its global reach and ubiquity.

The lyrics included at the beginning of each chapter convey a vision of the West that this dissertation has attempted to describe, a post-Western take. They are only a minuscule example of the vast amount of music devoted to the topic. The well-known artists here represented have often revisited the West through their music, establishing a sort of ‘romanticized unromantic’ West, by dwelling precisely in the ever-changing aspect of it and focusing on characters and themes that traditional Western music has been away from: losers, drifters, criminals, immigrants, Native Americans, local communities, mobility or economic failure, among many others.

The visits of Willy Vlautin of Richmond Fontaine and Sid Griffin of the Long Ryders –two essential figures in the movement of the new American rock movement of the 1980s-90s– to the University of the Basque Country some years ago respectively, were just a validation that music and literature are intrinsically entwined and, in my personal view, they can hardly be examined separately.

The songs to which the lyrics in the chapters belong can be listened to in the following playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5Az94e6cnJ0MMBWFCUvgwn?si=ff10566735ab40bd>.