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Dwelling in a Junkyard: Longing for Home and Self in Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*

I want to tell what the forests/ were like
I will have to speak / in a forgotten language[1]

Living Locally: Between Boundedness and Freedom

Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) is a piece of nature writing by a writer whose work on the local landscape and community serves as a guideline for understanding the changing world in which we live. The tripartite division of the article seeks to highlight, first, that for Ray to inhabit locally implies agreement with Barbara Ladd who defines place as something "provisional, fleeting, subversive, and creative,"[2] that is, as a geographical and psychic structure from which one may freely and creatively rediscover the world in multiple relationships. Secondly, it intends to show how Ray translates into language the intertwined processes of the discovery of her homeland and of her own self. The final

[1] W. S. Merwin, "Witness," in *Migration. New & Selected Poems* (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2005), 286.
[2] Barbara Ladd, "Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places—Past, Present and Future," in *South to a New Place*, *South to A New Place. Region, Literature, Culture*, eds. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 56.

part is a reflection on how in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* the local relies on the language of openness and relationality that, in Ray's case, offers the author the opportunity "for remaking her conception of self and reshaping the values of the human community in which she is embedded."[3] Ray's work functions, thus, as an act of restoration: symbolically, it advocates an ecological means of recovery for the damaged land she writes about, while, ultimately, her storytelling serves as a model for readers to rethink their understanding of and relation to the land.

In "The Regional Writer" Flannery O'Connor writes:

> To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality. It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking. Faulkner was at home in Oxford; Miss Welty is usually 'locally underfoot' in Jackson[…], and most of you and myself and many others are sustained in our writing by the local and the particular and the familiar without loss to our principles or our reason[4].

O'Connor argues that identity — in this case Southern identity — is something that is not to be found on the surface of a culture or a territory, but something that "lies very deep"[5] in qualities that endure and that are related to truth. Additionally, she notes: "In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist."[6] *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is a literary work of non-fiction that explores the themes of love and loss for the region, Southern Georgia, where the author lived with her family in a junkyard. Moreover, Ray's workis a journey that weaves together personal memoir and natural history; it also reveals that the author has found the place of her imagination—her home—in Baxley, Georgia, a region she describes with an observant eye and emotional verve. Paraphrasing Flannery O'Connor, one can affirm that Ray's writing is sustained "by the local and the particular and the familiar."[7]

[3] James Wohlpart, "Restor(y)ing the Self: Ecological Restoration in Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood,*"in *Walking the Land of Many Gods: Remembering Sacred Reason in Contemporary Environmental Literature* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013), 48.

[4] Flannery O'Connor, "The Regional Writer,"in *Mystery and Manners. Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 54.

[5] O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," 58.

[6] O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," 58.

[7] O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," 54.

On the other hand, by reading Ray's work within the nature writing tradition—and in contrast to the state of many rural regions on the planet, which in Ray's terms could be described as "overtilled, eroded, littered, polluted"[8]—I intend to show that her work offers a valuable contribution to the "awakening of perception to an ecological way of seeing,"[9] which characterizes the vital point of nature writing. In this line of argument, I also claim that Ray's work is universal in that it exposes and extends an understanding of the world that is relational, based on the recognition that *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is not just about the self, or human society, but more importantly about the world as a common home, as a system, of which humans are only one part. The condition Ray describes at the end of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* speaks for the global state of the Earth today:

> We recognize that the loss of our forests—which is to say of health, of culture, of heritage, of beauty, of the infinite hopefulness of a virgin forest where time stalls—is a loss we all share. All of our names are written on the deed to rapacity. When we log and destroy and cut and pave and replace and kill, we steal from each other and from ourselves. We swipe from our past and degrade our future."[10]

However, the complexity of the ecological crisis can be understood not only in terms of subject matter, but also in the open-ended and hybrid form of Ray's work, which combines her ecopolitical engagement with her personal voice.As a scholar with an interest in literary nature writing, I argue, alongside Daniel J. Philippon, that *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* shows that "the expansive sensibility expressed in much traditional nature writing still remains a useful tool with which to address the various humanistic challenges associated with sustainability."[11] In today's wastelands, it is important to read works that take the reader into the land of eloquent words and vivid imagery, sothat they may wonder about the possibilities rather than only the destruction and devastation.

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[8] Janisse Ray. *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1999), 165.

[9] Tom Lyon, *This Incomparable Land. A Guide to American Nature Writing* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001) x.

[10] Ray, *Ecology,* 271-272.

[11] Daniel Philippon, "Is American Nature Writing Dead?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 392.

Importantly, my proposal also engages with the idea offered by L. Hönnighausen in "The Old and the New Regionalism"that the area in which the rise of a new kind of regionalism has been most notable is "without doubt the ecological sphere."[12] This new regionalism is informed by local ecological knowledge and by the recognition that human well-being and environmental health are linked, a recognition that small-scale geographical units are most likely to promote respect for natural systems "while satisfying basic human needs in sustainable ways."[13] This essay argues thatby focusing on a (bio)region, a geographical area of similar ecosystems in which similar groups of species can be found and which isdefined by the different relationships that exist within them, Ray is operating simultaneously on "geographical terrain and terrain of consciousness."[14] Paul Shepard helps us to understand how self and place are related by writing:

> We are inclined to think of the environment as outside; our structure, heredity, and experience, inside. But the environment in which the heredity units, the chromosomes, live and act is a flux within the cell. This cellular environment is continually affected by and continuous with the outer world, receiving and giving substances carried by the blood. [...]. The natural world around me—the forest or desert or sea—is, like my genes, more permanent than I. Each of those habitats is like a great chromosome which I confront and which induces me to behave in certain ways[15].

Rather than presenting arguments about geographical determinism, Shepard is more interested in highlighting the relationship between consciousness and place, a connection that allows me to situate Ray's work. If *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is about the importance of a particular region to Ray's identity, her quest to preserve this particular landscape corresponds to the preservation of distinctiveness within American society, for it contributes to the reduction of the standardization of American life and challenges Ray's readers to listen to local voices. Ray's place-based narrative thus exemplifies the resurgence of regionalism in

[12] Lothar Hönnighausen, "The Old and the New Regionalism," in *"Writing" Nation and "Writing" Region in America,* eds. Johannes Willem Bertens and Theo d. Haen (Amsterdam: VU University Press), 17.

[13] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 135.

[14] Lawrence, *The Future*, 83.

[15] Paul Shephard, *Man in the Landscape* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 29.

America, a rebirth that Nathan Straight claims to be "a response to our modern condition of environmental and social alienation."[16] According to Straight, Ray belongs toa category of contemporary regional writers who, "by celebrating and interrogating the local [...] and returning again and again to [her] personal and regional histories," correspond to the efforts of present-day writers "to imagine new stories and new modes of inhabitation."[17] On this topic, Glen A. Love writes:

> Why does nature writing, literature of place, regional writing, poetry of nature, flourish now? [...] Because of a widely shared sense—outside the literary establishment—that the current ideology which separates human beings from their environment is demonstrably and dangerously reductionist.Because the natural world is indubitably real and beautiful and significant.[18]

I agree with Love in the sense that in a rapidly changing world, where statistics show that atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, ocean acidification, fertilizer and fuel use, water consumption, and human population growth have all increasedtheir threat to life on Earth, his suggestion that regional writing can help to change current environmental perceptions of endangered local landscapes is of the utmost relevance. Yet, despite being ignored by most twentieth-century criticism, the regional perspective has nonetheless been central to the literature of the United States, as Patrick Mazza describes:

> In the period between the two world wars, as metropolitan, mass consumerist society was decisively wiping away the remnants of an earlier, ruralist United States, a cultural and intellectual movement rose in challenge. To the centralizing, corporate system that was coming to dominate American life, this movement posed the region as an alternative framework for reconstructing society. The regionalists of the '20s, '30s and '40s sought in the cultural survivals of the older America the rootstock for a revitalized, re-regionalized 'symphonic nation,' as regionalist Benton MacKaye called

[16] Nathan Straight, "Who are we? Where are We?," in *Autobiography, Ecology, and the Well-Placed Self: The Growth of Natural Biography in Contemporary American Life Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 12.

[17] Straight, "Who are we? Where are We?," 12.

[18] Glen Love, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 237.

> it. In particular, the regionalists found resources for renewal in the folk life of agrarian and immigrant communities, and the tribal cultures of Native Americans. In these they saw the raw materials for a new 'civic religion' powerful enough to break the spell of the emerging mass consumer culture.[19]

What Love and Mazza highlight is that regionalism has been a crucial concept in understanding the ethical implications of land use in the US, but also for the world of today, as readers of this article will agree that the most pressing questions today are: "[I]n what way does our disconnection from the natural world affect our mental health, our minds, our emotional lives? And how will climate chaos, extinction and environmental degradation affect the human spirit?"[20] In this line, I argue that Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, a work within the larger framework of the American nature writing tradition, points to the ways in which readers can learn to incorporate place into their moral universe and become true inhabitants —both of particular places and of the world at large. In the words of Thomas J. Lyon in *This Incomparable Land*, one of the first guides to the nature writing genre, Ray's interest is "to convey pointed instruction in the facts of nature."[21] In this sense, Janisse Ray is a place maker, attempting to challenge her readers to leave behind an existence centered on abstract space and to step towards a recognition of their present surroundings as a place and, thus, as a home. Like many nature writers, Ray evinces ecological sensitivity and emotional power in depicting the way place works upon her mind, the way the longleaf pine forests became subjective, a home to her own self: "The story of who I am cannot be severed from the story of the flatlands."[22] Nature stands in Ray's text as a setting for the discovery of her own life story.

Ray's work demands thatwe, as teachers, readers, and critics, pay attention to writing that invites us to learn to become native to a place by "becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it."[23]As teachers, for instance, we should provide tools for students to use when critically analyzing the effects of ecological

[19] *qtd* in Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas.American Regionalism and Literary Value*(Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 102.

[20] Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden* (Dublin: Penguin, 2021), 21.

[21] Lyon, *This Incomparable Land*, 21.

[22] Ray, *Ecology,* 4.

[23] Buell, *The Future*, 146.

narratives on their bodies and psyches. Through critical thinking we should help them to challenge established views, and, ultimately, we should help them to be aware of the connections between humans and the nonhuman world, starting with the places they call their own. My suggestion is that Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* invites its readers to re-inhabit a place that has been disrupted, but that the writer's words and ethics of care seek to preserve and restore. As Ray reflects on the relationship between her childhood, spent in rural isolation and poverty in a junkyard, and the diminishing longleaf pine (*Pinuspalustris*) ecosystem that used to cover the South of the United States, she is restoring the place from an ecological perspective, that is, moving it closer, if only imaginatively, to an earlier, unspoiled landscape. As a writer she is looking to determine her place within that specific ecosystem but also in the larger world. Although the coastal plains of southeast Georgia seem an unremarkable place among the remarkable landscapes of America, Ray came to love them; her writing too demonstrates how her own self was influenced by the region, consequently voicing the paradox inherent in place: it roots the body but liberates the mind. At the same time, the junkyard serves as a metaphor for the many scars humans have made, and continue to make, on our planet, and acts as a symbol of the greed and garbage that characterize modern times.As an adult, Ray realizes that, because she "carries the landscape inside like an ache,"[24] her life has been defined by her longing for intimacy with the earth and its creatures, for a more inclusive locale she might call "home."

Apart from its classification as "a lyrical environmental memoir"[25] or "natural biography,"[26] Ray's narrative represents her effort to imagine new stories and new modes of inhabitation. New modes, I would add, of representing the self at home or, to use Lorraine Anderson's words, of making "oneself at home on this earth,"[27] that is, not being separated from one's place on earth, but relying mostly on modes of knowing the world centered in relationship and observing the world "with heart and feeling,

[24] Ray, *Ecology*, 4.

[25] Lawrence Hogue, "Ecology of a Cracker Childhood," review of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, by Janisse Ray. Isle*, Issue 2, Summer 2000, 284.

[26] Straight, "Who are we? Where are We?," 12.

[27] Lorraine Anderson, "Introduction: The Great Chorus of Woman and Nature," in *At Home on This Earth. Two Centuries of U.S. Women's Nature Writing, eds.* By Lorraine Anderson and Thomas S. Edwards (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2002), 2.

as if our lives depended on it."[28] Ultimately, both Janisse Ray's real and her imaginative life depend on that junkyard in Baxley, in rural South Georgia, a place she came to identify with, and out of which she created identity and meaning. Her activism is thus twofold: to restore the longleaf pine, and to create a written work in which the embedded local ecosystems are the foundations of artistic flight.

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood: In Search of the Local, Vital Knowledge of the Land

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood is divided into thirty-three chapters, the first describing the region in which Ray was born and which "owns her body,"[29] as well as that of her ancestors. She describes the landscape

> as lying below what is called the fall line, a half-imaginary demarcation avouched by a slight dip in the land, above which the piedmont climbs to the foothills of the Blue Ridge, then up that mountain chain to the eastern continental divide. The fall line separates the piedmont from the Atlantic coastal plain a wide flat plateau of piney-woods that sweeps to a marble sea.[30]

Her ancestors are described as descending from the people known as "Crackers," border landers, most of them coming from the Celtic regions of Britain, who, in the early eighteen hundreds, crossed the Altamaha River into what had been Creek territory and settled in the "vast, fire-loving uplands of the coastal plains of southeast Georgia, surrounded by a singing forest of tall and widely spaced pines whose history they did not know, whose stories were untold."[31] *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* responds to this void, weaving together personal memories and reflections on Ray's landscape and community to create a work bounded by physical, human, and social relationships.

In her lyrical memoir, in prose alternately plain and ornate, Ray tells the story of three generations of her family of Georgia crackers—descendants of Scottish settlers who remained isolated, retaining their distinctive Southern dialect. Chapters on family history alternate with

[28] Anderson, "Introduction," 7.
[29] Ray, *Ecology*, 13.
[30] Ray, *Ecology*, 13.
[31] Ray, *Ecology*, 4.

those on the natural history of the region's nearly vanished longleaf pine forests, interweaving, in Tony Horwitz's words, "her concerns for mending fractured landscapes and fractured human relationships."[32]Ray's narrative is not inspired by a joy of nature, but rather by stories that testify to the rapid retreat of nature from communal life. In her own words: "More than anything else, what happened to the longleaf country speaks for us. These are my people; our legacy is ruination."[33] While she stares straight into the apocalyptic loss of the longleaf pine, letting no one evade responsibility, she also pursues an empathetic understanding of the people who populated these woods, and she humbly shares responsibility with them: "Passing through my homeland, it was easy to see that the Crackers, although fiercely rooted in the land and willing to defend it to the death, hadn't had the means, the education, or the ease to care particularly about its natural communities."[34] Though Ray writes that her homeland is "as ugly as a place gets,"[35] and the woods are a numbing expanse of "improved slash,"[36] a fast-growing commercial pine that has been planted to replace the ancient trees destroyed by the timber companies, her imaginative proposal is to create a more relational home and, as in Merwin's verse in the epigraph to this article, to speak in a forgotten language. Feeling responsible for what her family and community haddone to the land — "they chopped, disked, rootraked, herbicided, windrowed"[37] — leaving it "bare as a vulture's pate,"[38] Ray is determined to reclaim the ancient word *forest*.[39]

To help rebuild her home, Ray reconstructs the past by writing about the possibility of a more just and sustainable future. Her life, her writing life, becomes a search for vital knowledge of the land, "as if it were a peace to be found."[40] Ray's work not only attempts to depict the coastal plains of southeast Georgia as a community founded on reciprocity between human and non-human nature, but the text itself is constructed within an

[32] Tony Horwitz, "In Praise of the Blue-Tailed Mole Skink," review of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, by Janisse Ray, *New York Times,* January 9, 2000.

[33] Ray, *Ecology*, 87.

[34] Ray, Ecology, 164–5.

[35] Ray, *Ecology*, 13.

[36] Ray, *Ecology* 124.

[37] Ray, *Ecology,* 124.

[38] Ray, *Ecology* 125.

[39] Ray, *Ecology,* 125.

[40] Ray, *Ecology,* 97.

interdisciplinary framework and within a model drawn from ecology. The place Ray calls home is understood within both a geographic and social context. Hence, the reader learns not only about the presence of humans but how this relates to soil and habitats, weather, plants, and animals. Ray's narrative seeks to represent dwelling as "the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work."[41] Her work is therefore an apprenticeship in the transformation of "indistinguishable space" into "place," a known and habitable location, to usethe terms of the geographer Yi Fu Tuan, for whom this is the only way to become true residents of our places, of our homes.[42] In order to achieve her goal, Ray creates a text—builds a place, creates a home—not only to harbor her own self but also to make sense of her culture, her landscape in the larger cosmos. As she puts it:"I'm writing to figure out how we are to live on the earth, how and where we are to live sustainably, functionally and well."[43] The reality she knew as a child: "20'x26', a white clapboard house that sat in the middle of ten brushy acres"; outside, "junk was stacked and piled."[44] The junkyard "was stuffed with junked, wrecked, rusted, burned, and outmoded automobiles and parts of automobiles. Ten acres of failed machines."[45] When Ray entered high school, she and her family moved out of the white house into a new house they had erected in a year of hard labor with little outside help.Yet, as Ray describes, the junkyard was the true reality; although dangerous, it was an open space. Most of the time, she encountered nature while wandering through the junkyard:

> I would rather be sitting in this certain pine tree I loved. It was a good pine, forty feet tall, sturdy and easy to climb if you boosted up from the fender of a '59 Chevy beneath it […] Blue jays criticized each other in the tree and fussed at me as I rode the lowest pine limb as if on horseback, not knowing

[41] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 111.

[42] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6. In an earlier but equally relevant work, Tuan develops the concept of "topophilia" as the affective bond between people and place or setting.

[43] Janisse Ray, "Words as Wild Blessing," interview by Interview J. Drew Lanham, *Terrain.org*, February 22, 2022.

[44] Ray, *Ecology*, 7.

[45] Ray, *Ecology*, 23.

> enough about anything but eager to live, listening to the wind in the needles that was sufficient music.[46]

In the face of both poverty and her family's religious fundamentalism, Ray comes to see nature as a refuge and the bedrock of normalcy, a home beyond the human meaning of the word, one that would never reject her. Significantly, as mentioned above, in parallel with the rewriting of the longleaf pine ecosystem into (textual) existence, Ray will rewrite her own self, a process reinforced by the presence of the intercalated chapters. The juxtaposition of chapters, some dealing with the natural world, others with the human world, is a rhetorical device that reveals the intimate relationship between the author's life and the natural landscape. In this sense, Wohlpart's words, "Ray is restor(y)ing both her own life and the lost forests,"[47] illustrate the author'saimto usestories as an element in the ritual of restoration. If repair is the main content of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, the form corresponds to the image of the junkyard itself: "[A] junkyard is a wilderness. Both are devotees of decay. The nature of both is random order, the odd occurrence and juxtaposition of miscellany, backed by a semblance of method."[48] For Ray, "the creativity of random"[49] that characterizes the junkyard corresponds to the diverseand hybrid structure of her own book, in which both the human and the non-human are juxtaposed, her own expressiveness alongside other voices: family, community, other literary viewpoints. By this means, Ray's work demonstrates the kind of order that exists in both a junkyard and in an ecosystem:

> Fords in one section, Dodges in another, or older models farthest from the house [...]. In the same way, an ecosystem makes sense: the canebrakes, the cypress domes. Pine trees regenerate in an indeterminate fashion, randomly here and there where seeds have fallen, but also with some predictability. Sunlight and moisture must be sufficient for germination, as where a fallen tree has made a hole in the canopy, after a rain.[50]

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[46] Ray, *Ecology*, 12.
[47] Wohlpart, "Restor(y)ing the Self," 51.
[48] Ray, *Ecology*, 268–9.
[49] Ray, *Ecology*, 269.
[50] Ray, *Ecology*, 269.

What is important is that nature lives in the junkyard: cardinals, brown thrashers, red-winged blackbirds, crows that "eat the ripe elderberries and the mosquitoes that rise from the environs of foundered vehicles."[51] By observing nature, Ray learns to create a home where she feels safe and alive, even though she knows little about it.

Ray admits that as a child she didn't develop a relationship with her natural environment: "When I pick up my childhood like a picture and examine it really closely, I realize that I left home not knowing the name of one wild bird except maybe the crow, and that I couldn't identify wildflowers and trees."[52] Furthermore, she states that in the rural South the relationship with the land wasn't one of give and return: "The land itself has been the victim of social dilemmas—racial injustice, lack of education, and dire poverty. It was overtilled; eroded; cut; littered; polluted; treated as a commodity, sometimes the only one, and not as a living thing."[53] Accordingly, in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, nature as home is depicted as a place of disquiet, and defined by what Ray sees as the shared plights of human communities and their degraded environment.In contrast with this, and as part of her strategy to revive her homeland, Ray writes about the moment her heart opened to the natural world during a science lesson: "I learned that nature wouldn't ridicule you…oblivious, it went about its business without you, but it was there when you needed some gift, a bit of beauty: it would be waiting for you. All you had to do was notice."[54] Once again, according to Lyon this attention to nature is one of the essential traits of nature writing, "the awakening of perception to an ecological way of seeing," by which the critic means "the capacity to notice pattern in nature, and community, and to recognize that the patterns radiate outward to include the human observer."[55] Ray's accurate and systematic observations of nature, particularly of the destruction of the longleaf pine forests, are her scientific and emotional response to the degradation of this environment.

Throughout *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray mentions different nature writers, such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold,

[51] Ray, *Ecology*, 267.
[52] Ray, *Ecology*, 211.
[53] Ray, *Ecology*, 165.
[54] Ray, *Ecology*, 214.
[55] Lyon, *This Incomparable Land*, x.

and the naturalists Roland Harper and John James Audubon, indicating her own affiliation in a tradition that at its center acknowledges that agency might come from the non-human as much as from the human. She also refers to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, another Southern writer, and an author who, before Ray, had understood that a particular place, a region, may be a privileged location for the articulation of particular thoughts or emotions. Even though Ray does not refer to any other women in the tradition of women's nature writing, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is a contemporary example of what other American women writers have been doing since the nineteenth century, when writing about nature became a woman-centered activity. By educating themselves in the natural sciences, women, particularly in the New England area, helped to forge the American environmental imagination, and increasingly advocated environmental protection and conservation in the face of mounting pollution, the decimation of species, and environmental exhaustion.[56] Like them, Ray limits her observations to her home's surroundings, and like these women before her, shebreaks down the barriers between the outside world and inward thought, showing her readers the close connections between the home of the nonhuman and the human world. All the writers she mentions belong to a tradition that relies on language to create meaning that, over time, draws the reader's attention to the land and, potentially, to the care of that land. It is only natural to suggest that, by following in the footsteps of these writers, Ray was able to find the directionin which her "life would go."[57]

Combining sensitivity and the knowledge of a tradition, Ray succeeds in creating a work in which she recognizes her identity is intertwined with the environment at threat. Ray acknowledges, as Lawrence Buell suggests, that "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it."[58] Indeed, for Janisse Ray the task involves reimagining human relationships with nature. Imagining possibilities,

[56] Tina Gianquitto, *Good Observers of Nature: American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820-1885* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 179. As Tina Gianquitto demonstrates, in nineteenth century America many women writers used the natural world as a platform for discussing issues of domesticity, education, morality, and the nation. "Botanical education," she writes, "was seen to serve several valuable ends: it led girls outside, exercising in the fresh air; it trained them to look for scientific connections among objects in the natural world; and it showed them how to translate those connections into pious lessons for the home," 5.

[57] Ray, *Ecology*, 263.

[58] Buell, *The Future*, 2.

then, is of great importance toher. In learning to read her place, she avoids merely naming the species she observes—though at the end of the narrative she presents a catalog ofextinct or endangered species— but instead pays attention both to these names and also to the stories that the landscape tells. In this sense, learning and writing about them becomes a way of mapping the cultural terrain. This is the case of the gopher tortoise,for instance. Ray offers her readers information on its habitat, what it eats, and the dangers it faces. But she does so within the larger context, connecting the long period of the animal's existence in North America, the landscape of human occupation, and stories about the gopher tortoise's survival. As Ray suggests, natural history is intertwined with human histories of the occupation of the land and, in reminding us that the tortoise is increasingly homeless, sheblames human action for the depletion of the landscape, implying that the disappearance of the tortoise also means spiritual impoverishment. Moreover, whenever Ray lists botanical species indigenous to her region—golden aster, purple balduina, wireweed, blue lupine, hairy wild indigo—she illuminates these names through the use of human stories, that is, she portrays personal and subjective incursions into the botanical realm. Ray's representation of her larger home is never merely enumerative; instead, it implies openness of the heart, and of the self, and aims to capture the continuous dialogue between human beings and the many voices, "the secrets" of the longleaf forest:

> What thrills me most about longleaf forests is how the pine trees sing. The horizontal limbs of flattened crowns hold the wind as if they are vessels, singing bowls, and air stirs them like a whistling kettle. I lie in thick grasses covered with sun and listen to the music made there. This music cannot be heard anywhere else on the earth. Rustle, whisper, shiver, whinny. Aria, chorus, ballad, chant. Lullaby[59].

In order to translate the experience rooted in nature and the consequent lift of the spirit, the opening up of the self, the "shared partnership"[60] with her place, she observes:

> Something happens to you in an old-growth forest. At first you are curious to see the tremendous girth and height of the trees, and you sally forth,

[59] Buell, *The Future,* 68.
[60] Lyon, *This Incomparable Land*, 74.

> eager. You start to saunter, then amble, slower and slower, first like a fox and then an armadillo and then a tortoise, until you are trudging at the pace of an earthworm, and then even slower, the pace of a sassafras leaf's turning. The blood begins to languish in your veins, until you think it has turned to sap. You hanker to touch the trees and embrace them and lean your face against their bark, and you do. You smell them. You look up at leaves so high their shapes are beyond focus, into far branches with circumferences as thick as most trees.[61]

Through the imagination, and by cleaving the story of a lost childhood to that of a lost forest, Ray creates a new story of the forest and of herself, a story of ecological regeneration and the integration of a community that began in her open-minded response to the vital knowledge of a particular place, where the ecological community is comprised of men and women mostly indifferent to the fate of nature, but which is also the habitat of gopher tortoises, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and Bachman's sparrows. Literally and figuratively, Ray intends to build a home where humans and non-humans might live together.

Recovering the Forgotten Language of Nature

In a recent interview, Janisse Ray suggests that Southerners in general have a profound connection with land, history, and place, which makes nature very important to the Southern psyche:

> I think what's unique about Southern wildness is the ability to access it without going to extremes [...]. It is pretty accessible, year-round. The other word that comes to mind is "botanical." Trees are a fundamental part of the Southern wilderness, as compared to geologic or meadow wilderness, and among all the green of trees are myriad botanics. In the subtropics and tropics of Southern wilderness, too, are a huge diversity of creatures. The Southern wilderness offers layers of complexity to the naturalist.[62]

In the same interview, in a passage that is relevant to my argument, Ray adds the following:

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[61] Ray, *Ecology*, 68.
[62] Ray, interview.

> There is one other thing about Southern wildness that I'd like to mention, and that's stories. Because I am native to and an inhabitant of the Southern U.S., I know its landscapes to be deeply layered with stories. When a person is passing through, only some of those stories become available. The longer a person stays in a place, studying it, the more stories are revealed to the person. Southern wildness is unique to me because of this, because I live in it.[63]

In these passages, Ray is reading place as a dynamic and relational entity, implying that knowledge of the physical world around her makes her aware of the way place and history relate. For her, and as *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* demonstrates, it is important to acknowledge the essential links between a person and a place, for they forge a perspective that embraces both ecological understanding and a sense of self as part of a larger system. This is an understanding that begins with the act of paying attention and listening to stories —human and non-human — and writing about them, that is, expressing in words what she hears and feels. Through language, Ray wants to unlock the secrets of the pine forest and challenge her readers to imagine new realities and new strategies for reconnecting with what remains of the longleaf ecosystem:

> In an old growth forest every limb of your body becomes weighted, and you have to prop yourself up. There's this strange current of energy running skyward, like a thousand tiny bells tied to your capillaries, ringing with your heartbeat. You sit and lean against one trunk—it's like leaning against a house or a mountain. The trunk is your spine, the nerve centers reaching into other worlds, below ground and above.[64]

These words demonstrate that for Ray to dwell in a place is to notice the way in which the land shapes mind and body, and how to stay close to nature is to be incontact with energy and dynamism, with life itself. In another passage, Ray expands on this idea:

> I drink old-growth forest in like water. This is the homeland that builds us. Here I walk shoulder to shoulder with history—my history. I am in the presence of something ancient and venerable, perhaps of time itself, its

[63] Ray, interview.
[64] Ray, *Ecology*, 68.

> unhurried passing marked by immensity and stolidity, each year purged by fire, cinched by a ring. Heremortality's roving hands grapple with air. I can see my place as human in a natural order more grand, whole, and functional than I've ever witnessed, and I am humbled, not frightened, by it. Comforted.[65]

This paragraph demonstrates Ray's relationship with place, and her comprehension of "the entwinement of our internal and external landscapes."[66] She finds solace as her body absorbs the benefits of the old-growth forest, acknowledging her place "in a grand, whole and functional natural order."[67] As a result, her concept of home is one of a fluid and porous structure with clear interactions with nature, an idea shared by writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, and, more recently, Margaret Renkel and J. Drew Lanham. All of these writers express in their work an ecological sensibility, an aesthetic appreciation, and an ethical commitment to the place they call home. Ray likewise devotes literal and literary attention to the living systemson which we all ultimately depend.

The questions she asks at the end of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* — "where are the eastern bluebirds, winter chickadees, yellow-rumped warblers, white-eyed vireos? Where are the tree swallows and savanna sparrows? Where is yellow colic root and swamp coreopsis? Where is bird's-foot violet and blue-eyed grass? Where are the meadowlarks?"[68] — are a rhetorical tool intended to emphasize a sense of connectedness with the rest of the world, and to draw attention to a richer understanding of what the protection of native ecosystems might entail. By using such rhetorical tools, Ray's purpose is to draw attention to these lost environments, hoping that readers, like her, will dream of restoring the junkyard to the ecosystem as it was when Hernando de Soto went to Georgia"looking for wealth but

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[65] Ray, *Ecology*, 69.

[66] James Wohlpart,"*Introduction: A Mind of Sky and Thunder and Sun,"* in *Walking the Land of Many Gods: Remembering Sacred Reason in Contemporary Environmental Literature* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013), 5. Wohlpart explores three works of contemporary environmental literature:Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood,* Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place,* and Linda Hogan's *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World.*

[67] Ray, *Ecology*, 69.

[68] Ray, *Ecology*, 268.

unable to recognize it."[69] Most importantly, Ray understands not only that the soil conditions would have favored slash pine (*Pinuselliottii)*, but also that the trees belong to a particular ecosystem: "Slash pines still grow here and there, as well as other flora native to a wet pinewood: hatpins, sundews, gallberry."[70] She knows that bringing back the longleaf pine forests, along with the sandhills and the savannas means bringing back "all the herbs and trees and wild animals, the ones not irretrievably lost, which deserve an existence apart from slavery to our own."[71] Moreover, she acknowledges that to restore the junkyard to a healthy ecosystem might take a lifetime and require a winding route to be taken.Yet, she is determined not to give up.For this reason, in the end, she turns to the Southerners, asking them to defend their forests: "In new rebellion we stand together, black and white, urbanite and farmer, workers all in keeping Dixie. We are a patient people who for generations have not been ousted from this land, and we are willing to fight for the birthright of our children's children and their children's children, to be of place, in all ways, for all time."[72] Because of the objective of nature writing is to interact with readers, to challenge their views of the world, and of the natural world in particular, in response to the question "Is American Nature Writing Dead?" Daniel Philippon argues that the genre "remains of inestimable value to our world, if for no other reason than because it continues to challenge us."[73] Ultimately, in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, at the confluence of a discourse based on the evidence of an endangered ecosystem and the need to improve the relationship that humans have with that ecosystem, Janisse Ray challenges us to reflect on our decision sand our own survival, insisting on words and worlds that, despite being lost to the greed of our modern era, offer a path to restoration— of place, of forest,of self (and soul).

[69] Ray, *Ecology*, 268.
[70] Ray, *Ecology*, 268.
[71] Ray, *Ecology*, 270.
[72] Ray, *Ecology*, p. 272.
[73] Philippon, "Is American," 404.

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Abstract

This article discusses Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) as an example of the nature writing tradition, suggesting that her knowledge of southern Georgia is based on an intimate relationship with that specific place. Drawing from Thomas Lyon, Lawrence Buell, Lorraine Anderson, Nathan Straight, and L. Hönnighausen my approach focuses on how Ray's work reflects on the relationship between a childhood spent in rural isolation and poverty in a junkyardand the diminishing longleaf pine ecosystem that used to cover the South of the United States. This method will help establish a connection, on the one hand, between Ray's growing awareness of a lost self and the loss of natural ecosystems, and, on the other hand, between Ray' ssuccess in building a home, which means repairing her own self, and the restoration of the longleaf pine ecosystem. Moreover, I argue, Ray is looking to determine her place within that specific ecosystem but also in the larger world, thus embodying the paradox inherent in the way place is understood in the light of the new regionalism: it roots the body but liberates the imagination.

Arguing that considerations about place are at the basis of nature writing, I show that Ray constructs a literary home in which she offers alternatives to repair the longleaf pine ecosystem; providing for a vocabulary that readers might use in formulating their own relationships with the places they live in, urging them, southerners and all others, to take responsibility in promoting healthier relationships between humans, nonhumans, and the environment. Ultimately, this article contributes to the debate in nature writing by addressing Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* as an example of how in the face of a widening global environmental crisis, we might engage more closely with local and regional perspectives as they often demand a heightened environmental sensibility and a language that contributes to repairing both ecological and personal damage.

Keywords: *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Janisse Ray, nature writing, place, region, local

Słowa kluczowe: *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Janisse Ray, pisanie o naturze, miejsce, region, lokalność