

SWAMP AESTHETICS:
ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIMENTS BY AMERICAN WOMEN FROM THE
NINETEENTH TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

CECILY PARKS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2011

2011

CECILY PARKS

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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____ Professor Joan Richardson _____

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

____ Professor Mario DiGangi _____

Date

Executive Officer

____ Professor Wayne Koestenbaum _____

____ Professor Alan Vardy _____
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Cecily Parks

Adviser: Professor Joan Richardson

“Swamp Aesthetics” proposes a theory of the origins of swamp aesthetics in the works of four visionary American women writers—Emily Dickinson, Mary Austin, Gertrude Stein, and Susan Howe—whose non-linear, non-hierarchical texts reflect patterns to be found in that ambiguous and particularly American landscape feature, the swamp. This project delineates new parameters for what constitutes environmental writing from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, and places American women writers at its forefront, arguing that these authors find in the swamp a position from which to re-imagine the relationship between the American mind and the natural world.

Acknowledgments

A version of Chapter 1 of this dissertation was presented at the Modern Language Association Convention in December 2009 as part of the panel “Emily Dickinson: Poet of Pleasure.” A version of Chapter 2 of this dissertation was presented at the Modern Language Association Convention in December 2008 as part of the panel “Modernism and Californian Literatures of the Environment.”

As I worked on this project, the Wertheim Study at the New York Public Library provided me with space, time, silence, and a bookshelf for all of the library books that proved indispensable to my research.

I continue to be thankful for the professors I encountered in the English Department at the CUNY Graduate Center, especially Joan Richardson, whose wisdom, generosity, and infectious imagination have encouraged me to read widely, write bravely, and think differently. Many thanks go to Wayne Koestenbaum and Alan Vardy for introducing me to some of the writers who became my subjects, and for their close reading and unflagging support of my work. Thanks also to my colleague Rowena Kennedy-Epstein for her friendship. Finally, thank you to my parents for continuing to read everything that I write.

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Abbreviations

Texts by Emily Dickinson are abbreviated as follows:

The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition, ed. R.W. Franklin — *F*

The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson — *L*

Texts by Jonathan Edwards are abbreviated as follows:

A Jonathan Edwards Reader, eds. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema —

JE

Images or Shadows of Divine Things, ed. Perry Miller — *IOS*

Texts by Susan Howe are abbreviated as follows:

My Emily Dickinson — *MED*

Souls of the Labadie Tract — *SLT*

The Birth-mark — *TB*

INTRODUCTION

I. OVERVIEW

Ahead the river narrowed and went into a swamp. The river became smooth and deep and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together, their branches solid. It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches. That must be why the animals that lived in swamps were built the way they were, Nick thought.

He wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading. He did not feel like going on into the swamp.

Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River"

A snippet of autobiography: I grew up fishing. So when Nick Adams pauses at the point where the river transitions into a swamp, I know a little bit about his reluctance. If you like your water clear, if you like to see the fish you cast toward, and if you like to have sky enough above you to accommodate your cast, you are out of luck in the swamp. The smoothness of swampwater derives from its stillness, so any disruption of the water's surface frightens not only the fish, but also the other ground-hugging, muck-loving animals crawling through the thickets that Nick, in order to approach the swamp even in his mind, knows that he must crawl through too. Any fish that Nick might hook in the swamp will swiftly dive into the submerged root system of a decaying tree, thread the fisherman's

filament into the most elaborate mess, and unhook itself—or, in the desperation of self-preservation, break the fishing line and swim away with a barbed hook permanently pierced through its lip. But when Nick considers the swamp’s augury of a “tragic adventure” (198), he is not thinking about fish: he is thinking about the natural obstacles that will prevent him from traversing the swamp, the possible injuries to his person, and the possible injuries to his ego that attend the tragedy of fishing without *catching* any fish. Nick’s act of self-preservation takes the form of a wish—for something to read. Something to read would provide him with a space he might enter, engage, and traverse, whereas the swamp’s obstruction offers impasse. Nick cannot read the swamp. And so he turns from it and heads back to camp, telling himself, “There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (199).

“Swamp Aesthetics” begins at the point of Nick’s turning, stays at the threshold that Hemingway’s hypermasculine modernism shuns, and crosses it. “Swamp Aesthetics” argues that rather than being unreadable, the swamp demands a new kind of reading that American women writers are uniquely positioned to undertake. The marginalized position of the swamp in the American environment offers those women writers who have been at the margins of the American tradition of environmental writing a position from which to subvert and reinvent that tradition. I create the term *swamp aesthetics* to describe a practice of reading and writing (my own and my subjects’) that collaborates with the swamp’s difficulty and uncertainty to introduce a new model for the American imagination’s relationship to the American natural world.

This project traces swamp aesthetics from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, focusing most particularly on the works of four innovative American women writers—Emily Dickinson, Mary Austin, Gertrude Stein, and Susan Howe—whose non-linear, non-

hierarchical texts reject the patterns of patriarchal narrative and manifest, in a range of genres, patterns to be found in that ambiguous and particularly American ecological feature, the swamp. My methodology shifts the swamp from the margin to the center of the American literary imagination as it evolves from the eighteenth century through the twenty-first, and obliges me to approach texts as landscapes indissoluble from those swamps that my reading accentuates in them—even though the swamps that I read around and into obstruct reading or lead reading astray. Seeking these unsettling places of displacement in texts and in those critical stances that they provoke, “Swamp Aesthetics” illuminates the degree to which American women’s experimental and anti-representational writing finds in the swamp a paragon of disorder that spurs them to re-conceive traditional modes of perceiving the natural world as well as the literature that responds to it.

The term *swamp aesthetics* is one I struck upon as I began considering the complicated tangle of my literary practices and observations with an eye toward finding in it the themes that might be the cause of such tangling. The presence of the swamp as a site of contemplation and revelation in both Jonathan Edwards’s “Personal Narrative” and in Henry David Thoreau’s *Journal* recalled to me the swamp as it had seeped into my own imaginative development. My childhood habit, while riding in the backseat of a station wagon on family fishing trips, was to scan the borders of upstate New York’s highways for the wraithlike trees that could only rise from the still, strange waters of swamps. As I began to look—with the same mixture of fascination and fanaticism—for swamps in environmental texts and ecocriticism, I found them. But I was perhaps more struck by what I didn’t find: a thorough treatment of women’s experimental, even anti-representational, writing in discussions of canonical American environmental literature and philosophies of nature. In *The Truth of Ecology* (Oxford University Press, 2003), Dana Phillips views the absence of anti-

representational writing from ecocritical discussion as a dismissal of the imagination, writing: “To insist that the trees must be present *in literature* ... seems very hostile to the possibility of imagination, which pays its dividends in the coin of figuration, not representation” (9). I began to suspect that the exclusion of the imagination from ecocritical discussion and the exclusion of women from ecocritical discussion might be intertwined.

Furthermore, and more personally, as an academic and a poet whose work blends equal parts environment and imaginative flight, I felt pressed to figure out what traditions my academic and creative work might look toward, if not align themselves with. I began to suspect that critical and creative were not, for me, mutually exclusive categories of inquiry. Propelled by my various yet related concerns, “Swamp Aesthetics” delineates new parameters for what constitutes environmental writing, and places American women writers at its forefront, arguing that American women writers find in the figurative swamp a position from which to introduce a new relationship between the American mind and the American natural world, one that values imagination as much as the environment that makes such imagination possible.

In suggesting that pioneering American poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and criticism by women can be read in relation to—and in reverence of—the suggestiveness of the in-betweenness of the swamp, this project prioritizes above all these writers’ approaches to their subjects. I do not simply focus on texts whose primary objective is the representation of the natural world, or even swamps themselves. Instead, I include texts that evoke swamps indirectly, through the manner of their language and thought. Eschewing the natural historical tradition of the solitary male explorer who seeks something in the wilderness and, to some degree, finds it, Dickinson, Austin, Stein, and Howe pursue uncertainty without the promise of finding. They enter the natural world with the desire not to dominate but to

collaborate with the language and the imaginative capacity that uncertain states demand of them. They create their own paths into, if not through, some kind of swamp, knowing that such pathbreaking is difficult. Their works are personal, experimental, and provisional.

Their language offers ambiguity, variability, and the capacity to unsettle. While Thoreau asks in his 1841 lecture “Walking”: “Where is the literature that gives expression to Nature?,” this dissertation asks (and aspires to answer): “Where is the literature that gives expression to the swamp?” I propose that this literature can be located, specifically, in: Emily Dickinson’s *Herbarium* (her collection of pressed plants and flowers, begun circa 1840); Mary Austin’s nature essays in *Land of Little Rain* (1903); Gertrude Stein’s landscape novel *Lucy Church Amiably* (1930); and the books of Susan Howe, particularly one of her earliest collections, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978).

My excavation of a theory of swamp aesthetics takes place against the backdrop of the American tradition of philosophically-inflected nature writing as it evolves from Jonathan Edwards through Ralph Waldo Emerson and finds its most swamp-centric expression in Henry David Thoreau. In “Walking” Thoreau declares: “Hope and future for me are not in the lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps” (241). My argument presupposes his claim to be not only literal but prophetic. That Thoreau’s call for a visionary and revisionary American imagination claims the swamp for its unlikely dazzling jewel speaks to the philosopher’s passionate claim that his listeners stand poised before “an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions” (235). Dickinson, Austin, Stein, and Howe answer Thoreau’s call, and use the swamp as an opportunity to revise radically the American imagination’s relationship to the natural world. However, in doing so, they find modes to forget creatively the ways their male predecessors and contemporaries (Thoreau included) delineate that relationship. The swamp’s less orderly

space encourages Dickinson, Austin, Stein, and Howe to produce ambitious environmental texts that blend aspects of natural history, religious experience, feminist thought and, in the case of Austin, pragmatist thought as developed by William James.

The environmental politics of swamp aesthetics as practiced by Dickinson, Austin, Stein, and Howe springs from the marginalized and precarious status of swamps themselves. Beyond the margin of a town's inhabited domain, the swamp was valued in early colonial ordinances the same way as waste grounds for human refuse: it was uninhabitable, uncultivable, and useless from an agrarian point of view (Stilgoe *Common Landscape of America* 44). This perception persisted until the mid-twentieth century, as American swamps were drained, filled in, and converted into more stable land that could be built upon. Even as the American landscape changes (and is changed by) modern and postmodern experience, swamp aesthetics aspires to reinstate in language and thought the swamp's signature features, and to demonstrate literature's capacity, in a range of genres, to actualize the wildness that Thoreau believes will preserve the world.

In the natural world, swamps are sources of ecological miscellany, home to trees (tall, short, deciduous, and evergreen), shrubs, grasses, sedges, and mosses. In the intrinsically active swamp, the earth ripples with light and darkness, animated by weather and water and wild animals. The swamp is an invitation to lose oneself, or at least one's footing. It seeps. Faithful to these characteristics of the swamp, swamp aesthetics appear in those texts by Dickinson, Austin, Stein, and Howe that turn away from traditional—hierarchical, linear, and generally orderly—modes of writing and thought in favor of an investigation or performance of qualities such as: disorderliness, displacement, liminality, decay, fecundity, flux, wildness, mystery, secrecy, and dream. In doing so, these texts exploit the creative power of uncertainty and, as my methodology reveals, encourage their reader to find her

own uncertain positions as well. As the gesture toward autobiography at the beginning of this introduction forecasts, my personal experience with the texts and those swamps they invoke underpins much of my argument. In addition to availing myself of the techniques of narrative criticism and ecocriticism, I also use lyric techniques that demonstrate the artistic versatility of swamp aesthetics as a mode of inquiry.

This chronologically-organized dissertation first provides a close, lyric reading of Dickinson's *Herbarium*, in relation to Dickinson's poems engaged with swamp, and in relation to Jonathan Edwards's work expressing a spiritually-inflected love of nature. Secondly, the dissertation considers Austin's nature essays in *The Land of Little Rain*, read in the context of the mysteries of the Desert Southwest that provoked her, and alongside the work of William James, Austin's most profound intellectual influence. Thirdly, the dissertation examines Stein's creation of a fluid landscape in the novel *Lucy Church Amiably* in light of Emerson's thought as it emerges in his 1841 essay "Circles." Finally, the dissertation considers Howe's writings, particularly her early collection, *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, which borrows its title from William Byrd's *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728), an account of a surveying party's endeavor to establish a disputed colonial boundary between Virginia and North Carolina through the Great Dismal Swamp. Howe's poetic and critical engagement with Byrd's swamp narrative aspires to imagine along with the swamp in a language that treads the borders of comprehension.

As I neared completion of this project, I discovered that Lawrence Buell had, in a 2005 book review, used the term "Wetlands Aesthetics" to describe "breakthroughs in natural science and in litigation...but also a revolution in values, especially aesthetics" (670).¹

¹ Buell's article is in fact a somewhat belated review is of Rod Giblett's *Postmodern Wetlands* (1997), which, despite the promise of its title, failed to provide me with many critical resources.

These breakthroughs find their flashpoint in language: substituting the term *wetlands* for *swamp*, environmental advocates have obtained support for the conservation of historically maligned places. But, as the title of this project indicates, I prefer the term *swamp*, which evokes those subversive and American qualities that most interest me in American literature by women: the capacity to harness the creative possibilities of disorder; the openness to a democratic collaboration with a wilderness that cannot be fully known; and the defiance of straightforward navigation, explanation, or classification. The swamp's Americanness arguably originates in the word *swamp* itself: the noun *swamp* does not appear in the English language until 1624, presumably as an onomatopoeic result of English speakers arriving in the New World and encountering swamps for the first time. The verb form enters the lexicon roughly sixty years later. (Another reason why I prefer the term *swamp*: I am swamped by my subject. I cannot be wetlanded.)

Buell uses the short review as an occasion to sketch the effect of the presence of wetlands in American and English literature. Though my approach views Buell's ecocritical work—exemplified in *The Environmental Imagination* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995); *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005)—as foundational, I provide a sustained consideration of imaginative literature's relationship to swamps that Buell's texts have not. Buell does not consider the influence of swamps in American literature as early as the mid-nineteenth century, nor does his theoretical framework accommodate texts outside the limited category of nature writing. Furthermore, his sketch of "Wetland Aesthetics" mentions only one woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Critiquing the narrowness of Buell's ecocritical approach, my project reveals swamp aesthetics as it appears in texts by women

writers who are and are not traditionally thought of as nature writers, making a case for how my selection of American nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's literature is more deeply entangled in the American landscape than previous readers have acknowledged.

This project breaks in significant ways from another earlier critical appraisal of the swamp, David C. Miller's *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). *Dark Eden* examines the strong cultural presence of the swamp in the nineteenth century, highlighting the impact of the swamp as both subject matter and symbol to be reinvigorated, if not recreated, as the American relationship to the natural world evolves. Drawing attention to psychic projection and metaphorical lushness in nineteenth-century works of art and literature about swamps, Miller adopts what he calls "a *phenomenological* perspective...examin[ing] the image of the swamp, as perceived in contemporary descriptions and representations, in relation to the prevailing epistemological and aesthetic criteria, in order to show how it came to challenge the Romantic realist iconography"(4). Miller's approach differs from mine first in examining only works of art explicitly about swamps, and secondly, in discounting the notion of the swamp as an "organizing metaphor"(3) for literature. While valuing Miller's work as foundational, this dissertation argues that the swamp does, in fact, operate as a model for some of the most innovative texts by women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature.

The belief—exemplified to varying degrees by Buell and Miller—in a textual expression, and perhaps preservation, of the rapidly-disappearing American wilderness, finds its swampiest and most lyric manifestation Barbara Hurd's *Stirring the Mud: On Swamps, Bogs and Human Imagination* (Beacon, 2001). In this collection of personal essays, Hurd allows swampy places loosely to guide her roaming imagination over a wide range of topics, and

also to prevent her from lingering with any one topic too long. Passages from her book thread throughout my project, which uses her personal speculation as a conduit for literary criticism. Hurd posits a creative engagement with the swamp that requires: “drop[ping] to our knees in algae, push hands into the fringed and seepy edges ... [where] something else is breathing: the origins of our words, wiser afterthoughts, the whispered asides of the spirit” (3). This sensual and collaborative informs my approach as well as my subjects’: Dickinson, Austin, Stein, and Howe write from the revisionary and visionary position of already knowing that the environment is a living system to be imagined *with* rather than simply imagined *about*.

II. CHAPTERS

1.

“Sweet is the swamp with it’s [sic] secrets”:

Reading into Emily Dickinson’s *Herbarium*

Emily Dickinson hunts for violets. She crashes through the thicket, basket in hand, burdock clinging to the hem of her dress. Her shoes press and sometimes sink into the mud as she advances toward what her niece describes as “the wet, inaccessible spot the rare yellow violets chose as their home in the South Amherst swamp” (28). Once there, Dickinson stoops through the shade and reaches for a bright five-petalled flower.

I have difficulty with this. I have difficulty envisioning Dickinson doing anything out of doors, let alone rooting around for wildflowers in a swamp. That such imagining vexes and perplexes my assumptions about Dickinson drives me to pursue and develop it in this

first chapter, where I argue that the swamp that the poet physically encounters as a young person secures itself in her mind and in her later production of poems.

The textual counterbalance to my exploration of Dickinson's active and sensual immersion in the environment of Western Massachusetts is the text of Dickinson's that is most actively and sensually immersed in that environment: the poet's *Herbarium*, which she began composing as a teenager. Reading this collection of pressed plants and flowers as illustrating the swamp aesthetics that would have originated with the poet's outdoor forays, I focus on Dickinson's early attention to margins, irregular ideas of order, and the private facets of imaginative collaboration with the natural world that manifest themselves in a text that favors the language of plants and flowers over the language of words. Spotlighting Dickinson's subtle and sophisticated interrogation of the expressive disparity between scientific language (the Linnaean terms she uses to label specimens) and the more provocative language of plants and flowers, I argue that the swamp deeply informs those textual moments when Dickinson's arrangement expresses the generative possibilities for art by women outside of the authoritative and male traditions of scientifically- and religiously-inflected nature writing.

In her imaginative but rigorous interrogation of nature, and in her desire to create a personal, private cosmos that derives from that interrogation, Dickinson shares an affinity with Jonathan Edwards, whose unpublished typological writings, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (begun in 1728), reveal a sensibility influenced by the swamps and other solitary places in the woods where he sought seclusion in his youth. No one, to my knowledge, has read Edwards's *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* alongside Dickinson's *Herbarium*, but the texts' similarities and similar origins invite such a pairing. Edwards's project foreshadows Dickinson's in its pursuit of the proliferating possibilities available to one who perceives the

natural world as wild with meaning. Dickinson, in turn, refashions the Edwardsean search for order into her own willing engagement with wilder orders.

The wildness of meaning that Dickinson finds in the swamp manifests itself in what I call the wilder orders of her *Herbarium* and, later, the wilder orders of her poems. (I prefer the term *wilder order* to *disorder*, which suggests opposition rather than creation). Toward the end of this chapter, I look closely at Dickinson's poem "Sweet is the swamp with its [sic] secrets," which reveals that the poet's youthful relationship to the swamp informs her adult relationship to writing, where Dickinson hunts for the language that will reconcile the private revelations of her personal experience with the abstruse forces of religion and death. The site of fluxing fecundity and decay, Dickinson's verbal imagination becomes the swamp where she confronts thresholds real and imagined, feared and fascinating.

2.

"In the very dirt of private fact":

Swamps in Mary Austin, William James, and *The Land of Little Rain*

Dickinson's *Herbarium*, viewed as a creative reconfiguration of Edwardsean typology, prefigures a modern relationship with nature in which revelation need not come from a vision of institutionally-endorsed divinity, a relationship exemplified in Mary Austin's nature essays about the California desert in *The Land of Little Rain*. Revelation takes a particularly perverse form in this text, which reveals how lost a reader might become in the desolate places that Austin describes. Offering herself as a guide to uncertainty as much as a guide to the desert, Austin communicates the creative power of the lostness that she experiences in that environment by purposefully producing a text in which her reader may experience, if

not participate in, this productive disorientation herself.

When I say *herself*, I mean *myself*. My argument in this chapter adopts the uncertainty and perversity that I identify in Austin's practice, and introduces the swamp as a position from which to illuminate the groundbreaking nature of Austin's responses to the desert. Enacting my own version of Austin's particular compulsion to seek out swamps for what she calls their "happy mystery," I took a road trip to Death Valley to see the Land of Little Rain firsthand, to visit Austin's home in Independence where she wrote her collection, and to try to find the swamps there that she describes in her autobiography and in her essays, calling them *tulares* (*The Land of Little Rain* 91). I interweave my desert initiation—in becoming lost, and in fear of becoming even more lost—throughout this chapter because it echoes Austin's own bewildering desert initiation, which proved to be the author's prerequisite for writing. As it turns out, the contrariness and seemingly fruitless nature of my searching not only for swamps in the desert but also for a landscape that existed over a hundred years ago reinforces my intuition that Austin might not want her reader to find the swamps that she describes—because it is in *not finding* that her reader might best experience that mystifying environment.

Idiosyncratic, intuitive intellectual pursuit finds one of its most persuasive champions in William James, whose philosophical and psychological writings reverberate throughout this chapter—in the structure of my argument, in the works of those philosophers of the natural world who I cite and, most importantly, in Austin's practice. Austin read James and heard him lecture and, as she recalls in her autobiography, in a meeting she had with him, James encouraged her to find a way of being in which "the whole personality might be flooded by the deep life that welled up from below the threshold of selfness" (*Earth Horizon* 282). James's invitation to Austin to immerse herself in experience—complemented by her

reading of his work, which recommends an openness to suggestion—validated Austin’s belief in the importance of her provocative encounters in the desert.

Austin’s practice requires her to attend to those aspects of the environment that she finds suggestive or mysterious to the point of incorporating the rhythms and forms that those aspects suggest into her work. Recurring nodes for Austin’s meditative project are the tulares to which Austin fastens her attention when she first arrives in California and later recalls in her autobiography as intricate blurs and, most notably, hieroglyphs (*Earth Horizon* 190). Dotted the valley floor with a dark and fugitive message that Austin senses but cannot decipher before she loses sight of them, the swamps *must* mean something because they *almost* mean something. They are the landscape’s script, upon which Austin models her necessarily provisional, approximate, and even bewildering essayistic style. Richly enmeshed in an unfamiliar environment that defies measurement, category, control, and traditional notions of beauty, Austin creates a text that defies those same forces. Her swamp aesthetics enlist: diffuse narrative perspectives that allow the author to all but disappear within disorienting settings and nonlinear textual structures; blurred geographical, physical, and perceptual boundaries; and an overall reluctance to demystify all of the desert’s mysteries.

3.

The Marsh of Uncertainties in and around Gertrude Stein’s *Lucy Church Amiably*

Turning from a nature writer’s exploration of the American landscape to a famously idiosyncratic writer’s exploration of the literary landscape of the pastoral, *Swamp Aesthetics* next examines Gertrude Stein’s self-described “return to romantic nature” in her novel *Lucy*

Church Amiably. I propose that Stein's practice positions her as an environmental writer (a label that has rarely, to my knowledge, been applied to her) in the Emersonian tradition whose response to the natural world enacts Ralph Waldo Emerson's reminder in "Circles" that: "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile" (403). Stein infuses her response to the natural world with American philosophy in the service of reinvigorating the relationship of the American literary mind to the American environment. In so doing, she participates in the especially American project of swamp aesthetics as I conceive of them. The fact that Stein sets her novel in France—where, furthermore, there are not swamps but marshes (arguably, the European cousins of swamps)—reinforces the versatility of swamp aesthetics as a theoretical perspective on innovative environmental writing by women.

Stein's innovation reveals itself in her purposeful perforation of the boundaries between the marshy landscape that forms her subject and what I envision as the marshy landscape of the text. In *Lucy Church Amiably*, Stein creates a fluid, floating work that asks the reader to relinquish her dependence on familiar narrative structures and immerse herself in its destabilizing space. In the course of this chapter, I liken this immersive practice of reading (whether it be reading the environment, the text, or the landscape that comes into being as a result of their swirling) to wading into the murky water of a marsh: I hold my arms out for balance and carefully step forward. The visceral instability and uncertainty that result from an encounter with Stein's marshy text speak to her success in closing the rift that conventional environmental writing has opened between language and landscape. Stein's swamp aesthetics inundate. In her words: "Inundation in a meadow is very different from inundation in a marsh a marsh can be small very small and high very high and prettily so. A marsh can be felt to be their gift" (87). The marsh provides a stunning example of the

world's capacity for contingency and possibility, gifting the writer and reader of this text new terms for writing's engagement with the natural world.

As has been my experience with many Stein texts, I found it difficult to locate a point of entry into *Lucy Church Amiably* and the destabilizing landscape that the novel foregrounds as its subject and even, arguably, main character. As I read and re-read the text, the active presence of the landscape was one of the few things I could be sure of. This sureness was relative. Readers of this chapter will notice that (due to a combination of inability and unwillingness) I refrain from explicating in detail the novel's plot. Instead, I elect to dwell in, and appropriate, the dislocation that the text impressed upon me in the service of arguing that to *not know* what is happening emerges in the world of Stein's novel (a world which includes its characters and its reader) as a form of creative agency. Uncertainty and its attendant discontinuity largely characterize my methodology: I organize my argument into a series of conjectural critical positions vis-à-vis *Lucy Church Amiably* that I call *Uncertainties*. Since my attention to *Lucy Church Amiably* converges in the text's multiple marshes, each *Uncertainty* becomes a marsh I wade into. My critical perspective reconciles the separation of two landscapes—the marsh, and the landscape of the text that the marsh informs—through a third landscape that circulates between the two: the landscape of the mind or, even better: the marshy intellect.

4.

The Swamp in Susan Howe

Of all the subjects in *Swamp Aesthetics*, Susan Howe most explicitly seeks positions of uncertainty for their creative promise. In an oft-quoted passage in *The Birth-mark*, she

elucidates the motivation for her work, writing: “It’s the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty” (181). The uncertainty that thrills Howe includes her own: she often begins her projects by way of personal narratives in which she describes the fusion of trepidation and anticipation that accompanies her entrance into the libraries where she finds inspiration. In these scenarios, Howe frames herself as a solitary scout who enacts her version of the Thoreauvian venture in the library’s wilderness. Whereas Thoreau saw the future in the swamp, Howe sees the future in the open stacks, where she reads to recuperate the American intellectual landscape from temporal restriction.² In order to do so, she reconfigures the Thoreauvian philosophical and literary engagement with the natural world (especially as it manifests itself in Thoreau’s practice of keeping a naturalist’s log) to apply to the contemporary material and literary landscapes in which she writes. The wilderness of language she finds in the library manifests itself as wilderness on her page: her assembled readings unsettle and disorient and make English seem strange.

Howe’s rewilding of language is so infectious that it rewilds my methodology. I begin this chapter by imitating Howe: recording my own approach to the library-as-swamp, I describe entering the New York Public Library not as it exists now but as The Mannahatta Project’s website envisions it: a wilderness.³ A work of astounding landscape ecology, The Mannahatta Project offers its visitors a computer-generated, painstakingly researched projection of how any city block of Manhattan might have looked in 1609, just before

² In *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New Directions, 2007), Howe juxtaposes Thoreau’s reverence for the swamp with her reverence for the archive. Echoing Thoreau’s opening declaration in “Walking,” she writes: “I wished to speak a word for libraries as places of freedom and wildness” (*SLT* 17).

³ The Mannahatta Project re-launched and renamed itself The Welikia Project after I wrote this chapter. The name change reflects the expanding nature of the project, which now aspires to encompass Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, and the surrounding bodies of water. Welikia means “my good home” in Lenape, the original Native American language of the region.

Henry Hudson arrived. To insinuate my own wanderings through the swamp of language that I find in the library's location as The Mannahatta Project re-creates it, I assemble text from the website's inventory of plants that would have been present on the west side of Fifth Avenue between 41st and 42nd Streets in the year 1609 and assemble it into thicketlike poetic pauses that I call *Wild Places*.

The metaphorical swamp that Howe discovers in the library (and encourages me to discover there as well) finds a literal harbinger in the Great Dismal Swamp that she writes about in her early collection *Secret History of the Dividing Line*. Howe's poetic engagement with not only the Great Dismal Swamp but also one of the earliest American swamp narratives, William Byrd's *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728), firmly positions her practice in the context of the swamp aesthetics that I have been excavating throughout this project. Aspiring to imagine along with the swamp rather than subjugate it as Byrd and his surveying party aimed to, Howe proposes that to tread the borders of the American swamp requires a language that treads the borders of comprehension: "poppy sh snow flee falcon fathom sh" (FS 116). Like The Mannahatta Project, such paratactical and ambiguous verse structures simulate a formative encounter with the American landscape. The language that Howe imagines this encounter would provoke conveys the experience of being lost in a wild place, and at a loss for words. Her structures also express nascent utterance: in *Secret History of the Dividing Line's* particular swamp of voices, Howe's is the only woman's voice, and the only voice that communicates through poetry. Her hunt for the swamp in the American experience creates terrestrial, imaginative, and literary space for women writers, especially poets, to speak, and suggests that there might be as many swamps as there are individuals who want to imagine with them.

CHAPTER 1

“Sweet is the swamp with it’s [sic] secrets”:

Reading into Emily Dickinson’s *Herbarium*

1. Emily Dickinson and the Orchis

“I had long heard of an Orchis before I found one, when a child,” writes a forty-six-year old Emily Dickinson in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “but the first clutch of the stem is as vivid now, as the Bog that bore it – so truthful is transport – Though inaudible to you, I have long thanked you” (*L* 458). The passage unfurls much like an arm reaching to pluck a wildflower. Perhaps it is the poet’s firm grasp on the pen with which she writes that catalyzes the luminous memory of her fingers curling around the stem of an orchis after having reached down toward the boggy soil to pull it. Dickinson’s memory reaches further—past childhood, down the flower’s stem and through its roots, and deep into the bog that gives birth to the bloom. In point of fact, in this memory the bloom holds a muted place, dimmed by the brilliance of clutching the stem of a flower whose origins lie in the equally brilliant bog. By reaching for the orchis stem, Dickinson reaches for the bog. By reaching for the bog, Dickinson reaches for a past in which the orchis existed only as the bog’s dream. She ventures toward origins—and specifically, as I hope to show, toward the origins of a language that might stem from the most chaotic, most borderless, and most irresistibly inscrutable feature of the natural world that Dickinson is intimate with: the bog.

But for now, in this letter, the poet's imagination tracks, and keeps tracking, a past before any past she could remember, down and down into the living bog of thought.

“Many bogs are actually dying lakes,” writes Barbara Hurd:

What had once been wide open and filled with clear water begins to accumulate organic debris on the bottom. Grasses and reeds edge the lake's perimeter and eventually sink their roots into the shallow water. Shoreline vegetation reaches out toward the center of the lake, which grows shallower and shallower as organic sediments pile up in the bottom. Gradually, a floating bog mat creeps out over the water, tendrils latching onto tendrils, a whole cushion of tiny clasped hands that thickens and spreads, begins to hold soil long enough for cotton grass and cranberry, which give way to red maple and black spruce. (121-2)

Renouncing the transparency of fresh water in favor of obfuscation, the bog muddies the lake as well as the distinctions between land and water that a lake maintains. The bog also blurs distinctions between life and death by requiring the lake's death in order to live, and to support an abundance of life—cotton grass and cranberry; red maple and black spruce.

And orchises. Dickinson's remembered clutch may have induced Higginson to write, in his introduction to her posthumous 1890 *Poems*: “In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed.”⁴ Higginson and his fellow editor Mabel Loomis Todd also draw on botany to describe Dickinson's sewn packets of poems, using the botanical term “fascicles.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “fascicle”

⁴ qtd. in Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 135.

as: “A cluster of leaves or flowers with very short stalks growing closely together at the base; a tuft. Also, a bunch of roots growing from one point.” In other words, a “fascicle” may be a rooted thing or the roots of a thing. A fascicle guides discrete, organic parts into a living system that, even uprooted, bears proof of its natural origins. A fascicle conveys liveliness, if not life.

What if the roots of Dickinson’s poetic fascicles, or the fascicles of Dickinson’s fascicles—indeed, the roots of Dickinson’s poetic imagination—lie in swampy places such as the bog? In her poems, the bog polarizes and provokes. The sexual and sinful snake in Dickinson’s poem “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass” prefers to slither through a “boggy acre” (*F* 1096). Elsewhere, a cartoonish “admiring Bog” emblemizes the quality of audience that a croaking self-publicist can expect to attract. “How public – like a Frog – ” the poet philosophizes, “To tell one’s name – the livelong June – / To an admiring Bog!” (*F* 260). But under different, private circumstances, the bog nourishes wild, feminine beauty: “The Wild Rose - redden in the Bog - ” (*F* 374) the poet writes. The bog invites flowering but also intimidates the casual or self-absorbed visitor who might wish to flower there. If, as Susan Howe suggests, “wild roses are veils before trespass” (*TB* 21), then perhaps the bog’s wild roses bloom at the threshold of another register of experience: that of the snake, the rose, the orchis, or the bog. Trespass implies subversive passage, wild and past convention. Trespassing the boundaries of time and page, Dickinson rapturously weaves her way back into the bog as her fingers curl around the pen with which she writes to Higginson. Among the tiny clasped hands that Hurd evokes in her description of the formation of a bog is Dickinson’s, fumbling toward the network of the natural world’s radiating, radiant meanings. For the poet, as for the landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn, “language is rooted in landscape” (11). As revealed in her art, Dickinson’s thought demonstrates the extent to

which “[l]andscape, as language, makes thought tangible and imagination possible” (Spirn 15). The bog bears the orchis that is the vivid, tangible proof of the natural world’s capacity to imagine. In her letter, Dickinson does not recount ripping the flower out of the earth. Rather, she holds, and remains holding, the flower’s stem in her hand. In doing so, she holds the bog in her mind, and imagines along with it.

My foraging methodology: along with Dickinson, I clutch the orchis stem, pronounce it my starting point, and presume it will transport me to the poet’s bog. Elisa New, who describes Dickinson’s signature dashes as “attenuated with faith... like light tightropes or wishful boardwalks thrown over the void,” reminds me of the actual wooden boardwalks that have invited me to walk deep into New England swamps. I envision Dickinson’s dash (“so truthful is transport –”) as the platform for my own imagining.

2. Reading into the *Herbarium*

The orchis transports me to Dickinson’s *Herbarium*, a collection of pressed flowers the poet began when she was a teenager. I am not the first reader to have been led this way by the clutch that Dickinson describes in her letter to Higginson. As Alfred Habegger observes, Dickinson’s “herbarium has the yellow fringed orchis (*Habenaria ciliaris*) and the larger purple fringed orchis (*H. fimbriata*). One of these may be the trophy of that avid clutch” (157). The yellow fringed orchis appears in the bottom left corner of a page containing six specimens in total, all of which (save the cinnamon fern) have yellow flowers. The orchis distinguishes itself by its knottiness as its fascicle of clumped flowers—petal touching petal—emerges out of a coarse well of leaves. I would like to touch the orchis—to run my fingers over the topography of overlapping leaves, passing from one dry, rough edge

to the next, and to the next. Dense at its central axis, the specimen thins into a fan of small starry flowers. Like a bandage affixing the stem to the page, the label bearing the flower's Linnaean classification (written in Dickinson's slanting scribble) reads: *Orchis, cliaris*. 18-1.

A few pages later, the large purple fringed orchis dominates a page it shares with seven other, smaller specimens. Its flower resembles a fully-foliaged treetop, and its leaf, the shadow a tree might cast at the beginning or end of the day: dark and swelling and slanting away from the flowery stalk. Brown now, the leaf is the color of wood paneling and similarly striated. The flowers are a slightly lighter shade of brown, almost beige, pressed together so that it is difficult to isolate the form of an individual bloom. Again, around the base of the stem, where the leaf curves around the stalk from which it so dramatically flares, is a Linnaean label in Dickinson's script: *Orchis, fimbriata*. 18-1.

In addition to these two that Habegger mentions, I find other orchises in the pages of the *Herbarium*:

A green wood orchis, sinuously stemmed with fat oval leaves and small dark fingers of a decaying bloom. I say fingers, perhaps, because I am thinking of Dickinson's clutch, and imagining a flower that would clutch back to her in a bog that, in Hurd's evocation, comprises a network of clasped hands.

An unlabeled ragged fringed orchis: stem, fat leaf, and wispily-fringed blooms.

A showy orchis: leaf like a shovel's blade and a thick tubular stem.

A round-leafed orchis: nearly circular flower with a bristly cone-shaped stem.

It is easy to be carried away by the *Herbarium* as Harvard University Press has published it, delighting in its large thick pages and facsimiled specimens. The flowers suggest subtleties of texture and color even now that they are over one hundred years old. But perhaps the *Herbarium* thrills because, as a book review by Virginia Jackson points out,

“the girl who made it grew up to be Emily Dickinson” (108). In Jackson’s opinion, “what is most interesting about this volume is that it is an ordinary object, the result of an ordinary domestic practice” (108). For others, the joy of reading the *Herbarium* lies in its invitation to read *into* it, as Richard B. Sewall does when he writes, “Take Emily’s herbarium far enough, and you have *her*. It foreshadowed much of what was to come” (19). Similarly, Judith Farr believes that Dickinson’s “pressings also foreshadow poems to come” (105).

And here I confess to reading *into*. Reading Dickinson’s *Herbarium* as the poet’s earliest engagement with language, and as illustrative of the swamp aesthetics that would have originated with her early forays into the Amherst landscape, this chapter focuses on Dickinson’s early attention to irregular ideas of order, margins, and silence in a text that favors the language of plants and flowers over the language of words used to describe them. In this imaginative but rigorous interrogation of nature, she shares an affinity with Jonathan Edwards, whose unpublished typological writings, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (begun in 1728), reveal a sensibility influenced by the swamps and other solitary places in the woods where Edwards sought seclusion in his youth. Originating in the swamp, Edwards’s devotion to the natural world he perceived as a storehouse of divine meaning both anticipates and provides a foil for Dickinson’s readings of a less-than-orderly natural world. Spotting Dickinson’s subtle and sophisticated interrogation of the expressive disparity between words and the more provocative language of plants and flowers, I argue that swamp deeply informs those textual moments when Dickinson’s arrangement expresses the physical and cognitive sense of being at the edge of something whose wildness and wonder resists traditional forms of conversation and categorization.

Readers of Dickinson’s relationship to the natural world confront a question perhaps best posed by Christopher Benfey: “Does the face of the landscape [in Dickinson’s poems]

reveal the presence (or withdrawal) of a divine mind, or at least of a nature that can count as an other to me, a face that looks into mine?” (4-5). For Benfey, the answer is yes, for “nature is, in Dickinson’s poetry, animated. Nature faces us and we face it, and to miss this reciprocity is to miss one of Dickinson’s claims in response to skepticism” (7). Many other readers locate a spectrum of skepticism in Dickinson’s poems. Despite the fact that she was “[i]ntimate with the flora and some of the fauna in her environs, Dickinson still doubted they were hers by poetic right,” suggests John Felstiner (7). Rachel Stein reframes such doubt as conviction: in her reading, Dickinson does not countenance a conversation between the human and natural registers of experience, and “disbelieves interpretations of nature that confuse human inscription with intrinsic message” (35).

Still other readers locate strains of antagonism, retreat, or re-appropriation in Dickinson’s attitude toward the natural world. Joanna Feit Diehl suggests that Dickinson’s aggressive obsession with the natural world’s unperceivable mysteries leads her to “either appropriate the landscape by internalizing it, or, obversely, deny the boundaries between self and nature by describing the landscape in the anatomical language of arteries and veins, impressing herself upon the land” (35). In opposition to Diehl, Sharon Cameron locates a physical and imaginative distance between the poet and the natural world, concluding that landscapes are “generally symbolic in the poems, bearers of more meaning than a given speaker can interpret” (5). Combining facets of both Diehl and Cameron, Howe (whose work I will focus on in the final chapter of this dissertation) claims: “Dickinson takes sovereignty away from God and bestows it on the Woods” (*MED* 80).

3. Reading Emily Dickinson into the Swamp

My thinking cleaves most closely to Howe's, though I say: "Dickinson takes sovereignty away from God and bestows it on the swamp." I choose the swamp because the orchis I have imaginatively clutched leads me there. In an 1858 poem, Dickinson writes, "To him who keeps an Orchis' heart - / The swamps are pink with June" (*F* 31). Dickinson's pink, feminine swamp perpetually blooms in the mind of the person holding not the orchis, but the orchis's *heart*: the urgent core that makes it living, loving, loved, and transporting. The orchis's heart brings the swamp into an electric, living relation to the orchis's keeper. Though the terms "bog" and "swamp" are, for this chapter's purposes, generally interchangeable, I prefer swamp over bog because the swamp is inclusive: the *Oxford* definition of "swamp" contains the word "bog," defining "swamp" as: "A tract of low-lying ground in which water collects; a piece of wet spongy ground; a marsh or bog. Orig. and in early use only in the N. American colonies, where it denoted a tract of rich soil having a growth of trees and other vegetation, but too moist for cultivation." I prefer the term "swamp" for its Americanness, and for its relative newness in the literary imagination. The word "swamp" enters into the English language in 1624, as a result of English speakers arriving in the New World and encountering swamps for the first time. The verb form of the word enters the lexicon roughly sixty years later: "To be entangled or lost in a swamp." And: "To be submerged or inundated with water (or other liquid), as a boat, a piece of ground; hence *actively*, to submerge, inundate, or soak with water, etc."

I prefer the swamp to the bog because Thoreau, despite using the terms interchangeably, locates hope and future in the swamp:

Hope and future for me are not in the lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps...I have frequently found that I

was attracted solely by a few square rods of impermeable and unfathomable bog,—a natural sink in one corner of it. That was the jewel which dazzled me. I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my entire town than from the cultivated gardens in the village. There are no richer parterres to my eyes than the dense beds of dwarf andromeda (*Cassandra calyculata*) which cover these tender places on the earth's surface. Botany cannot go farther than tell me the names of the shrubs which grow there,—the high-blueberry, panicled andromeda, lambkill, azalea, and rhodora,—all standing in the quaking sphagnum. (241)

Thoreau uses the word “quaking” twice, but his trembling, tender place of a swamp also reveals itself as impervious, impermeable, and unfathomable. It gives and resists; it offers and withholds its diversity, even from the wielder of botanical terms. To be drawn to the swamp is to be drawn to the solitary experience of reading—to the place where the earth gives under your feet, and to the interstitial ground determined by the flux that is nature's constant. (A swamp's integrity would have been more subject to the vagaries of New England weather than either land or water.) In a place of unsteadiness, the fully present reader's attention fathoms and steadies but may never perfectly comprehend the richness of nature's compass. Dwarf andromeda, *Cassandra calyculata*, leatherleaf: different names for the same perennial growth. To know the name of a particular swamp plant, in other words, is not the same as knowing that swamp plant well enough to describe it.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes: “[E]ach one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost fields and meadows. Thoreau said that he had the map of his fields engraved in his soul” (11). I would venture that the author of *Walden* had a map of his swamps engraved in his soul as well. Like Thoreau, her admired contemporary, Dickinson

was (in her youth) familiar with—if not engraved by—the swamp.⁵ In Farr’s description, “digging deep in woodland swamps ... [was] one of Emily Dickinson’s more rugged pleasures” (105). And, as the poet’s niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi recalls, Dickinson knew “the wet, inaccessible spot the rare yellow violets chose as their home in the South Amherst swamp” (28). Despite such assertions, envisioning Dickinson outdoors, let alone rooting around in a swamp, is daunting. The Dickinson that readers almost always encounter in biography and criticism is resolutely reclusive—anchoritic, eccentric, and dressed in white for no earthly marriage. “A Bog affronts my shoe” (*F* 289), she writes, walking into the splashy, seeping swamp whether or not my imagination can follow her. The fact that such imagining vexes and perplexes my assumptions about Dickinson persuades me to pursue it, and to build my own theoretical boardwalks to and from the image that still fixes me: Emily Dickinson in the swamp, reaching for the stem of an orchis with her writing hand.

In attending to Dickinson’s outdoorsiness, I am joined by Scott Knickerbocker, who points out that the majority of interpretations of Dickinson’s response to nature “deny her active perception and consideration of a physically real natural world” (185), disregarding the extent to which her “extensive childhood experiences in nature significantly shaped her epistemology” (188). Similarly, Habegger writes, “One aspect of herbarium-making that left an indelible mark on the poet-in-the-making was her experience in the field” (156). Believing, as does Spirn, that “we are imprinted with the landscape of our early childhood” (5), I posit that Dickinson was imprinted with the landscape of western Massachusetts that she encountered as a young girl, particularly the swamp, which would secure itself in her mind and in her production of language. In fact, the swamp—as a place, and as a place of origins—would have been a far more potent crucible for language than the flowers that

⁵ See Habegger 500.

readers so often consider the poet's muses. Place is fixed, and transfixing. Place cannot be transported, but place transports. Place pulls us out of ourselves so that we may listen to its gestures. As Knickerbocker writes, "[I]t is in the space between the human and nonhuman where poetry occurs" (196).

4. Wild Places and Wilder Orders: Jonathan Edwards and Emily Dickinson

Aligned with Dickinson by place is Jonathan Edwards, who—over a hundred years before her—was born into the landscape of the Connecticut River Valley. That landscape, as Clyde Holbrook has illuminated, indelibly influenced the minister's imagination. Building my own boardwalk of thought from Holbrook, and also from Farr's observation that Edwards shares with Dickinson not only a landscape but also a proclivity for solitary ramblings in the woods⁶, I propose that the two writers are also brought into a relationship of intellect and imagination through their shared attraction to the New England swamp as a breeding ground for a language adequate to their wild thought.

As Edwards recalls of his childhood in the outdoors: "I with some of my schoolmates joined together, and built a booth in a swamp, in a very secret and retired place, for a place of prayer" (*JE* 282). Little trafficked by the human world, the swamp was a young boy's obvious hideout, a slightly-less-obvious setting for a young boy's acts of contemplation, and an arguably unlikely destination for prayer, especially for a minister's son. Perhaps the booth to which Edwards refers provided his younger self with sufficient mooring for his early spiritual investigations, or a sanctifying framework for his outdoor prayer. However, such a booth may also have been largely without structure, even

⁶ See Farr 278.

temporary. Blended into its surroundings, the booth to which Edwards retired might not have had walls. Its roof, if made of branches, would have let in rain and snow, sound and light.

For Edwards, as it is for Thoreau, to be in the swamp is to be in a place characterized by the natural world's wildness, silence, and instability. In the presence of unknowability, variety, and quaking ground at an age when, like the natural landscape of the swamp, his "affections seemed to be lively and easily moved" (*JE* 282), Edwards would have had the physical and cognitive sense of being ungrounded in body and language. At the edge of a swamp, "an open mind leans out so far it brushes the landscape, like the hand of a blind person exploring a patch of grass. This is the edge of a mind foraging through the edge of a landscape" (Hurd 9). To engage with the swamp requires agility, even bravery, of mind. To engage with the swamp is to test the strength of unsteady surfaces and the bladelike edges of the known. Considered as an expression and an evolution of his being "deeply affected" by the swamp and other "secret places in the woods" where he sought seclusion in his youth, Edwards's thought becomes an account of his trying to find the language adequate to his experience of being at the brink of revelation.⁷

Courting such revelation requires a willingness to think wildly—to think with the wilderness. Wonderfully illuminating the extent to which landscape shapes Edwards's thinking, Howe writes:

During his ministry in Northampton, Jonathan Edwards traveled alone on horseback from parish to parish.... As an idea occurred to him, he pinned a small piece of paper on his clothing, fixing in his mind an association between the location of the

⁷ Edwards 282: "And besides, I had particular secret places of my own in the woods, where I used to retire by myself; and used to be from time to time much affected."

paper and a particular insight. On his return home, he unpinned each slip and wrote down its associated thought according to location.... I love to imagine this gaunt and solitary traveler covered in scraps, riding through the woods and fields of Massachusetts and Connecticut. (*SLT* 9)

Woods and fields: thought and thought. Covered in the thoughts that originated in landscape and were secured in relation to one another by his body and mind, Edwards thus envisaged participates in the natural world's imagination, just as Dickinson does as she reaches down the length of the orchis into the swamp. Edwards's method of thought-gathering reveals a mind flexible enough to recalibrate its thinking according to what nature presents to it. To envision Edwards covered in scraps of paper promotes the envisioning of the varying landscape through which he rode, in which (and by which) his thoughts were provoked. It was, to be sure, a landscape characterized by irregularity and flux—changes in temperature and light; changes in color and sound; changes in vegetation—spooling across the rider's vision and through his mind at the speed of a horse's particular gait on a particular day at a particular time. Each occasion that Edwards traversed this wildness, its richness and diversity would have suggested something unprecedented to his dynamic mind.

The instability both courted by and endemic to Edwards's thought is, according to John Sallis, an instability endemic to a mind vigorously and imaginatively engaged with place. He writes:

Focused receptivity to a place is also a receptivity to words, to words that come and that exercise in turn a kind of attraction on those held in abeyance, drawing these words out from the horizon. In the double interplay of receptivity, imagination, and

the place on which they are focused, what emerges is blended from vision and words. Because of the intrinsic instability of this blend, there is need for it to be steadied somewhat by writing[.] (5)

The instability that Sallis perceives in the activation of thought and writing in the presence of a potent place can only be accentuated by the singular instabilities of the swamp, which coerces its observer into indulging in wilder orders, if not disorders. Describing the swamp's signature ecological instabilities, William Howarth explains:

Ecologists call unstable regions of this sort *ecotones* because they contain no fixed boundaries, only a gradient slope between solid and fluid...these areas have come by long association to express divided values: (1) difficulty or uncertainty, as in a quagmire, or morass; (2) change, since wetlands are transition zones, between water and land; and (3) contingency or possibility, because wetlands may foster new life. (521)

For Edwards and for Dickinson, instability proves to be the swamp's gift, providing both writers with a wild, unpredictable locale for what Howarth calls contingency and possibility, and for what Howe (paraphrasing Dickinson) calls "dwelling in Possibility," where a "lyric poet hunts after some still unmutated musical wild of the Mind's world" (*MED* 76, 105): The wildness of the swamp suggests to both of these writers the most productive and provocative kinds of disorder, encouraging their pursuit of patterns of thought and language that subvert conventional practices of thinking and writing.

Pursuing such wilder orders, Edwards's gathering of his thoughts as he passes through the terrain of Connecticut and Massachusetts shares methodological affinities with Dickinson's gathering of specimens for her *Herbarium*. Though she may have initially relied on the Linnaean system to dictate the arrangement and order of her specimens, those strict Linnaean classifications may have, oddly enough, drawn Dickinson to the muddling, disorderly swamp. As Howarth notes, "Spurred by the work of Linnaeus . . . emerging natural sciences began to alter the reading of wetlands, by identifying them as homes to rare and diverse species" (524). The hierarchical order that elevates the cultural reception of the swamp is precisely what the swamp subverts by nourishing—in addition to abundance and diversity—chaos.

Bogs and swamps still suggest the chaos of miasma, the breakdown that occurs when all the protective devices available to the human psyche collapse. Whether it's the combination of rotten egg smell and unstable ground or their ability to be two things at once, swamps and bogs have been the setting for psychic collapse for centuries, the landscape where the imagination sets its monsters loose, its frayed, ferocious creatures of shame and fear and revenge. (Hurd 103-4)

Hurd's vision of a frenzied and fearful swamp neglects the possibility that breakdown can be generative: innovation emerges from the fragments of apocalypse. Even as it might unsettle them to the brink of psychic collapse, the swamp submits itself to Dickinson and Edwards as a site for infinite creative potential, providing the staging ground for a newness assembled from the natural world's dark, violent, and fecund indexes.

Despite the Linnaean labels that Dickinson uses for her specimens, many readers have described the *Herbarium* as without order. As Habegger observes, the poet placed

congeneric plants on different pages. One finds a few related species grouped together—buttercups, geraniums, anemones, violets, pipsissewa, and spotted wintergreen—but by and large her order of arrangement had nothing to do with the Linnaean system.... Chances are, she did what most people would do: added specimens as they were collected and became ready. (155-6)

Progressively relinquishing control of her collection to the landscape that determines its content, Dickinson may be rehearsing for her own wild encounter with that landscape's language. Such a methodology, informed as much by the poet's environment as by her experience *in* that environment, may presage the lack of standardized order, or what I call the wilder orders, of Dickinson's poems.

5. The Margins of Images, The Margins of Shadows

Rather than disclosing an unsystematic mind, the unconventional arrangement of Dickinson's *Herbarium*—like the scraps of paper pinned to Jonathan Edwards's moving body—discloses a mind supple enough to perceive multiple, variable relationships between the specimens that the natural world offers it. Such thinking bravely hunts through chaos for the landscape's poetry and—primed by its intimacy with the fluctuating poetry of the swamp—is always hunting. In the bog:

You recall a line of poetry and you know why poets love that white space at the end of a line, how that space invites you to forgo the usual eye-dropping to the left and down to the next line. How it invites you, instead, to launch yourself into that white margin of imagination, where the countryside lies uncharted, wild habitat at the edge of civilized thinking, where the mind is rampant with phrases[.] (Hurd 9)

A swamp sustains the wide, wild margins of silence that poetry sustains. To stand at the edge of the bog is to stand at the edge of what has already been said, and to consider what language might allow imaginative passage (or, in New's words, what might build a boardwalk) into what comes next.

Wild margins abound in the *Herbarium*, whose arrangement activates the spaces around and between specimens, and insinuates a charged lyric encounter where language and the natural world meet. The specimens *are* the language of a natural world that dares Dickinson to engage with it, and their margins charge the mind to make what Howe calls the “[c]onnection between unconnected things [that] are the unreality of poetry” (*MED* 97). Dickinson's specimens, though isolated and decontextualized, become part of new contexts and networks un-linearly forming—on a single page, and throughout the *Herbarium* as a whole. As Howe points out, “In botany a margin is the edge of a leaf” (*TB* 28). Surely Dickinson knew this: the multifarious margins of the specimens pressed to the *Herbarium's* pages would have prompted the poet not only to consider what happens when the natural world and the page come into contact with each other, but also to consider what, as a poet, she might do to exploit what Sallis terms “the intrinsic instability” of this encounter.

The *Herbarium* stages Dickinson's first engagements with the instability and wildness of language. Most obviously, the text subverts traditional readings: its specimens are arrayed

on unnumbered pages, and can be read from any starting point: bottom left, bottom right, top left, or top right.⁸ In its interpretive openness, the *Herbarium* exhibits “the signs of a fundamental ambivalence toward synthesis and closure” (Werner 3) that readers such as Howe and Marta Werner observe in Dickinson’s later work. In its diffuseness, the *Herbarium* enacts what Jay Leyda describes as the Dickinsonian “omitted center” (xxi): without central narrator or strict design, the text defies critical classification. Perhaps most crucially, the *Herbarium* is largely wordless, depending on natural images to communicate meaning. The only words in the *Herbarium* are those Dickinson wrote on the specimen labels. As Ray Angelo notes, “This mind did not choose to inscribe the volume anywhere with title or authorship or embellish the collection with quotations from poetry, as if the specimens were an adequate statement in and of themselves” (170). Dickinson may have resisted writing more in the *Herbarium* because she sensed that the wildness of the natural world necessarily ends where language begins. Or, perhaps the *Herbarium* reveals her intuition that the natural world already contains the rampant language for its expression, a language that will reveal itself to her if she can be still and receptive and silent in her engagement with its seeming, unsettling silence.

My methodology is also an engagement with what seems like silence. My reading of Dickinson’s specimens as text will certainly strike some critics as willful, perverse, or willfully perverse. But Dickinson’s hand, in spite (or because) of its absence, becomes ubiquitous in the *Herbarium*. The hand that gathered these flowers and carefully labeled them is the same hand that grasped the pen that wrote to Higginson about the Orchis. The same hand

⁸ I should point out that the Harvard University Press edition of Dickinson’s *Herbarium* manages the reader’s encounter with the text: Dickinson’s specimens occur on the recto, in facsimile; specimen identifications, in type, have been added on the verso. This verso text dictates that the specimens be read, as much as possible, left to right.

grasped the stem of the Orchis in the bog. I follow it. As Howe writes, “Trust absence, allegory, mystery” (*MED* 23). I continue following.

Back to the *Herbarium*. On the same page as the Larger Purple Fringed Orchis, a specimen of Indian Cucumber Root overlaps its label. The leaf, shaped like an upside-down teardrop, covers part of the capital “M” of: *Medeola virginica*. 6-3. Encountering the *Herbarium* in facsimile (as most readers must), I will never be able to lift the leaf. Dickinson, of course, would have been able, as she revisited her collection, to lift a leaf and remind herself what she had written. But perhaps, as she pressed the flower to the page and labeled it, she purposefully let a leaf fall over the label. Such swamplike obfuscation occurs frequently in the *Herbarium*: purposeful pressings of the natural world over the language that attempts to describe it. Subversive and provocative, these moments force the reader to read the leaf as insinuated into—indeed, as part of—the label.

On another page, a Japonica specimen nearly veils its label completely. Dickinson’s disappearing script weaves its way under and into a petal as if to grow back into it. Because the daphne was one of Dickinson’s favorite flowers, the way this label disappears into the specimen reminds me of the story of Daphne, who transformed into a laurel tree in order to elude Apollo’s hot pursuit. This Japonica specimen, and others like it, embody Daphne’s story, which is itself a story of embodiment, isolation, and the return to underground sources. Daphne models a metaphorical aspiration for women’s art that, like Dickinson’s, derives strength from autonomy and the natural world.

Elsewhere in the *Herbarium* are vertical and diagonal labels upon which Dickinson’s handwriting follows vertical and diagonal axes.⁹ As if to tell the reader “Look there, and

⁹ See pages 19 and 46 of the *Herbarium*.

there, and there,” these labels suggest vectors of imagination that the horizontal axis of conventional text cannot follow.

In addition to the main identifying labels for each specimen, smaller ancillary labels hold the larger specimens to the page—and, like some of the obfuscated identifying labels, almost vanish into the plant they propose to cover and hold. I could tell myself that the specimen of violet wood-sorrel would leap off the page were it not so pinned.¹⁰

In many places, Dickinson’s paper labels have thinned, presumably as a result of organic decomposition, so that the stems of specimens push through the filmy white handwritten rectangles as if to bloom again. Although the specimens themselves also show the signs of natural decay, that their longevity surpasses that of the labels and the language used to describe them exemplifies the instability and impermanence of language in the face of the natural world’s vitality.

Over time, the pages onto which Dickinson pressed her specimens have also grown progressively more transparent—so much that, while looking at specimens on one side of a thinning page, the reader can just make out the silhouettes of other specimens (on the back of that page) shadowing forth from behind them.¹¹ The effect is ghostly, a most literal illustration of foreshadowing that encourages the reader to look deeper, into, and even through the page. What initially appears as shadow materializes in the wild whiteness of the margins—as if the page were the swamp, secretly fashioning a flower to bloom from its depths. As if to show that what we encounter as real has its origins in the imagination. As if

¹⁰ See page 16 of the *Herbarium*.

¹¹ For particularly vivid examples of this shadowing, see pages 24, 26, and 34 of the *Herbarium*. Though this effect could be a result of the presumably strong light needed to digitize Dickinson’s *Herbarium* and render it in facsimile, I believe that the dematerializing of the paper is most likely the result of an organic process.

to show that the margins beg to be read and written into, for they might contain what comes next.

6. *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*

What comes next is, in this instance, a text that comes before Dickinson's *Herbarium*: Jonathan Edwards's *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, a collection of typological writings that Edwards began in 1728, when he was twenty-five, and continued working on his entire life. In this text, Edwards rigorously interprets the "antitypes" in the natural world as demonstrations of divine "types" in the Bible. The methodology of *Images or Shadows*, which demands an intimate observation of the natural world to complement the writer's intimate knowledge of Scripture, allows Edwards to pursue the relationship to the natural world that originated in his childhood forays into the swamp. The swamp would have introduced him to the imaginative potential in the investigation of such entwined inventories of experience, for the mind in the swamp senses "a certain exhilaration in the tangle of plant and word, image and water, the mind curling and leaping at the far edge of itself, tiny tendrils of imagination twining their way down stems of waterweeds, cartwheeling across cranberry mats and sundew, never minding the here-and-there unexpected plunge into tea-colored water" (Hurd 9).

Edwards's typological twining of the natural world to the divine is loosened, if not undone, by Dickinson, whose poems, as a number of readers have pointed out, contain a critique of Puritan thought as shaped by Edwards. According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Dickinson recognizes that "the semiology of latter-day American Puritanism was no more than a system of falsehoods" and opposed the idea "that the poet might perceive some

benevolent supernatural force working through nature” (283). Similarly, Howe understands that Dickinson’s allegiance to Edwards’s vision could only happen if the poet rejected his religion in favor of a faith in language: “Dickinson took both his legend and his learning, tore them free from his own humorlessness and the dead weight of Calvinism, then applied the freshness of his perception to the dead weight of American poetry as he knew it” (*MED* 51). Or, in Elizabeth A. Petrino’s words, “Dickinson finds consolation not through religion but through deliberate artistry” (120). In Dickinson’s hands, Creation becomes creation.

Readers have also located in Dickinson’s poems a critique of the male authority that both Puritanism and its interpretations of the natural world relied on. Rachel Stein’s ecofeminist reading reveals that Dickinson’s nature poetry subverts the Puritan typological tradition as practiced by Edwards, in which “the transcendent Will that infuses nature is gendered male, and the theological authority who reads nature as text is also male” (30). In Stein’s framework, Dickinson’s poetry emerges as an investigation of what the “transcendent Will that infuses nature” would look like were it female. Rather than reading Dickinson as a religious poet, as Stein does, I read Dickinson as devoted to a natural world made divine by the swamp. Accordingly, Dickinson’s version of transcendent Will has a downward thrust, plunging deep into the vivid swamp below the orchis. Perhaps such Will also finds its emblem at a riverbank—where water meets earth—in the form of a laurel tree at whose core is the isolated body of Daphne. What better form for what Virginia Jackson, in *Dickinson’s Misery*, describes as Dickinson’s “attempt to extricate the (especially female, queer) body from a nineteenth-century discourse that had incorporated it” (197).

Or perhaps in its encounter with the faceless swamp, a transcendent Will might distinguish itself by its attention to light and motion and silence. It would distinguish itself

by its willingness to perceive multiple meanings in the natural world's flux. As Anthony Lioi offers:

[A] celebration of our connection to wetlands that move and change and age and die is a transvaluation of values, a shifting of loyalties from the old order that valued transcendence, changelessness, and control to a new order that finds the transcendence of light inside the material world, eternity in the flux of matter, and distance as a sign of respect for the autonomy of otherkind. (27)

Though Lioi's envisioned swamp redescribes and naturalizes transcendence, it compensates its witness by inviting her to participate in new orders of thought and writing—in new orders of creation. As I have emphasized throughout this chapter, Dickinson and Edwards elect to participate in these new orders—on the brink of uncertainty—that the swamp suggests to them. Dickinson's *Herbarium* leads her to contemplate the wonder of the natural world in the absence of divine meaning. Increasingly severing her experience from God and from the Linnaean system, Dickinson confronts a natural world that accommodates the chaos and strangeness that the swamp insinuates.

No one, to my knowledge, has read Edwards's *Images or Shadows* alongside Dickinson's *Herbarium*, but the texts' similarities, and similar origins, invite such a pairing. Despite its spiritual overtones, Edwards's project foreshadows Dickinson's in its pursuit of the proliferating interpretive possibilities available to one who perceives the natural world as wild with meaning. *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, in Eliza New's description, reveals "Edwards's sense of the Creation as literally multifoliate, opening in ways as manifold as contingency triggers" (117). Another botanical term, like *fascicle* and *margin*, the word

multifoliate describes a many-leaved or many-flowered thing. Edwards's figuratively multifoliate specimens present opportunities for him to contemplate the wonder of God's creation, and to forge, in language and thought, a relationship between the supernatural and the natural world. The swamp, as I have tried to show, would have encouraged his mind to inhabit such active, interstitial places. In the swamp, the earth wavers, ripples, and catches the light. Water seems thicker, collecting on the spongy ground across which wild animals warily traverse. The swamp kills, evolves, nourishes, and seeps. To spend time in a swamp is to be swamped, actively immersed in its visual and sonic array. To spend time in a swamp is to question the soundness of received structures of thought.

7. Edwards's Specimens

In Image #77 in *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, Edwards launches into a long description of rivers—which, in his typology, will necessarily have divine significance. But the length of his description of the natural world is also a deferral of interpretation that reveals both the minister's powers of observation as well as his willingness to be patient enough to let the natural world convey its meaning before he imposes a Biblically-informed one over it.

There is a wonderful analogy between what is seen in RIVERS: their gathering from innumerable small branches beginning at a great distance one from another in different regions, some on the sides or tops of mountains, others in valleys, and all conspiring to one common issue, all after their very diverse and contrary courses which they held for a while, yet all gathering more and more together the nearer they

come to their common end and ultimate issue, and all at length discharging themselves at one mouth into the same ocean. Here is lively represented how all things tend to one, even to God the boundless ocean, which they can add nothing to, as mightiest rivers that continually disembogue themselves into the ocean add nothing to it sensibly. (*IOS* 77)

Edwards describes rivers with a concentration that resembles devotion. Deploying the passive voice to illustrate “what is seen,” he unmoors his description from a central, narrating “I” in favor of a diffuse perspective, or perspectives, enacting the “omitted center” that Leyda sees in Dickinson’s poems and that I find in Dickinson’s unembellished, wildly ordered *Herbarium*. In Edwards’s case, narrative diffusion accommodates a dynamic vision that can pursue the slipperiness of nature’s phenomena: branches morph into regions; mountainsides morph into mountaintops, which morph into valleys; paths are diverse and contrary and conspiring and common. The passage’s first sentence—employing the present tense and relying on commas to prolong its stream of images—conveys, instead of a linear unfolding of events, an active, even chaotic, present in which all activity happens simultaneously.

Edwards devotes three long paragraphs to a meticulously observed and detailed description of freshwater activity. When he concludes his description of rivers, arriving at one periphery of his two-part typological structure, he announces, “I need not run the parallel between this and the course of God’s providence through all the ages” (*IOS* 79). And even though he *does* devote the ensuing two paragraphs to the completion of the analogy, Edwards’s impulse to admit that “he need not” suggests that he recognizes that the natural world contains the language for its expression. Just as Dickinson removes language

from her *Herbarium* so that the specimens may communicate meaning themselves, Edwards need not run his analogy's parallel because the natural world already contains the parallel. When Edwards finishes describing rivers, he arrives at a wild white margin: for him as for Dickinson, this moment of blankness—one description ended and one about to begin—charges the mind.

Edwards's images, like Dickinson's specimens, are meant to convey life, to convey the sense that they—like Dickinson's poems—have been torn out of the earth. Again and again, Edwards refers to natural phenomena that represent “livelily.” In Stephen Daniel's words, “[T]hings represent “livelily” when they are moving: they move an observer to feel differently in virtue of their own movement toward other things that complement and complete their meaning” (53). Objects are lively in the natural world when they instruct and voice, like Scripture, speaking to Edwards through their presence and sustaining him by their never-expiring acts of communication. They brim with life, and their brimming reveals itself as color and light and movement. They also invite the observer to imagine how they might relate to one another, as Dickinson's specimens do. As New writes, “Edwards gave America...the idea of the created world as composition” (21). The artistry in which Dickinson finds consolation is rooted in Edwards's wonder.

8. Intimacies

Edwards and Dickinson negotiate a complicated intimacy with the swamp. The swamp's invitation to participate in the natural world's imagination is silent, unsettling, and subversive. Its illumination, as Dickinson suggests in an undated poem, comes at the risk of psychic unmooring:

Sweet is the swamp with it's secrets,
 Until we meet a snake;
 'Tis then we sigh for houses,
 And our departure take
 At that enthralling gallop
 That only childhood knows.
 A snake is nature's treason,
 And awe is where it goes. (*F* 1780)

Host to a meaningful silence, the swamp offers sweet disorder in opposition to the ruefully sighed-for order of houses. Such sweetness belies danger, in the form of a snake, but even the snake's danger inserts pleasure into the world of the poem. The enthralling gallop—whether of the mind, the body, or the horse that Edwards rode through Western Massachusetts—suggests transport laced with rapture. The speaker and her companion may be running away from the swamp, but the poem chooses to follow the snake, back to a state of swamp-induced awe. The poem gallops to the swamp.

Subtracting the swamp from the exchange of meaning possible between natural and human (especially female) registers in this poem yields readings such as Marisa Anne Pagnattaro's, in which the poem becomes an account of a lesbian tryst: "The 'swamp' could be a cryptic metaphor for the damp, vaginal bog and the 'secrets' shared between two females. The girlishness of exchanged gossip is abruptly broken off by a 'snake'; possibly a phallus, but equally possibly an authority figure who summons each back to her house" (36). Though the subject of my project speaks to my intuition that visionary art by women finds

its origins in the swamp, I am less interested in framing the swamp as vaginal, perhaps because it seems too easy, or reductive, to do so. By following Dickinson into the bog, I elected to follow a less obvious boardwalk of thought into what might have led the poet to see the world in the visionary way she did. In my reading, the swamp is most provocative as an object lesson in the generative possibilities for women's thought and writing outside of male tradition beyond the limited conversation that, say, gender might delineate.

The swamp's generative potential carries the implication of sex, but also foreshadows its aftermath. Elucidating the swamp's diffusive effects on an ungendered post-coital body, Hurd writes:

You slip toward the borders of yourself, toward the obscure blooming in the creases, into the forgotten pockets against whose seams your fingers have fretted and chafed until threads finally thin and your fingers plunge into dark, invisible territory of thigh-skin. You drift in a bog as you do in those moments just after sex, everything matted and moist, when you don't know if you and your partner are one body or two. (8-9)

As the swamp's seductive margins provoke a deep inward turn, down past the pocket's boundaries through to the flesh it conceals, they simultaneously encourage physical dissolution. The swamp pulls the body in two directions. As in Dickinson's poem "Sweet is the swamp with it's [sic] secrets," the swamp also pulls the mind in two directions—to margins and to origins; to the fringes and to the center of consciousness, which may not be a center at all.

The swamp's promise to transport its witness to a post-coital, amalgamated body, where "you don't know if you and your partner are one body or two," strikes me as the promise—or a promise implying a promise—of death. After all, the swamp, in Hurd's words, illustrates "how closely bound are absence and presence, decay and the spirit. This, the swamp shows us, is what everything comes to—tissues and bone gone soft, the psyche thready and unraveled, skulls mushy as dead mushrooms, the invisible world munching away" (112). The swamp dares the physical, imaginative, and poetic fathoming of death—a dare that, for Dickinson, must have been intoxicating. What else is the *Herbarium* if not a collection of the dead, bearing the poignant signs of having lived? Considered in this way, the *Herbarium* emerges as the first text in which Dickinson fashions a personal version of immortality, willing her dead specimens to remain lively and liberated from the patterns of language that deaden them. As Cameron writes, "For immortality as Dickinson dreams it into existence is not simply specified as permanence; it is also presence liberated from the moral encumbrances of both flesh and language" (3).

Dickinson's submission to disorder and simultaneous desire to master death—through love or creation—finds a harbinger in Edwards. The antitypes that Edwards collects represent an attempt to vivify Scriptural types in the author's particular present experience—to bring the Bible back to life. That Edwards's typology evinces signs of the author's increasing attraction to the natural world's antitypes suggests an impending breakdown in the binary structure that he uses to demonstrate divine order. As the natural world gains more traction in his imagination, it carries along with it a less controlled model for creation. As Howe elucidates:

Edwards' negativity, his disciplined journey through conscious despair, humiliation, and the joy of submission to an arbitrary and absent ordering of the Universe, presaged [Dickinson's]. These two prophets of American Modernism speculated in a linguistic territory of ferocious morality. There, mystical revelation collided with self-tormenting literalism. (*MED* 49-50)

The joy that Howe finds in these two writers follows from their capacity to engage with thought that accommodates the kinds of death that the natural world flaunts. To imagine along with the natural world requires the mind to, like the swamp, incorporate death into its version of creation.

9. Personal Narratives

Personal narratives of childhood encounters with the swamp form much of this chapter's unusual foundation. Dickinson's recollection of clutching an orchis in a bog finds a provocative complement in Edwards's recollection of seeking solitude in a booth in the swamp. That both writers choose to characterize themselves and their thought by these narratives in middle age (Dickinson was forty-six when she wrote of the bog to Higginson; Edwards was probably thirty-six when he wrote his "Personal Narrative") reveals the formative impact of these encounters with the swamp that so compellingly connects them.

Spirn writes, "Landscape is loud with dialogues, with story lines that connect a place and its dwellers" (17). The communicative and connective power of landscape has led readers of Edwards to contribute their own story lines to the critical discourse around the minister's relationship to the natural world. For instance, in *Jonathan Edwards, The Valley and*

Nature, Clyde Holbrook's own childhood in the Connecticut Valley galvanizes his conviction that Edwards was deeply, irrevocably impressed by the same landscape. As Holbrook recounts, "This was the land whose serene beauty I drank in, as I believe Edwards did also. It left an impression upon me that even my experience of the majestic heights of the Rockies has never effaced. It was home to me, as it was for Edwards" (11). Similarly establishing the origins of her attention to Edwards in a personal encounter with that same landscape, Howe begins *Souls of the Labadie Tract* with the following account:

[My husband and I] moved to Connecticut from Manhattan because my husband's job required that we live in the general area of New Haven. We found a house in Guilford only a five-minute walk from Long Island Sound. This particular landscape, with its granite outcroppings, abandoned quarries, marshes, salt hay meadows, and paths through the woods to the center of town, put me in touch with my agrarian ancestors. (*SLT* 13)

Howe's encounter with the southern margins of the Connecticut Valley (including an encounter with the marsh, a swampy feature that I will address in the third chapter) steers her to the library. There, she discovers the story of Reverend Hope Atherton, who in 1676 became lost in the wilderness surrounding Deerfield, Massachusetts, just north of Edwards's Northampton and Dickinson's Amherst. Atherton's story guides Howe to Edwards by way of landscape and the radiating imagination that landscape catalyzes.

Piecing together what Howe calls the "miscellanies-fragments" (*MED* 52) that transfix me in Dickinson's *Herbarium* and arranging them around the swamp's uncertain center, my methodology represents an attempt, by way of landscape, to situate myself in

imaginative proximity to Emily Dickinson. To imagine Dickinson in relation to the swamp, let alone *in* the swamp, has required me to think differently—to think, perhaps, like a swamp. In pursuing such thought, I find myself in a tangle of relationships that includes not only Dickinson, Edwards, and the natural world that they shared, but also those critics who read these two writers through the lens of their own personal experiences in the Connecticut Valley.

My connection to the Connecticut Valley occurs by way of Bachelard. I am reminded again of his injunction: “[E]ach one of us should make a surveyor’s map of his lost fields and meadows” (11). One of my lost fields is, in fact, a dormitory named Field, in which I lived during my junior and senior years of preparatory school at Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Massachusetts. The dormitory stands at the far margins of campus, overlooking a graveyard. For two years, my window gave onto the leaning and weather-worn stones marking the lives and deaths of Deerfield’s oldest settlers. Below their graves was, most likely, the burying ground used by American Indians before them. In one corner of the cemetery, a mound marked the mass grave of the English settlers slain by Indians in the Deerfield Massacre of 1704. There is no swamp in the Connecticut Valley in which I hunted for wildflowers, or to which I retreated for contemplation. Instead, I hung around a graveyard.

I say this chapter’s center is uncertain, perhaps, because I did not anticipate arriving at my seventeen-year-old self, shuffling through a graveyard. But the swamp as I imagine it (and imagine along with it) protracts what New describes as “that natural reverie whose smallest transports exceed the scope of mere intention” (136). And if, as New wonderfully posits, “The bush is not a place but an experience” (137), then perhaps the swamp is not a place but an experience: of intimacy with chaos, death, and the new creative orders that

violence makes available at the margins of known experience. I might be carried away when I say that my proximity to Dickinson comes into being simply by my imagining it. As much as possible, I have let the suggestiveness of the swamp chart the course of this chapter, and so it is the swamp, in part, that brings me to this conclusion. “This is, after all, the principal lesson of the swamp,” David C. Miller writes, “in which an animism that is both spiritual and material and yet neither—the product of ourselves and yet an otherness all but inaccessible to us—apprises us of the conditions for keeping the world alive” (16). This chapter ends in hindsight, where my wandering through Deerfield’s deep burying ground represents my raptness with the swamp of thought that originates in the Western Massachusetts landscape and finds its practitioners in Edwards and Dickinson.

CHAPTER 2

“In the very dirt of private fact”:

Swamps in Mary Austin, William James and *The Land of Little Rain*

1. Beginnings

To reach Independence, I drove west through Death Valley. It was embarrassing to believe, even a little bit, that the place names of eastern California conspired to impart symbolic meaning to my itinerary, but I read into my road trip nonetheless. I had traveled there intending to write about swamp aesthetics in the work of Mary Austin (1868-1934), and to visit the little brown house in Independence, California where she wrote her debut collection of essays about the desert, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903). As the highway steadily and steeply descended—one, then two, then three thousand feet—the perversity of my project confronted me with increasing insistence.

Given its name by a group of pioneers wandering there in the winter of 1849-1850, Death Valley is the lowest, driest, hottest location in the United States. Unnerving to anyone accustomed to trees, grass or human habitation, the landscape daunted description, let alone the imagining of the swampy places a few valleys away that Austin saw and described over a century ago. The swamps I found, I presumed, would have to be imagined out of rock and sand and monochromatic space. It was my first time in the desert, in any desert, and I considered it to be the large and merciless manifestation of Charles Olson’s particularly American “SPACE” (11). My lostness in it derived from having lost (or from never having

had) the words to explain what I, for the first time, saw. Place names could only orient me so much: I needed to learn how to read the new landscape in which I found myself. As Anne Whiston Spirn writes:

Landscapes were the first human texts, read before the invention of other signs and symbols. Clouds, wind, and sun were clues to weather, ripples and eddies signs of rocks and life under water, caves and ledges promise of shelter, leaves guides to food; birdcalls warnings of predators. Early writing resembled landscape[.] (15)

To write like a cave or ledge or leaf—I could almost envision doing these things: writing away from light into darkness; or pushing from stable ground to a daring theoretical overhang; or loosening my dependence on fixed branches of thought and succumbing to some kind of linguistic free fall. But to write like a desert? The practice, even hypothetically, flouted imagination.

My fumbling for the language of the desert—and, by extension, the language to describe it—placed me very much in the position of Austin, who moved from Illinois to California in 1888 to homestead there with her mother and two brothers. It would be fifteen years before she published *The Land of Little Rain*, yet vital to Austin's literary pursuit was the estranging illiteracy she felt in her first encounter with the landscape of southeastern California. By examining Austin's engagement with Californian swamps in particular, I hope to introduce the swamp as a provocative and practical model for the writer's groundbreaking readings and responses to the desert. Using the conventionally-considered waste land of the swamp as a way to think and write about the conventionally-considered waste land of the desert would have made aesthetic sense in Austin's time: until the nineteenth century (and

very late in that century, in the case of the desert), both landscapes had been summarily neglected by writers and artists.¹² But the rising aestheticization of the swamp in the middle of the nineteenth century, as David C. Miller points out, suggests that “[t]he immersion in the unknown that desert places had always represented came to be embraced by many as not only a dangerous but also an exhilarating and self-renewing experience” (3). Embracing the rich tangle of her immersion in an unfamiliar landscape that defies measurement, category, control, and traditional notions of beauty, Austin’s writing defies those very same forces. As unconventional as her subject, Austin’s use of language in *The Land of Little Rain* finds inspiration not in the desert, but in that other desert place, the swamp.

Why do I say that Austin responds most powerfully to the swamp when, in fact, she is best known for a book that responds most powerfully to the desert? The eccentricity of my argument almost requires that I commence with oblique endorsements that, in the aggregate, allow me to reply: Why not? For instance: if, as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse observe of Austin, “the more remote, the more marginalized, the more written off as blank space and seen as a silence that has been chosen, the more likely a region is to provide a space for the construction of meaning” (38), then why wouldn’t Austin use the marginalized swamp as the locus for meaning-making? As critics have often observed, water emerges as one of the most powerful forces in Austin’s essays about an arid landscape. About *The Land of Little Rain*, Mark Schlenz writes, “Nature and culture, individuals and communities are defined and interconnected in the book by their relations to water” (190-1). Robert Hass claims that water in *The Land of Little Rain* is “what marriage is in a novel by Jane Austen: the element that explains everything” (xxv). Elizabeth Ammons falls into describing Austin’s writing itself in terms of water, calling it “repetitive, fluid, and

¹² Most critics point to John C. Van Dyke’s *The Desert: Studies in Natural Appearances* (1901) as the first book to aestheticize the desert.

aggregative” (93). Referring to what he terms “watershed aesthetics” in Austin’s work, Lawrence Buell (whose thinking motivates mine) explains:

[E]qually important to [*The Land of Little Rain*], and crucial to Austin’s grasp of desert ecology, is its perception of the region’s watercourses, both natural and human-made: their service as borders and instigators of trails, both for animals and humans; the stunning visual and botanical effects of the sparse rainfall; the vicious fights among ranchers over water supply. (*Writing for an Endangered World* 252-3)

Buell’s “watershed aesthetics” recognizes “the power of the watershed as a luminous aesthetic-ethical-political-ecological image, provided one recognizes it as a less than empirically airtight category” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 247). In Buell’s argument, rivers define landscape and people, and in the late twentieth-century, they begin to define works of literature aspiring to what he calls “riverness.” Encouraged by both the critical appraisal of Austin’s attention to water and the critical neglect of Austin’s attention to the watery swamp, I will argue that Austin’s text aspires to swampiness.

If, as Austin describes herself (using the third person) in her autobiography, “[s]he learned best by subjects, by units of knowledge which had a kind of wholeness in themselves, taking by instinct the center of the field and working out to the fringes overlapping the next subject and the next” (152), then the swamp becomes a plausible site from which and by which she would have made considered forays into the larger environment of the desert, with the swamp guiding her language and thought. In *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin’s swamp aesthetics enlist: diffuse narrative perspectives that allow the author to all but disappear within disorienting settings and nonlinear textual structures;

blurred geographical, physical and perceptual boundaries; and an overall reluctance to demystify all of the desert's mysteries. Austin's inventive and original vision of the California desert occurs, as I see it, by way of the swamp.

And if, as a recent biography by Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson describes her, Austin "understood the American West to be a singular region, exempt ... [from] flawed hypotheses about beginnings and ends" (x), then perhaps, I can tell myself, my project of writing about Austin's unconventional response to the desert asserts its validity in its unlikely beginning—in a rental car at the entrance to Death Valley, where I paid a \$20 fee. Now a National Park, Death Valley was designated a National Monument by Herbert Hoover in 1933, the year before Austin died.

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Death Valley forms one of the many basins that give shape to the American West's undulating basin-and-range topography. Traveling west at the age of twenty, Mary Austin (then Mary Hunter) first saw the deserts of the Great Basin from the window of a train that passed through Great Salt Lake on its way from Denver to San Francisco in 1888 (Goodman and Dawson 2). Born and raised in Illinois, Austin moved west after completing her college education—an endeavor punctuated in 1885 by a breakdown that required her to take a leave of absence from the State Normal School in Bloomington, Illinois before completing her degree at Blackburn College in Carlinville. In her 1932 autobiography *Earth Horizon*, Austin retrospectively blames the breakdown in part on the college curriculum's "[u]nremitting fixation of attention on objective detail, not of true learning, but of pedagogical method," complaining that "reading [was] reduced to the rendering of the content of literature in the

most explicit rather than the most expressive verbal terms” (151). As she recovered, Austin “began to realize that the breakdown represented for her the need of a quicker intellectual tempo, a more expansive and varied rhythm” (*Earth Horizon* 156-7). The quickness, expansiveness, and variety that formed Austin’s “need” are, I believe, qualities the writer reckoned were to be found in the “expressive verbal terms” that her college education denied her. They were also qualities she’d felt reading *Paradise Lost* when she was young. Referring to herself in the third person in her autobiography, she recalls:

Through Milton, the magic of words carried Mary swimmingly much of the way—
Lucifer falling from Morn to dewy Eve—and all the dark angelic host—*thick as the
leaves that strew the brooks*—.... But she kept forgetting the sequences of the story,
mazed by the magic of the verse—*like watching a thunderstorm at sunset*. (105, second
set of italics mine)

Austin’s impulse to compare (in the two italicized similes) the poem and the experience of reading it to phenomena in the natural world reveals her early intuition that language and the workings of the natural world are twined, because they generate the same feelings in her own perceiving self. Milton’s verse speaks to her as the leaves do, perhaps in its tumbling syntax evoking what Spirn might call a language resembling leaves. But like the flash flood after a spectacular evening thunderstorm, the verse also inundates—carrying its reader “swimmingly,” flooding her to the point of unsequencing what she thought she knew. When it comes time for Austin to write her own book, her early instincts about language and the natural world emerge most strongly in her subject matter and style: she locates as subjects those features of the natural world that not only speak to her, but flood her so

unrelentingly that she has no choice but to speak. This nexus of the landscape's language and the English language occurs most powerfully for her in the discombobulating waters of the swamp.

But that comes later.

2. In the Tules; In the Tulares

Austin completed the final eight-day stretch of her 1888 emigration on horseback—from Los Angeles to her new home in the San Joaquin Valley—through the Tehachapi Mountains at Tejon Pass. Referring to herself in the third person, Austin recalls the new environment as troubling:

Her trouble was that the country failed to explain itself...She did not know yet what were its weather signs, nor what the procession of its days might bring forth. Until these things elucidated themselves factually, Mary was spellbound in an effort not to miss any animal behavior, any bird-marking, any weather signal, any signature of tree or flower. (*Earth Horizon* 194-5)

Austin's craving for signs—*behavior, marking, signal, and signature*—reveals her imagining mind yearning to learn what Spivak would call the “first text” of her new life. At the top of Tejon Pass with the setting sun behind her, Austin obtains her first view of the desert's vastness in an encounter facilitated by the pace and paths of travel on horseback. Her vision would prove to be determining. Referring to herself in the third person, Austin remembers both what she sees and what disappears from sight as she descends into the valley.

It was down this way Mary came, riding a buckskin horse, and watching ... the vast dim hollow of the Valley, in the midst of which *she could just make out the dark hieroglyphs of the Tulares*....There were no trees growing there, and no green grass, nor any shrubs taller than the sparse knee-high sagebrush; all tawny pale with summer heat. Pale cusps of treeless hills clipped the homesteaders' strip on either side, and between it and the hollow of the Valley lay a low ridge of whitish sandy dunes. Far on the eastern horizon, above the heat haze, hung the long, snow-whitened slopes of the Sierra Nevada, from which the rivers came down to feed *the vast tule swamps, whose intricate dark blurs were lost to the sight as the travelers came down from the Pass.* (*Earth Horizon* 190, italics mine)

In the great desert basin of the San Joaquin Valley, as my italics indicate, Austin's eye twice finds swamps. Defined as *tule lands*, tulares are the wetland homes of the tule, a type of New World bulrush whose name (pronounced too lee) derives from the Spanish, and before that, the Aztec (Vileisis 25). Dotted the valley floor with a dark and fugitive message that Austin senses but cannot decipher before she loses sight of them, the swamps *must* mean something because they *almost* mean something. Hence her recollection of the tulares as intricate blurs and, most notably, hieroglyphs. They are the desert's script.

*

Beyond hieroglyph, beyond intricate blur, beyond the symbolic, what does a tule literally look like? Alongside the highway, before entering Death Valley, I passed small

pockets of rushes that must have fed off invisible underground springs. The rushes were perhaps twelve feet tall, topped by yellow inflorescent plumes. They were dense but dry, blown by the force of passing cars. They were not the damp thickets of dark green grass-like plants I'd seen pictures of when I performed a Google search for *tule*, and I suspected that I was not seeing tules. I knew that I was not seeing tulares. A tulare implied critical mass, presenting itself as it presented itself to Austin from the vantage of Tejon Pass: as vast. Tulares were something to lose yourself in.

In the 1770s, a Spanish militia captain found the San Joaquin Valley choked with 'a dense growth of nettles, wormwood, grapevines, willows, cottonwoods, oak, ash, bay laurel, and the ever present tules.' ... In places the captain estimated that tule marshes extended twenty miles from the river, making travel impossible. In fact, Central Valley wetlands encompassed 4 million acres, nearly one-third of the valley's total area. (Vileisis 25-6)

In Ross Macdonald's 1965 hard-boiled detective story *Black Money*, a petulant Kitty says (to Macdonald's recurring hero, Lew Archer):

"Leo made a lifetime of enemies. If they knew he was helpless, his life wouldn't be worth that." She snapped her fingers. "Neither would mine. Why do you think we're hiding out in the tules here?"

Lew Archer (to himself):

To her, I thought, the tules meant any place that wasn't on the Chicago-Vegas-Hollywood axis. (189)¹³

To be *out in the tules* is to be in the boondocks, in the sticks, lost (Eaton). *Tule fog* plugs the basin of the San Joaquin Valley in the wintertime, obliterating visibility. Likewise, I keep failing to see—the tules, I mean. Looking for tulares in widening digressions, I fear I am in danger of losing Austin.

Until William L. Preston brings me back to her. A work of historical geography, Preston's *Vanishing Landscapes: Land and Life in the Tulare Lake Basin* (1981) spotlights the southern San Joaquin Valley that Austin descended into that evening in 1888 on the back of a buckskin horse. Describing the wetlands there, Preston writes with scientific rigor, employing parentheses, brackets, references, lists, and meager imagery. The passage I've quoted is unforgivably long, even boring—but quoted, I hope, for good reason.

Lands subject to seasonal overflow (fig. 10) occur throughout the basin, and marsh species flourish wherever standing water persists. Besides including species peculiar to each surrounding community, the marshland flora includes its own characteristic species such as common tule, bulrush, cattail spike rush, and sedges (Burcham 1957, pp. 148-149). Most marsh species stay green throughout the dry season, in marked contrast to the rapid browning of the prairie and savanna grasses. Tules (this Aztec term applied by the Spanish to all marshland species [Gudde 1965, p. 329] here

¹³ Ross Macdonald, *Black Money* (New York: Warner Books, 1990) 189, qtd. in Mark Liberman, "Ultima Toolies," *Language Log*, 27 Aug. 2005, <<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/002426.html>>. Liberman discovers the tules in Ross Macdonald's *Black Money*. His etymological wanderings in the tules complement my own.

denotes only *Scirpus acutus* Muh.) grow to heights of eight to ten feet along streams and may reach fifteen or twenty feet in height on the lakeshore (Hittell 1866, p. 107).

The marsh community was described by Mary Austin in *The Land of Little Rain*["]

(22)

Choosing to quote Austin at length, Preston implies that his inventory—supplying the information that geography, to some degree, demands—sorely lacks the vibrant description of the ensuing Austin passage. (As it happens, Preston unabashedly remedies the dryness of his text by splicing into his historical geography passages from various literary sources.) The Austin quote that illuminates Preston's tulares comes from her essay "Other Water Borders" in *The Land of Little Rain*:

Last and inevitable resort of overflow waters is the tulares, great wastes of reeds (*Juncus*) in sickly, slow streams. The reeds, called tules, are ghostly pale in winter, in summer deep poisonous-looking green, the waters thick and brown; the reed beds breaking into dingy pools, clumps of rotting willows, narrow winding water lanes and sinking paths. The tules grow inconceivably thick in places, standing man-high above the water; cattle, no, not any fish or fowl can penetrate them. Old stalks succumb slowly; the bed soil is quagmire, settling with the weight as it fills and fills. Too slowly for counting they raise little islands from the bog and reclaim the land. The waters pushed out cut deeper channels, gnaw off the edges of the solid earth. The tulares are full of mystery and malaria. (90-1)

If, like me, you have never seen tulares, Austin will make you believe you have (and might make you believe that you'll not want to see them again anytime soon). Fetterley and Pryse write, "She is acutely aware of the imaginative and cognitive leap required for the reader to enter her region," and note that her writing invites and facilitates such leaps (351). As I hope to show, these are imaginative and cognitive leaps that Austin makes as well.

Movement reigns in the Austin passage, but it is the movement of decay in what Austin calls a waste. There, the natural world discloses its sickly, poisonous, dingy, and rotting self. Expiring tules accrete solid matter, obstructing waterways with their clumping, daring the water to go elsewhere. Austin's tulares are most alive in their very act of dying. (This death-laced description of the swamp may derive from Austin's own background: her asthmatic father, who died when she was ten years old, never recovered from the time during his service in the Civil War when he stood neck-deep in a malarial Southern swamp to hide from Confederate troops [Goodman and Dawson 4].) Until the contemporary wetland preservation movement, swamps had long been considered chaotic, contagious, forbidding places—and Austin would have been tempted to draw on convention in her own response (Miller 13). She may even have assumed that her (mainly East Coast) readers expected nothing less than the affirmation of what they already believed to be true about swamps. Indeed, her audience also expected an affirmation of what they already believed to be true about deserts. Austin acknowledges assumptions about the desert in the opening essay of *The Land of Little Rain*, wondering, "And yet—and yet—is it not perhaps to satisfy expectation that one falls into the tragic key in writing of desertness?" (7). Despite its oozy immediacy, Austin's swamp passage suggests that the narrator creeps up to the edge of the tulares but will go no further. Devouring the ground she stands on, Austin's tulares challenge the writer's presence in the strange landscape she dares to describe.

But the tulares are not unilaterally threatening in Austin's work. They are still the same hieroglyphs that invite her to read them when she first arrives in southern California, inviting her to participate in making meaning in a topography of blankness (Fetterley and Pryse 38). Her world had ruptured—emotionally and physically—when Austin arrived in California, and it restores itself in the form of a desert dotted with swamps that call her to participate in the language of her new landscape. Each swamp tenders an occasion, or a handhold, or a portal into interpreting her experience in the desert. Later in her life, in an essay about regionalism in American fiction, Austin would express her conviction that the environment influences literary forms:

[T]here is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly on upon man as his regional environment....[Therefore] it is rather surprising to find critics in the United States speaking of regionalism as something new and unprecedented in a territory so immensely varied as ours. The really astonishing thing would have been to find the American people as a whole resisting the influence of natural environment in favor of the lesser influences of a shared language and a common political arrangement. (Blackbird and Nelson 70-1)

Given Austin's understanding of the correlation between environment and language, and given her formative experience with the tulares, her availing herself of the tulares to fashion a language that is described by Fetterley and Pryse as asserting an "intimate connection between topography and form" emerges as increasingly credible, if not inevitable (197).

To see the swamps in the desert landscape, as Austin does when she crosses Tejon Pass, runs counter to prevailing perspectives. The swamp occasions a new way of seeing, if

one is bold enough to pursue such perception in a place that worries the boundaries between life and death, growth and decay, water and dirt. Barbara Hurd elucidates in *Stirring the Mud: Swamps, Bogs, and the Human Imagination*:

The paradox is that to see clearly, you must learn to see obliquely. You must look ahead and, at the same time, widen your peripheral vision so that it extends not just in great arcs around your head, but over the edge, into the margins where the visible and invisible, dreams and reality, land and water, emptiness and profusion mingle.... What space is this that seems to open up only at those moments when our usual protective stances have been obliterated? Why is it we only see that space when we teeter on some precarious brink? What kind of vision don't we have? (13, 109)

The regenerative space that opens up (what Olson refers to as "SPACE") to the brave and pioneering perception inheres most imperatively, for Austin, in the tulares. By fastening her attention onto the innate mystery and paradox of the tulares, she will subvert (in the quoted passage that follows) conventional assumptions about the swamp's deadliness and entropy. Indeed, in the spirit of paradox, Austin enacts this subversion in the essay by switching the emotional valence of her description in the paragraph break between the paragraph I quoted above and the paragraph I quote below. Referring to tulares' mystery and malaria, she writes:

That is why we have meant to explore them and have never done so. It must be a happy mystery. So you would think to hear the redwinged blackbirds proclaim it clear March mornings. Flocks of them, and every flock a myriad, shelter in the dry, whispering stems.

And then, continuing this line of thought into the essay's next (and final) paragraph, Austin writes:

By night one wakes to hear the clanging geese go over. One wishes for, but gets no nearer speech from those the reedy fens have swallowed up. What they do there, how fare, what find, is the secret of the tulares. (91)

Austin enacts a radical reversal: after portraying the tulares as sickly sites of rot and decay, she recognizes them as fecund sources and hoarders of language, characterized by their whispering tules and swallowed speech. Rather than clearly communicating, the sounds of the swamp bewilder and confound conventional exchange, even conventional progressions of thought. “Sound accentuates the most disorienting effects of the swamp,” Miller writes, “present[ing] the prospect of both immersion and absorption into the realm of otherness” (177). What Miller calls the swamp's otherness is, for Austin, a “happy mystery”—kept secret by the tulares themselves and the red-winged blackbirds that disappear, unharmed, into them. The tulares' silences and birdsong communicate the presence of alternate modes of communicating—by *almost* communicating—much like the hieroglyphs of the tulares must mean something to Austin because they *almost* mean something. The tulares dare Austin to make meaning out of them. In an introduction to *The Land of Little Rain*, T.M. Pearce writes, “Vast open spaces were neither silent nor barren for [Austin]. She recognized an exchange of communication everywhere, and her search was to understand and participate as fully as she could” (vii). Austin rises to the landscape's provocative, productive

dare not only in the tulares, but also in the desert trails, and in her neighbor's field, and in the other places and people she encounters in southern California.

“In a swamp[,] we are arrayed in mystery, one foot in a seep hole and one in a dream,” Hurd writes (43). To pursue mystery (as both Hurd and Austin do) in the swamp is to pursue the suggestive and the puzzling. To pursue a dream, on the other hand, is to subject a mystery to time, protracting it into a sequence that verges on narrative or explanation. To pursue a dream is to believe in its possible reality. Spirn claims, “[W]e dwell in what began as dreams” (267). Confronted in the swamp with a sucking seep hole that obstructs (Thoreau excepted) easy transcendence, the mind's passage from almost-meaning to meaning becomes its challenge and responsibility. The passage must be created, or dreamt.

The swamp's suggestive thrall, as Miller importantly points out, compels Thoreau because it feeds his larger interest “in the indistinct prospect, the mere suggestion” (223). This fascination, moreover, “ties Thoreau to the pragmatism of William James and to James's prophetic formulation of the ‘stream of thought,’ to the great value he places on the penumbra of suggestiveness that could bring the world alive in a perpetual self-renewal” (223). Encouraged by Austin's claim in her autobiography to “have read practically everything that James has written” (282), and by her declaration that she is “a pragmatist in religion” (126), I would like to situate Austin in this network of thought, particularly Jamesian thought, that lingers around the swamp. Austin met James in 1898, two years before she started writing *The Land of Little Rain*—and his ideas, as I hope to show, endorsed Austin's intuitive literary pursuit of what she sensed was sacred in the desert. Her mystical outdoor encounters—and the feelings that attended those encounters—were, from a Jamesian standpoint, to be pursued, probed, and taken seriously. Robert D. Richardson,

referring to James's encouragement of Austin, writes, "It was just this sort of inner exploration that James loved to egg on" (318). I will argue that Austin's exploration is of both inner *and* outer landscapes, and of the language, informed by the swamp, that illuminates and enhances the relationship between the two.

3. William James

Although I have only now introduced him into this chapter, William James has been present in the thinking of the authors whose texts I've most relied on. By way of thought, James has been present from the beginning. Charles Olson's *Call me Ishmael* finds a Jamesian "fringe" of related texts radiating from *Moby Dick*, enacting James's understanding in *The Principles of Psychology* that "[k]nowledge *about* a thing is knowledge of its relations" (vol. 1, 259). Austin echoes this sentiment when she recalls in her autobiography that she "learned best by subjects, by units of knowledge which had a kind of wholeness in themselves, taking by instinct the center of the field and working out to the fringes overlapping the next subject and the next" (152). Meanwhile, Anne Whiston Spirn's *Language and Landscape* announces itself as the Jamesian fusion of "function, feeling, and meaning" (3). Indeed, Spirn could be referring to the swamp's relationship to the creative mind when she quotes James, saying, "Utopias can be dark.... William James said those who would change the world must hold the ideal and the real as dynamically continuous" (265). Placing her book *Stirring the Mud* in dialogue with James's "Stream of Thought" chapter in *The Principles of Psychology*, Barbara Hurd describes the activity of mind that the swamp provokes, admitting, "I'm sweet on the moments of reverie that water induces, the way my mind loosens, grows fluid" (36).

I also find James in a passage from one of Austin's later, semi-autobiographical books, *Experiences Facing Death*, written nearly twenty years after *The Land of Little Rain*. In it, Austin champions feeling as the powerful guiding force in her life:

[T]he *felt experience* of life, must, in any conclusion of mine, always take precedence of the orthodox of science. The problems of life and death are largely subjective problems. I can admit science as a method which has an explicit, but not predominant, applicability to subjective experience. Science may explain, but I do not permit the experience to be confined within or constrained by the method. I make this rule for myself out of a profound experience of my own that the *method* of consciousness, of God, if you will, is not the method of the scientist, but of the creative artist. (273)

The felt experience to which Austin refers determines not only the content of the essays in *The Land of Little Rain* but also her way of thinking about the world. Her method is, of course, very pragmatist: pragmatism, as James introduces it, “widens the field of search for God.... She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him” (*Writings 1902-10* 522). It is my contention that James gives Austin the artistic and intellectual license she needs in order to write about the strangeness that she observes and feels in the desert: in the context of Jamesian thought, Austin's intuitions matter, and writing about them matters. With a boosted faith in the realities of what she feels in the natural world, Austin responds uninhibitedly to what holds her: the spontaneous impulse she

receives from a thing marks that thing (a mouse trail, a horse trail, an irrigation ditch, a clump of desert flora) as worthy of further investigation. In this practice, feeling is the criterion by which Austin judges what to observe and what to write about. If her focus on swatches of the non-human natural world seem particular or random, it is because the scale of the desert demands that Austin be selective, spotlighting that which beguiles her in what, taken as an undifferentiated whole, would be an estranging landscape. This selection process mirrors her choice to write in the key of the swamp—that landscape feature that so moves her when she first sees it—when describing the larger desert.

Writing in the truly mystifying environment of the desert becomes an act of divination—for what Austin calls in her autobiography “the magic words which would unlock as much at least as anybody knew of the meaning of what she saw” (195). Believing that a language accountable to sensation remedies physical and emotional disorientation—and suggesting, in her retrospective diagnosis of her college breakdown, that her equilibrium depends on it—Austin’s literary project will require that language be faithful to not only her outer and inner landscapes, but also the continuity between the two.

Austin’s confidence—expressed in both her autobiography and literary criticism—in language’s capacity to recalibrate its user’s relationship to her environment is inspired by James. James expresses his own, arguably less complacent, faith in what Austin considers the “magic of words.” Emphasizing in *Pragmatism* the role of words as points of temporary rest, not ends in themselves, he writes:

[Y]ou know what a great part in magic words have always played...the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name....But if

you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience... *Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.* We don't lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. (*Writings 1902-10* 509)

For James, a language that is provisional permits its user to “make nature over again” in the testing ground of her experience. This participatory thrust will be crucial for Austin: throughout her life, mystical experience in the natural world will be a common occurrence, an occurrence whose meaningfulness pragmatism would endorse. It is important to note that although Austin knew James through his early works—such as *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *The Will to Believe and Other Essays on Popular Psychology* (1897)—she would have had to have read *Pragmatism* after writing *The Land of Little Rain*. *Pragmatism* was published in 1907, four years after *The Land of Little Rain*. This does not mean, however, that she would not have been aware of the philosophy as James elaborated it: in fact, the month before Austin met James, the philosopher had delivered a lecture at Berkeley in which he spoke “for the first time of ‘pragmatism’ as a philosophic principle, attributing [the] term to Charles Peirce.”¹⁴

The year was 1898, and Austin was in San Francisco seeking treatment for what would be her last breakdown. At that point, she had been living in California for ten years, married (unhappily) for seven, and living in the evocatively-named towns Lone Pine and Bishop. She was about to join her husband in Independence, a town she describes as having

¹⁴ William James, *Writings 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992) 1159. Gerald E. Myers's chronology gives the date of the lecture—“Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results”—as August 26, 1898.

“no single alleviating circumstance” (Stineman xiii). Austin’s biographer Esther Lanigan Stineman notes: “The exact nature of her illness remains obscure mainly because although Mary could write exceptionally clear prose, she chose not to when referring to her own health” (57). However, it seems crucial to remember that, at the time of her 1898 breakdown, Austin had yet to start writing seriously. That would not happen until after she met William James.¹⁵

The meeting occurred after Austin attended a lecture on relaxation that James gave in the Bay Area.¹⁶ His lecture championed the kind of idiosyncratic conduct and emotional expression that Austin felt she had been denied in her education and in her early adult life. As Austin recalls in her autobiography, he “[r]ecommended to all intellectuals...the relaxation of the rather strained surface tensions which was the preferred intellectual mode of the time, in order that the whole personality might be flooded by the deep life that welled up from below the threshold of selfness” (282). So moved was Austin that she “tracked James down to his Oakland hotel to converse with him, and was gratified—and incredulous—when he received her” (Stineman 61). The encounter had the power of revelation, sanctioning what Austin had been feeling in the desert, particularly in her interactions with local tribal communities. She remembers:

[James] validated my own experience of the swinging door, the door that opens out of consciousness with the same effect of . . . an icy shiver as when an actual door behind you shudders on the latch and lets in a draught of coolness. When you are sitting with the elders of the tribe, when the sayings of the Ancient Men are passing,

¹⁵ In Stineman’s “Austin Chronology,” she notes 1900 as the year that Mary Austin started writing seriously (xiii). I am inclined to agree with her.

¹⁶ Stineman says the lecture was in Oakland; Richardson says that the talk was September 12th at Berkeley, on the subject of psychology and relaxation (379).

and suddenly at the word dropped, an incident related, whole areas of human evolution let blow upon you, a wind out of your own past. (283)

Austin's conviction that a word or saying can summon "whole areas of human evolution" with a force as sensuous as the passage of air across the skin harkens back to her experience of reading *Paradise Lost* and feeling its language affect her the way thunder, lightning, leaves, or watercourses do. This category of language adheres most closely to the landscape that Spirn calls the "first text," the landscape to which Austin looks for keys to innovative and powerful communication. Upon meeting James, Austin, for the first time, heard of "her intimate experience stated as normal and explicit, even recommended, [and this] carried her in a kind of daze of illumination" (282). She returned to Independence in 1900 and wrote the essays that make up *The Land of Little Rain*, considered her masterpiece.

4. As Much of Independence as a Visitor Can Give

"None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections," writes Austin in her collection's title essay (6). It had not yet laid a hold on mine. Winding up out of the pit of Death Valley, with nearly four thousand feet of elevation between me and Independence, I felt anxious and small. I did not want to stop, because I did not want to get out of the car. I passed sand dunes, then the pocked ground that marked the ghost of a lake. Later, I passed the puddled remnants of a larger lake whose water now supplies the city of Los Angeles. Soon after, Independence met me with a sign indicating its population: about six hundred people. A little dilapidated, under an equally dilapidated willow tree, Austin's home is landmarked with a plaque that I parked my rental car beside.

I hadn't followed Austin's advice. I had driven too fast, even though Austin herself warns against such velocity, writing in the "Preface" to the 1903 edition of *The Land of Little Rain* that "the real heart and core of the country are not to be come at in a month's vacation. One must summer and winter with the land and wait its occasions" (x). With only three days to spend in the desert, I approached Independence from the east, even though she advises me to ride from the west "over the Sierra passes by pack and trail, seeing and believing" (x). What was I supposed to see? What was I supposed to believe? I had not yet seen the tulares that I'd hope to see, and I no longer believed I would. Perhaps the trouble was that I didn't love the desert, or didn't want to do the work that loving the desert required of me. Hurd could easily be describing the desert when she writes, "To love a swamp . . . is to love what is muted and marginal, what exists in the shadows, what shoulders its way out of mud and scurries along the damp edges of what is most commonly praised. And sometimes its invisibility is a blessing" (8). Would I have to love this landscape before I was to see what Austin saw? Did her love call the desert's beauty into being, the way it called the swamp's beauty into being? Perhaps the blessing of invisibility is in its invitation to the lover/writer/observer to make visible what she desires to see. At the end of her preface, Austin invites her readers to the home I stood in front of:

But if ever you come beyond the borders as far as the town that lies in a hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow-tree at the end of the village street, and there you shall have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another. (x-xi)

There was no point in knocking. Austin lived in the little brown house more than a hundred years ago, and I didn't care to speculate who lived there now. It looked empty to me, but perhaps that was its invitation. I could fill that emptiness with my own imagining.

5. *The Land of Little Rain*

Austin's subjects in *The Land of Little Rain* command such attention in her essays that, as Lawrence Buell observes in *The Environmental Imagination*, the observer herself nearly vanishes. Buell argues that the landscape that Austin describes informs this relationship to her subject matter as well as the dissolution of self:

Austin allows the book to be taken over by other peoples' stories and her speaker to imagine the desert as it might look through the eyes of birds and animals. In this diffusion of centers of consciousness, and her refusal to maintain an executive control over the perceptual center except at the level of prescriptive aphorism, Austin adheres to what she sees as the ethic dictated by the place: 'Not the law, but the land sets the limit.' (176)

Buell goes on to argue that Austin's self-effacement links her to "premodern women environmental writers ... who were expected not to...thrust themselves egotistically forward" (177). I would rather believe that Austin's artistic method asks her reader to feel both the inhuman strangeness of the desert and, eventually, the other (animal, botanical, geological) registers of that experience. Her method allows for a multi-dimensional experience made possible through the associations that a relaxed (in James's terms) mind can

make. In “The Gospel of Relaxation,” James posits: “*strong feeling about one’s self tends to arrest the free association of one’s objective ideas and motor processes*” (*Writings 1878-1899* 835). Whereas Buell sees Austin’s diffuse, associative practice as the larger landscape’s mandate, I believe it to be the dissolution of self and self-consciousness validated by James and evoked and encouraged by the swamp. As Hurd describes,

A swamp is a poor place to go for a steady reflection. This is a broken, shattered place, shards of mirror nestled in the hummocks, jammed between levees. The most you might get is a momentary two-by-three reflection framed in overhanging willows, an image, wavering or still, pierced by arrow arum or water lily, a human being out of whom bloom lushness and wildness, tranquility and tangles, a reflection that dissolves the moment you lean too close, try to disappear into yourself. (39)

Confounding anthropocentric intentions, the swamp promotes what Buell describes as the “suspension of ego to the point of feeling the environment to be at least as worthy of attention as oneself and of experiencing oneself as situated among many interacting presences” (176).

Such suspension of ego (also implied by Austin’s decision to write her autobiography in the third person) appears most dramatically in Austin’s essay “Water Trails of the Ceriso,” in which she tells her readers of the myriad animal trails leading up to a particular, though unspecified, spring in the desert. The narrator’s refusal to specify the spring’s location is matched by her refusal to specify where she is. Each of the essay’s first five paragraphs is written from a different location: the narrator abruptly shifts from the desert floor (in the first paragraph), to the top of a mountain (in the second paragraph), to the foot of the same

mountain (in the third paragraph), to a specific yet unspecified coyote-dug water-hole (in the fourth paragraph), and back to the desert floor and its spring (in the fifth paragraph). The narrator's imaginative flights assert a bodiless versatility in which presence is most strongly contoured by absence.

Frequent changes of point of view and tense enhance the narrator's perceptual instability. For instance, "Water Trails of the Ceriso" opens from the perspective of a mysterious "one" in the desert: "Getting down to the eye level of rat and squirrel kind, one perceives what might easily be wide and winding roads to us if they occurred in thick plantations of trees three times the height of a man" (9). She soon switches to the imperative, developing a baffling directive:

Venture to look for some seldom-touched water-hole, and so long as the trails run with your general direction make sure you are right, but if they begin to cross yours at never so slight an angle, to converge toward a point left or right of your objective, no matter what the maps say, or your memory, trust them; they *know*. (10)

Such baffling seems purposeful, for, like the animal trails radiating from the waterhole in the desert, Austin's writing resists linear plotting. As Elizabeth Ammons observes in these essays, "Austin creates a structure of no large climaxes: no peaks and valleys" (96).

Meanwhile, Susan Winnett might see such subversion of patriarchal narrative forms as driven by the particular rhythms of female sexual experience: she provocatively suggests that "female pleasure might have a different plot" (507). But Austin's eschewing of peaks and valleys is also a rejection of the American desert's basin-and-range topography as a model for her own writing. Agreeing with Mark Schlenz's reading of "Water Trails of the

Ceriso”—as a narrative whose imaginative structure is “geographically inspired” —I would like to see the tulares as inspiration for a porous, flexible, penetrating structure of thought that “opens into metaphysical insight” (193).

Bogs specialize in stimuli whose primary characteristic is to penetrate, leak through. Suddenly the skin is not strong enough and any sense of self can be lured below the surface and caught in a tangle of water lily stems, quicksand of mud, shattered by sunlight gleaming in small pools and fracturing into shadows behind hummocks. Whatever self lingers, sunlit and dry-booted, uncoils, unwinds, dissolves, seeps into a landscape of shifting dimensions. This is a valley of friable reflections where you cannot tell what is mirror, what is window, what is self, what is oblivion. (Hurd 104)

*

Austin’s diffuse and disorienting narration lends itself to the purposeful blurring of geographical, physical, and perceptual boundaries that occurs throughout *The Land of Little Rain*. As the passage from “Water Trails of the Ceriso” cited above indicates, Austin dismisses maps, admonishing her reader to follow her lead and, ultimately, the lead of any desert animal who leaves a trail. But Austin herself is an unreliable guide, and *The Land of Little Rain* is certainly no guidebook. Rather, the essays seem bent on either losing the reader or conveying dislocation, or both. In her later theory of indigenous rhythms, *The American Rhythm* (1923), Austin posits that this lostness is a prerequisite to the creation of an innovative language born out of the intuitive, felt, animal response to one’s environment. As she proclaims, “An instinctive rhythm is a habit of response of which the initiative is lost.

Being lost is one of the conditions of our making poetry of it” (7). Seeking lostness and divining in the desert for the words to communicate it, Austin attends to the natural world in pursuit of her own account of its relationship to human consciousness (Fetterley and Pryse 4). With that purpose, she brings what she knows of Jamesian thought to the desert.

The Jamesian influence on Austin emerges powerfully in the essay “Water Borders,” in which Austin portrays desert water in its various natural manifestations—mountain rivulet, lake, spongy swamp—and illuminates its power to delineate animal and plant existence. The essay begins: “I like the name the Indians give to the mountain of Lone Pine, and find it pertinent to my subject,—Oppapago, The Weeper” (77). Austin’s preference for the Indian name for the mountain is, according to Buell, an example of how “Austin commits herself to boundary erasure,” warning her readers early in *The Land of Little Rain* “that she is an unmethodical cartographer” (175). Austin’s “unmethodical cartography” is, in fact, wholly methodical from a Jamesian standpoint: by inventing a radiant cartography coordinated by her own chosen subject of interest, Austin conceives of relationships in her environment according to the radiant model for consciousness proposed by James in *The Principles of Psychology*. He writes, “Knowledge *about* a thing is knowledge of its relations. Acquaintance with it is limitation to the bare impression which it makes. Of most of its relations we are only aware in the penumbral nascent way of a ‘fringe’ of unarticulated affinities about it” (vol. 1, 259). In his later work, *A Pluralistic Universe*, James elaborates on the fringe:

[N]ature is but a name for excess; every point in her opens out and runs into the more; and the only question, with reference to any point we may considering, is how far into the rest of nature we may have to go in order to get entirely beyond its

overflow.... My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more...*all shades and no boundaries.*

(*Writings 1902-10* 760-1, italics mine)

Evoking a watery overflow composed of all shades and no boundaries, James could easily be describing the swamp. (Substituting the word *Swamp* at the beginning of either sentence in the above quote yields pleasing results.) Intentionally or unintentionally employing Jamesian terms herself, Hurd reminds us that the swamp has

fringed and seepy edges into which pieces of our lives have sunk, places where year after year the crust grows thin, too thin, finally, to mask the sense that underneath this unkempt border something else is breathing: the origins of our words, wiser afterthoughts, the whispered asides of the spirit. (3)

Drawing on James's seeping fringes of thought as much as the seeping fringes of the swamp, Austin exploits permeability to the point of unnerving her readers to the extent that she herself has been unnerved by her environment. As Buell states, "The best environmental writers continually recalibrate familiar landscapes" (261). But the recalibrated landscape loops back to recalibrate the thinking self. As Ammons writes:

Austin's book asks: How can a text lead modern western readers into a place, a consciousness, which we can progress through, but more importantly we need simply to quit progressing, quit straining and searching, in order to know? How does

a writer construct a narrative to tell us formally as well as conceptually to be still—to give over, merge, stop struggling? (91)

Water, of course, is the ideal medium to encourage such merging. Meticulously tracking the movements of water from mountain spring to manmade irrigation ditch, Austin writes:

Here is the fashion in which a mountain stream gets down from the perennial pastures of the snow to its proper level and identity as an irrigating ditch. It slips stilly by the glacier scoured rim of an ice bordered pool, drops over sheer, broken ledges to another pool, gathers itself, plunges headlong on a rocky ripple slope, finds a lake again, reinforced, roars downward to a pothole, foams and bridles, glides a tranquil reach in some still meadow, tumbles into a sharp groove between hill flanks, curdles under the stream tangles, and so arrives at the open country and steadier going. (79-80)

Austin's attention to all the potential aspects of water (it has "identity," it "foams and bridles" like an animal, it moves and evolves) shifts the narrative away from a human center. Significantly, however, Austin doesn't use the word *water* in this passage, and she only mentions the word *stream* once. Austin encourages the reader to lose herself in the muscle and momentum of the description, to the point of forgetting the thing being described. Not only is the reader unsure of where she is, she is also unsure of what she is supposed to be thinking about.

Such destabilizing groundlessness is remedied in Austin's work by a foundation of feeling. After all, Austin's essay opens with an assertion of feeling: "I *like* the name the

Indians give to the mountain...” (77, italics mine). Indeed, affection becomes the unifying thread in this seven-page essay in which the word *love* appears five times. Austin writes, “One finds butterflies, too, about these high, sharp regions which might be called desolate, but will not by me who love them” (78). The unexpected trajectory of this sentence (*butterflies* » *regions* » *me*) requires the reader imaginatively to traverse multiple registers of experience (local/animal » expansive/geographical » human/emotional)—and the effect of multiple perspectives can be (as it is in “Water Trails of the Ceriso”) unsettling. This information is, however, grounded in the experience of one, feeling consciousness: all of these things are related because Austin herself *feels* them as related. This kind of affectionate relationship manifests itself in plant lives as well: “The bleaker the situation, so it is near a stream border, the better the cassiope loves it” (79). Finally, describing the acts of love in nature in the essay’s antepenultimate paragraph allows Austin to replicate the radiant model for consciousness she encounters in James: “A fir-tree loves a water border, loves a long wind in a draughty cañon, loves to spend itself secretly on the inner finishings of its burnished shapely cones” (83). The fir-tree becomes the center of this particular fringed moment because the act of love lets the imagination extend towards the water border; toward the wind (and, by extension, towards the cañon); then inside the tree, where pinecones secretly, invisibly grow.

Austin’s use of love as a vehicle for larger understanding exemplifies what James calls in *A Pluralistic Universe* the power of “intuitive sympathy,” allowing Austin to participate in the natural world to the point of creating it. Or, as James writes:

What really *exists* is not things made but things in the making.... [P]ut yourself *in the making* by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of

possible decompositions coming at once into your possession, you are no longer troubled with the question which of them is the more absolutely true. (*Writings 1902-10* 751)

James's conviction that "[t]ruth *happens* to an idea" (*Writings 1902-10* 574) endorses Austin's fearless imagining of natural processes that she cannot see, what Buell calls Austin's "act of imaging in words the actual but imperceptible" (100). Transgressing the boundaries between the visible and invisible, Austin envisions growing pinecones and even the snow-covered plants "forehanded with their bloom, working secretly to that end under the high piled winters" (81). Such hunches require Austin to be confounded by the natural world to the point of being thrown back on the intuiting self—who, James would say, is her only reliable guide. In Hurd's evocation, the swamp occasions this passage from doubt to conviction:

Surely there is no better place than in a swamp or bog to learn about uncertainty, to notice how we feel when the ground under our feet wobbles, what small boats or dogma we cling to, what all we must let go of when we look down and learn to trust what's holding us now. (53-4)

*

Suffused with the imaginative leaps and lapses that suggest fiction, but presenting themselves as nonfiction, Austin's essays in *The Land of Little Rain* extend their boundlessness of content to the point of obscuring the boundaries of genre (Graulich xii). To read this collection is to enter into a perplexing textual swamp that offers smudges of

setting, narrator, and narrative—offering, essentially, “all shades and no boundaries.” Fiction and nonfiction merge, and the reader of *The Land of Little Rain* enters uncertain terrain—that is, if she enters at all. A swamp in its own right, this book elides entrance and confounds the reader who looks for a center that will hold. Austin-as-intuiting-narrator would be the center of the book, if she weren’t resolved to fade away from her own writing. To encounter *The Land of Little Rain* as a swamp is to be reminded that, as Lucy R. Lippard observes in her essay “Swamped”: “There is no sense of exhilaration on reaching the center of a swamp. In fact, swamps have no center, just as they have only limited ‘views.’ They are psychic landscapes of no return, true ‘be-wildernesses’” (27).

In the service of such bewildering, Austin’s willingness to hypothesize the unseen is interspersed with a marked reluctance to demystify all that she finds mysterious in the natural world. According to Fetterley and Pryse, “Austin often tells her readers the story of why she cannot tell a story” (116). She also tells her readers that they cannot fully understand the desert, at least without living there. She warns the armchair traveler, “You of the house habit can hardly understand the sense of the hills” (75). Even Austin herself, by her own admittance, cannot explain all of the natural episodes she witnesses—or even when these episodes take place. Her natural world evades the pinpointing gaze, so that “[o]ne can never fix the precise moment when the rosy tint the field has from the wild almond passes into the inspiring blue of lupines” (51). Similarly, “[t]he origin of mountain streams is like the origin of tears, patent to the understanding but mysterious to the sense. They are always at it, but one so seldom catches them in the act” (77).

Mysteries abound in Austin’s desert, but secrets do too. Whereas mystery suggests the nebulous, secrecy suggests the clandestine communication that either the landscape withholds from Austin or Austin withholds from her readers. The distinction between these

two categories of secret sharpens when Austin comes into contact with the tulares. In the swamp passage from “Other Water Borders” that I cited at the very beginning of this chapter, Austin concludes with the written equivalent of a shrug: “By night one wakes to hear the clanging geese go over. One wishes for, but gets no nearer speech from those the reedy fens have swallowed up. What they do there, how fare, what find, is the secret of the tulares” (91). The swamp-specific conversations—between the geese, between the swamp, between the geese and the swamp—remain secrets kept from Austin herself. But in another essay, “The Little Town of the Grape Vines,” Austin becomes complicit in the desert’s secrecy. Coily referring to the town she purports to make known, she writes, “Where it lies, how to come at it, you will not get from me; rather would I show you the heron’s nest in the tulares” (101).

The image of the heron’s nest in the tulares could refer, as Buell has pointed out in *The Environmental Imagination*, to Sarah Orne Jewett’s story “A White Heron.” In Jewett’s story, the young heroine Sylvie, who intimately knows the woods and creatures that live there, decides not to show a shotgun-toting ornithologist a heron’s nest in a marsh somewhere in a New Englandy Northeast. But the comparison to Jewett neglects the fact that herons commonly live in wetland habitats (and not just those in Jewett’s fiction), and ignores Austin’s use of the local word *tulares* in her essay—a word choice that decisively locates her sentiment and statement in the California landscape she both meticulously and bafflingly describes. Because she never once enters the tulares in *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin’s remark about showing her reader the heron’s nest there comes off as sarcasm, or her own figure of speech, or both. The unequivocal message: there are some wonders that Austin does not want to reveal. By not disclosing everything, Austin protects the sense of uncertainty that provoked her to write in the first place, and reminds her reader of its

creative power. She reminds her reader that there is as much pleasure and potential in lostness as there is in discovery. She prompts her reader to dream what she wishes to discover.

In an introduction to *The Land of Little Rain*, Carl Van Doren writes:

[Austin] did not insist that all men live in the actual desert, schooled by one discipline. For she knew that round every man lies his own desert, separating him from his nearest neighbor. If he will pause long enough, be receptive, he may be flooded by a wilderness of thought and feeling in which there is the prospect of wisdom. (xv)

Austin is inundated—in the swamp, in the desert, but also in the city, after her crucial meeting with James. As Austin recalls in her autobiography, “I went away from William James that summer dusk, with the lights coming out all about the Bay, through the deeply luminous blue of the Bay shot by the riffling trail of the ferries, assured for the first time in my life that the true Middle of my search was in myself” (283). The philosopher’s message, infused with the fading light and the reflections of the light on unsettled water, carries Austin back to the desert to write. Throughout her life, Austin’s observations of the natural world—in what James calls “the very dirt of private fact”—provide the touchstones for such revelation.

6. “You emerge properly from the vast intricacies of the tulares—if you emerge at all”

Austin did not write another collection that achieved the same level of critical success as *The Land of Little Rain*, perhaps because she could not find another place and time in which to feel the lostness she needed in order to participate imaginatively and literarily in another environment. In her autobiography, she remembers:

[P]eople used to fret at me because I would not do another ‘Land of Little Rain.’ I couldn’t, of course, I had used up all I had in the first one. I should have had to find another country like that, and pay out ten thousand dollars to live in it ten or twelve years. I wrote what I lived, what I had observed and understood. Then I stopped.
(320)

Austin moved away from the desert soon after *The Land of Little Rain* was published, and she never lived in that part of California again. Later in her life, though, Austin did return to the tulares, writing about them in a book of nature essays, *The Lands of the Sun* (1927). In “The Land of the Little Duck,” an essay about the wetlands of northern California, Austin initially expounds upon the threatening nature of the tules: “[M]iles upon miles of them—and not one other thing—stand up on either side the winding water lanes, man-high and impenetrable” (140). Favoring the ambiguous perspective of an ambiguous *one*, she goes on to say, coyly, “One who has the courage to penetrate deeper within the tules...will see many wished for sights” (141). And then, by some unacknowledged and mysterious means, the narrator slips deep into the tulares, and describes the abundant life she finds there: red-winged blackbirds, tule wrens, coots, mallards, mud-hens, bitterns, herons, grebes, dragonflies, pelicans, loons, minnows, cranes, geese, and even “an albatross perhaps blown inland on a storm” (143). This lush interlude is brief. Eventually, ominously, as if the tulares

were some kind of Californian Brigadoon, “Low on the twilight-colored waters, the tule fog creeps in” (143). Occlusion bears down on the landscape and on the reader—for she has followed Austin’s strange and fading narrator into the tulares. The perspective of *one* slips into *you* somewhere in the tangle of the tules, and you find yourself in the swamp you perhaps never wanted to enter. As strange as your passage through the tulares might be, the paradise you find upon egress is stranger still: “You emerge properly from the vast intricacies of the tulares—if you emerge at all, and are not completely mazed and lost in them—at Sacramento, a city but barely rescued from the marsh, and still marsh-colored with damp-loving lichens” (143).

*

I emerge from the tulares in New York, a city but barely rescued from the swamps of northern New Jersey. I left California without seeing a tule, without seeing a tule, but Austin might have predicted this. First of all, I did not stay long enough in the Land of Little Rain to immerse myself in the landscape the way she did. Secondly, the California she describes no longer exists. In the preface to *The Lands of the Sun*, Austin laments,

Too much of what I describe has utterly vanished, too much more has utterly changed, so blatant and bristling with triumph over the unresisting beauty of the wild, that it would be difficult indeed for one to lose himself in that delighted sense of the whole which was the special privilege of those who came to California in the last quarter of the last century and before it. (xii-xiii)

Like many of the swamps in the United States, Austin's tulares have mostly been drained and fashioned into tame tilled fields, cultivated for agriculture (Bakker 158). (It is not merely for effect that William L. Preston titles his book about the Tulare Lake Basin *Vanishing Landscapes*.) The *Webster's* definition of *tule* foreshadows disappearance, supplying the following example for how the word can be used in a sentence: "usu used in pl. and with *the* <plans for draining and cultivating the ~s>." Death Valley was protected in the form of a National Park, but the swamps at its fringes were not. In hindsight, it seems possible that Austin's reverence for the tulares derives from her sense of their vulnerability, and the vulnerability of the creative human relationship to the natural world that they invited and, in her work, stood for.

This chapter insinuates my immersion in the swamp of aesthetics that confronts me when I read Mary Austin. Far from an arid desert, *The Land of Little Rain* emerges as a textual swamp that communicates its author's inundation in an unfamiliar landscape by inundating its reader and critic. In the process of articulating an unconventional argument, I have tried to communicate this inundation, and my own particular absorption. In deference to Austin's tenuous narration, I elect to waver and fade from this chapter, and bid her to voice its aspiration and imperfect conclusion:

In two or three generations, when towns have taken on the tone of time, and the courageous wild has reestablished itself in by-lanes and corners, a writer may be born, instinctively at one with his natural environment, and so able to give expression to that wholeness. In the meantime, let this book stand as a marker, if for no more than the sketched pattern of a suggested recovery. (xiii)

CHAPTER 3

The Marsh of Uncertainties in and around Gertrude Stein's *Lucy Church Amiably*

“But then what would a marsh be, what would any wild place be, without uncertainty?”

William Burt, *Marshes: Disappearing Edens*

1. The First Uncertainty: Impasse

Francis Ponge's *La Fabrique du Pré* (“The Making of the Meadow”) illustrates the sometimes trying, sometimes exhilarating relationship between a writer and a reticent subject, revealing the extent to which language fills that particular relational space, that particular silence. In this chronological collection of drafts and redrafts of a single poem, what might be considered the detritus of process—lines crossed out, redundancy, doodles in the margins—proliferates. Such accretive language—rather than documenting an increase in the writer's insight into or intimacy with the meadow (*pré*) that he chooses as his subject—insinuates impasse. Had Ponge found the exact word or exquisite expression with which to render the natural world that he observes, he would not feel the need to keep writing: he would have arrived at the finished poem. Meditating on being so stalemated by his obstructing subject, Ponge arrives at a strategy of submission:

Is that perhaps why I chose it (that I chose this subject)? Because I have to, will have to lie there, lay myself down, stretch out. Because I am no longer able, faced with

this subject, (faced with any subject) to do anything but stretch out there (and be quiet, (to remain in silence) and to drift right off). (103)

Ponge elects silence, but if he is still writing (and if I am still reading), his silence is not complete, but denotes itself through parentheses and parenthesis-within-parenthesis. By way of these asides, and asides-within-asides, Ponge enacts a kind of self-abduction: each parenthetical takes him further away from the meadow he proposes to write about. When he lies down, he lies down in a meadow of his own making—the meadow of the text, words iterating like grass blades. He lies down in words and, appropriately, drifts away from the natural world. Flirting with dissolution, his stillness drifts along a fluid plane of sleep or thought, or thoughtful sleep, or sleepful thought. Such radiating stillness and attempted silence suggest that he shares Ralph Waldo Emerson's intuition, expressed in the essay "Circles," that:

Good as is discourse, silence is better, and shames it. The length of the discourse indicates the distance of thought betwixt the speaker and the hearer. If they were at a perfect understanding in any part, no words would be necessary thereon. If at one in all parts, no words would be suffered. (408)

Of course, Emerson is not advocating against discourse entirely; rather, his essay calls for language imbued by nature, which communicates largely through a silence that only the still listener can listen for. "Cleansed by the elemental light and wind, steeped in the sea of beautiful forms which the field offers us, we may chance to cast a right glance back upon

biography,” contends Emerson (409). In *La Fabrique du Pré*, Ponge lies down in a French meadow one night and can write again the next day.

Ponge’s meadow—either literal or textual—is not a marsh, though a contributor to the exhibition catalog *The Swamp: On the Edge of Eden* (2000) reads it as such, translating *pré* in a quotation from Ponge’s text not only as meadow but also as “prairie, or marsh,” leading me to *La Fabrique du Pré*.¹⁷ This loose translation, Pongean in its proliferation, strikes me as more willful than accurate: in French as in English, meadow and marsh are etymologically unrelated. Perhaps the alternate translation is founded in imagistic affinities. Visually, a wet meadow might resemble a marsh, and a water-meadow (purposely flooded for agricultural use) even more so. Slipping along with such slips in translation, my methodology obliges me to approach texts as landscapes indissoluble from those wetlands that my reading locates in them, even though the wetlands that I read around and into lead reading astray. I read to lose myself in Emily Dickinson’s *Herbarium* and Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* as easily as I lose myself in a swamp. This practice operates most gracefully on the assumption that dislocation leads to being found, or finding, but with Gertrude Stein—as any reader of hers surely knows—such causality remains tenuous. Unlike Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein is no ramble in the New England woods. Unlike Mary Austin, Gertrude Stein is no cross-country road trip. To reckon entry into Stein’s novel *Lucy Church Amiably* (1930) and its marshes, I would probably do well to abandon the expectation of entrance.¹⁸

2. The Second Uncertainty: The Marsh

¹⁷ The translation appears on page 26 of Kerry Oliver-Smith, *The Swamp: On the Edge of Eden* (Gainesville, Florida: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art) 2000.

¹⁸ I will refer to pages in the Dalkey Archive (2000) reprint of the novel.

I am wary of delineating the contours and consequences of my critical stance in relation to *Lucy Church Amiably* too surely, especially as the marsh predicates my thought. Defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* by its susceptibility to the vagaries of natural forces, a marsh is: “Low-lying land, often flooded in wet weather and usually more or less waterlogged throughout the year; a tract or area of such land.” Just as uncertainty suffuses the definition of a marsh (*Oxford’s* marsh is “usually” and “more or less,” but not always), uncertainty shapes this particular chapter, which is comprised of a series of uncertain positions vis-à-vis *Lucy Church Amiably* and its marshes—what I call “Uncertainties.”

Uncertainty reconfigures what might be failures into small, flexible forms of conjecture that, in their iteration, allow me to pursue an argument from multiple sites. Forecasting the infusion of Emersonian thought in my reading of Stein’s experimental writing, I suggest that Stein would appreciate the brave sentiment of Emerson’s disclaimer, which, in order to give ballast to my critical method, I appropriate as my own:

But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretend to settle anything true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back. (412)

Imagined Emersonian and Steinian advocacy notwithstanding, my proposed strategy of proliferating uncertainty runs the risk of deferring intimacy with my proposed subject: just as Ponge creates a meadow in response to a meadow, I create my own marsh in response to a marsh, and to the swamp aesthetics at work in *Lucy Church Amiably*.

I am in a tricky position at this juncture. I have, up to this point in this dissertation, been writing about American women writers' responses to American landscapes and, more specifically, their responses to that particularly American landscape feature, the swamp. The swamp's interpretive versatility, Americanness, and relative newness in the American literary imagination shape my project's methodology. But Stein writes *Lucy Church Amiably* in France, in response to the French landscape. Stein's French marshes are not swamps, though they are, arguably, the European relatives of swamps: both features can be found in the definition of *wetland*, a transatlantic term that *Oxford* dates back to 1743. (*Swamp* enters the English language in 1624; *marsh* can be found in Old English). Even so, Stein—along with (or because of) the marsh—remains at a slight remove from the American landscape, the swamp, and swamp aesthetics as I have more or less demarcated them up to this point. Such dislocation, I posit, can be revelatory: in Emerson's words, "The field cannot be well seen from within the field" (409). To remedy, or at least navigate, Stein's particular remove from the other writers in this dissertation, I hope to show that Stein exploits her ideological and physical distance from American literature and landscape by revising conventional assumptions about place. Stein sets the Emersonian field in motion, and her writing conveys the sense of being not inside or outside the field, but floating somewhere between.

Before I attend to the marsh's role in Stein's particular geographies and what I call Stein's swamp aesthetics, the marsh itself and the marsh's contribution to swamp aesthetics as I conceive of it bear some consideration. Unlike the wooded swamp, with its skyline of vine-slung, towering dead trees, a marsh keeps a low profile of grasses and sedges, with little modulation. "People tend to find them uninteresting," writes the landscape historian John R. Stilgoe of salt marshes,

not variegated enough, monotonous, boring, although finding out what such people think, when such people avoid the marshes proves a little difficult. Exploring what is at first glance a seamless web of green undoubtedly pales besides roaring about in the open ocean in an engine boat or gallivanting around the crowded yacht harbor a few miles away, or so it seems. (43)

It may not be so much that the marsh is boring than that the marsh's ground-hugging proliferation challenges the organizational instincts of perception. As Rod Giblett observes, "[T]he seeming limitlessness of open, grassed wetlands, such as marshes, are inimical to taking the long view within confined borders, down tree-lined avenues, bounded by mountain ranges" (11). The marsh permits slow motion, and exploration rather than passage. Read another way (and in less optimistic terms), the literal or figurative marsh begets physical and intellectual impasse, if not defeat. In *The Road* (1923), a treatise on road-building published and printed by the British Reinforced Concrete Engineering Company, Hilaire Belloc warns:

Marsh is less striking to the eye, especially to the modern eye, than a stretch of water, much less striking than the apparent obstacle of the sea, or of a bold hill range: it is nevertheless the chief problem presented to the making of a road, because of all natural obstacles *it is the only one wholly untraversable by unaided man*. Man unaided can climb hills, swim water, work his way through dense undergrowth. But marsh is impassable to him: it is the great original obstacle to progress. (Giblett 13-4)

The marsh initially appears as the anti-sublime landscape, placid and unassuming. To draw closer to it is to feel the horror, suffused with awe, which Belloc's italics convey. By the end of his description, Belloc's marsh becomes worthy of the adjectives *great* and *original*. Still, the literal marsh proves an impediment to linear, industrial, and male progress as Belloc envisions them. The fact that Belloc doesn't use articles—such as *the* or *a*—with the capitalized word *Marsh* serves to enlarge and abstract the marsh's aura. Marsh verges on omnipresent, like God or Nature. Meanwhile, a wholly figurative marsh can be luridly antagonistic. In Giblett's estimation: "The marsh is also a metaphorical, even metaphysical place where meanings slip and slide, where morals go under, and reason cannot maintain its rectitude. Inimical to empire, empire must needs conquer it, or sink into the slimy depths, choke, suffocate and expire" (20).

Crumbling mores, obstruction, and slime: despite (or because) of its transgressiveness, the marsh still seduces. "[Marshes are] mysterious concealing places with this lure of the forbidden and the out-of-bounds" (Burt 1). The siren call that accompanies the marsh's boundlessness and groundlessness is, according to one writer, discord: "Poets who know no better rhapsodize about the peace of nature," writes Bern Keating, "but a well-populated marsh is a cacophony" (Lopez 223). Such swirling birdsong, perhaps even blending with frogsong, only augments the marsh's capacity to unsettle. In his "Marshland Elegy," Aldo Leopold describes the marsh's music as: "High horns, low horns, silence, and finally a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries that almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing whence it comes" (95). To add to this collection of marsh sounds, I return to David C. Miller's insightful evocation of the soundscape of the swamp (quoted in the previous chapter), which arguably applies to the marsh as well:

Sound accentuates the most disorienting effects of the swamp....The medium creates a multidimensional space whose contours constantly shift, in contrast with the relative stability of visual and especially pictorial space...sound presents the prospect of both immersion and absorption into the realm of otherness. (177)

The marsh's relevance to swamp aesthetics reveals itself in the marsh's capacity to undermine predetermined angles of inquiry and conventional communication. The marsh, like the swamp, challenges its witness to see, hear, speak, move, and think differently: but before she can do so, this witness must be willing to lose herself in the marsh. To give in to such bewilderment—to lie down in the meadow, in Ponge's case—becomes a necessary practice for writers and readers in the face of the marsh's obfuscations. In his meditations on the Klamath Marshes in Oregon, John R. Campbell wonders if “[o]bscurity might be revelatory, and a joy might lie in the tension between the unknown and the known. Centers are replaced by peripheries as simple individuals segue into the complexity of their environs” (55). Campbell's segue, like Ponge's drift, owes much to Emerson's vision, in “Nature,” of himself “bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space” until he becomes “part or Particle of God” (10). Taking Emersonian thought and the idea of segue earnestly, Thoreau muses in a journal entry dated June 15, 1840, “Would it not be a luxury to stand up to one's chin in some retired swamp...” (Miller 220).

If I am to approach *Lucy Church Amiably* as indissoluble from the marsh where perceptual immersion and absorption follow from physical immersion and absorption, I could do worse than follow Thoreau's lead—and walk into the marsh the way he imagines walking into a swamp. I rely on Thoreau at this point because Thoreau's writing is the muse for my theory of the origins of swamp aesthetics, which believes that the swamp is the

flashpoint for women writers' experimental and anti-representational reinvention of writing about the natural world. When Thoreau locates "[h]ope and future ... in the impervious and quaking swamps" (*Collected Essays and Poems* 241), this dissertation presupposes his claim to be not only literal but prophetic. So, it seems, does Barbara Hurd, who also imagines walking into a swamp: "The trick is to learn how to wander without intention, to float eye-to-eye with the fringed orchids, to make yourself available to what lives there, whether it is the rare bittern or a poem or the whole damp and water-lilied world" (13). Of course, Hurd may float eye-to-eye with swampy blooms because swamps are deep and wooded and water-lilied. The water in a swamp might reach a wading man's chin. A marsh is shallower than a swamp, deep enough for only flat-bottomed boats, and I have no boat.¹⁹ Besides, I want to get wet. Perhaps the marsh is an invitation to wade.

3. The Third Uncertainty: Wading into *Lucy Church Amiably*

Literal wading is physical, but somewhat aimless, like a watery counterpart to wandering: wading's only destination, if it may be called such, is *into*. The wader picks her particular point of entry, wades into, and wades out of something—usually, a body of water of some depth. Knee-deep, thigh-deep. Envisioning a practice of reading that models itself on wading, I imagine that wading permits me to make a necessarily uncertain excursion into a text's particular substance and depth. Wading advances slowly toward and into a text that, by its very nature, slows such advances even further. To wade into a text is to encounter it sensually and aesthetically and, perhaps crucially, a bit aimlessly. The wader does not move

¹⁹ I owe this understanding to John R. Stilgoe's *Shallow Water Dictionary: A Grounding in Estuary English* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), in which the author writes about marshes from the perspective of a rowboat named *Essay*.

in a straight line. The wader hesitates, stumbles, or sways. The wader does not go under, and does not swim.

Informed by the particularly fluid, marshy landscape that I locate in *Lucy Church Amiably*, my wading is also prompted, in part, by Elizabeth Ammons's observation that: "Stein drenches us in words.... Denied traditional plot, we get in its place an overwhelming, sensuous experience of language that, try as our brains must, at least initially has to be met as a body not a head experience" (97). Ammons's admonition holds especially true for *Lucy Church Amiably*, set in the marshy region of the Bugey in France where Stein was living when she wrote the novel. As with many Stein texts, it is difficult to say what happens in *Lucy Church Amiably*: Stein's characters are names rather than people attached to those names, and those names shift; Stein's places are permanently unmoored. Stein herself seems fully aware of her novel's particular refusal to engage with human plots, writing:

How is it not known what happened to them. It is not known what happened to them. In a conversation it was not known what happened to them. In a recitation it was not known what happened to them. In a description it was not known what happened to them. In attention it was not known what happened to them. Thereby when they were unusually disappearing it was not known what happened. It was not as known what happened to them. They made a wide investigation so she said. They did not know what had happened to them. Very often they will not know what has happened to them but they are mistaken. (53)

Any attempt to follow her characters through a storyline will, Stein tells her reader, be fraught. To not know what is happening becomes a celebrated form of agency, as does a mistake-making for which there seems to be no clear corrective.

It is easier for Stein's readers to identify what *Lucy Church Amiably* is about: landscape. Among others, Ulla E. Dydo (Stein's most consummate and thoughtful reader) recognizes the degree to which landscape emerges as this text's most vigorous omnipresence.²⁰ "The landscape is not mere background, setting, or 'scenery,'" Dydo explains, "nor is *Lucy Church* a naturalist's log or a travel guide. The land is immediately present, without beginning, middle, and end" (204). My reading distinguishes itself from previous readings of *Lucy Church Amiably* by considering Stein as an environmental writer—though I make this classification with the knowledge that Stein defies classification. By eschewing the conventions of nature writing (carefully-wrought descriptions of the non-human natural world, often interwoven with carefully-wrought lyric evocations of the writer's emotional response to that world), and by eschewing nature writing's genres (the log; the travel guide), Stein renegotiates the terms for writing's engagement with the environment. This is Steinian description:

There there is a lake here there is a lake. There there is a garden and woods and trees and here here there is a garden and woods and trees. Here there are meadows and a moon. There there are not meadows and there is a moon. Here there are lights and trees there there are lights and trees. Here there are sounds due to marshes and there there are sometimes sounds due to marshes. There is this there. There there is this there and so there is. (113)

²⁰ See Ellen E. Berry, Marianne DeKoven, Lyn Hejinian, Bonnie Marranca, and Donald Sutherland for similar convictions about landscape in *Lucy Church Amiably*.

Replete with discombobulating passages such as this one, in which Stein evades definite articles and employs deixis only to render deictic strategies inane, *Lucy Church Amiably* exposes the rift that writing opens between writer and landscape. When Stein announces “Here there are sounds due to marshes,” I understand “here” as the paragraph. The sounds of the marshes compare to the sounds of Stein’s language—a cacophony, in Bern Keating’s opinion; or a pandemonium, in Leopold’s. Among other practices, Stein’s particular sounding evokes the marsh’s unruly influence.

Stein’s practice as a nature writer is self-conscious and critical: like Ponge’s in *La Fabrique du Pré*, her writing confronts the act of representation itself, exploiting the complex and often estranging relationship between the writer and her landscape. Her writing demonstrates the extent to which, as Dana Phillips puts it, “Too much of what is called nature writing proves, on closer inspection, not to be writing about nature at all; it is, instead, writing about a response to nature” (210). In the context of Stein’s subversive critique of literary responses to the natural world, the marsh emerges as her text’s insubordinate emblem. *Lucy Church Amiably* explores the marshy space, in Stein’s words, “in the around the water” (230)—a fluid place that is both water and not, contained and moving, central and peripheral. As Bonnie Marranca elucidates, Stein “[writes] around a subject not about it” (111).

Stein’s text communicates Emerson’s conviction, in “Circles,” that: “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile” (403). Emerson’s love of flux informs Stein’s idiosyncratic style of nature writing: “in nature, not of it,” in Marranca’s words (110). Such self-immersion and self-dispersal presupposes Emerson’s transparent eyeball as a prerequisite to writing about the natural world. As Steven Meyer explains Stein’s practice: “The ecstatic sense of disembodiment, with its thorough blurring of the boundaries

between inside and outside and its self-conscious dissolution of self into environment, remained an embodied, natural phenomenon for Stein” (48). In her experimental adaptation of Emersonian thought to American writing about the natural world, Stein enters into a network of mind and innovation that I have followed through Jonathan Edwards and Emily Dickinson, and William James and Mary Austin. In *Lucy Church Amiably*, Stein applies American philosophy to her response to the natural world in the service of reinvigorating the relationship of the American mind to American landscape—in doing so, she participates in the especially American project of swamp aesthetics as I conceive of them. As Marianne DeKoven points out:

[T]he literary principle of ‘landscape’ has less to do with landscape painting, or with the quality of the Rhône Valley countryside, than with Stein’s notion of intensity of movement as the central interest in genuine twentieth-century writing. For Stein, the ‘American thing’—which is the same for her as saying the ‘modern thing’ or the ‘important thing’—is to create an integrated, simultaneous, static whole which is made up of continuously moving parts. (123)

That Stein is writing in France, or about a marsh, become less relevant to her text than what her text performs from that position and in reaction to that landscape feature. Or, in Stein’s words:

Lucy Church might be as very well distanced by Lucy Church might be as very well distanced as by as by as by as well Lucy Church might as well be as well as well

distanced as well Lucy Church might be as well as well distanced Lucy Church might be as well distanced. (194)

4. The Fourth Uncertainty: Unstilling the Center

Steven Meyer warns against reading Stein in relation to any pivotal structure, let alone in relation to the marsh. Explaining how Stein's writing dares organization, he writes:

She refuses to convey the illusion, as she sees it, that there is a still center to her writing, or to any piece of it, which, once found, will serve synecdochically as the key to what one has just read, the point around which everything else coalesces, a theory of everything. The only adequate explanation of a piece of her writing is that realized in the act of composition itself, in the autopoetic process whereby the composition 'understands itself.' (122)

In retort to such admonition, I posit that, instead of thinking in terms of a still center, my reading of *Lucy Church Amiably* might coalesce around the *unstill* center of the marsh.

"Marshes comprise their own form of wilderness" (viii), Paul Lester Errington writes. Wild and uncultivated, perhaps the marsh is most provocative in its refusal to be fathomed. As a location from which to read Stein's text, the marsh (as I suspect my writing conveys) advocates its own unruliness. Insofar that it is a nexus, the marsh is at best a nexus of flux and open-ended possibility, a simulacrum of Emerson's vision of the "American mind [as] a wilderness of capabilities" (Porte 372). In point of fact, Meyer himself draws Stein and

Emerson into a relationship of thought around a similar natural figure of unrest: the cloud.

He writes:

For Stein, as for Emerson, a theory of life was necessarily indistinguishable from a theory of writing, and if to a more British, more orderly mind, this must signify a “cloudy” intellect, for Emerson, as for Stein, it was the clouds—literally, figuratively, above everything—that spoke most profoundly of the life of things, and of the permanent flux, and of the writing on both sides of the wall. ‘Crossing the bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky...’ (154)

Tampering with Meyer’s passage by substituting the word “marsh” for “cloud,” and the word “below” for “above,” and the word “above” for “under” yields something partly but significantly playful. My substitutions are in italics:

For Stein, as for Emerson, a theory of life was necessarily indistinguishable from a theory of writing, and if to a more British, more orderly mind, this must signify a “*marshy*” intellect, for Emerson, as for Stein, it was the *marshes*—literally, figuratively, *below* everything—that spoke most profoundly of the life of things, and of the permanent flux, and of the writing on both sides of the wall. “Crossing the bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, *above a marshy* sky...”

(I’d like to think that Emerson and Stein, if not Meyer, would appreciate such rambunctious renovation.)

Stein is particularly attentive to the marsh's instability and suggestiveness: when she loosely systematizes landscape elements in *Lucy Church Amiably*, she describes the marsh in active, fluctuating terms. She writes: "Inundation in a meadow is very different from inundation in a marsh a marsh can be small very small and high very high and prettily so. A marsh can be felt to be their gift" (87). Approaching the marsh as subject to rainfall, Stein follows the movement associated with flooding. Even her first sentence in the above passage enacts inundation by rushing on without the obstacles of punctuation. The inundated marsh—shaped and reshaped by such flooding—"can be felt to be their gift." The marsh's gift is its interstitial roving: its fluctuations and fluctuating contours inform the nebulous contours of Stein's novel, inspiring Stein to construct fully and freely in language a landscape "without beginning, middle, and end" (Dydo 204). The marsh invites Stein to reconfigure language in terms of the marsh's dynamism, and in doing so, reject traditional modes of storytelling. Her rejection leaves the reader on unsure footing.

5. The Fifth Uncertainty: A Marsh Hope as a Pause

marsh hope. *n. Obs. rare* a piece of raised or enclosed land in the midst of a marsh (cf. HOPE *n.*² 1).

Oxford English Dictionary

*

I hope, I hope and I hope. I hope that I hope and I hope. Half of that in time.

Reflections upon moving and directing. If a great many come in and come out and there is confusion is it due to that or are we mistaken am I mistaken.

Gertrude Stein, *Natural Phenomena*

6. The Sixth Uncertainty: Stein's Upsetting of Setting

That Stein writes *Lucy Church Amiably* in France does nothing to diminish the Americanness of her text, or its relevance to swamp aesthetics as I conceive of them. Rather, Stein's physical distance from the American landscape proves instrumental to the rangy aspirations of her intellect and imagination. Joan Retallack asks: "Is it safe to say, by abundantly formed hindsight, that Gertrude Stein could only become the quintessentially American author she wanted to be by spending her entire writing life in France?" (29). Perhaps it is precisely this self-motivated distance that forces Stein to think in terms of the multiple relationships that can be created through an Emersonian atomized self, and to apply such thought to the novel.

Dydo calls Stein's sentences "spacious" (17); *Lucy Church Amiably* is a spacious novel. In it, Stein raises the stakes for an Emersonian practice of disembodiment by purposefully destabilizing the novel's setting, declaring that Lucy Church is a place and a person—both entities flickering in and out of presence:

Lucy Church could not be here she never had been here. She never could be here. She never would be here. Lucy Church could never be here. Lucy Church here here Lucy Church there Lucy Church Lucy Church and gaining she is gaining this from

that and after it after it to them. Can Lucy Church distinguish a river. All the same.
(195)

Repeated assertions of Lucy Church's absence only makes Lucy Church (person or place) more present—though as a name rather than what that name signifies. Lucy Church “is gaining” resonance through language, proliferating through the landscape of the page, taking up space. The more that Lucy Church appears on the page, the more the word “here” starts to mean something closer to “there,” for the more that Lucy Church is not “here,” the more it seems that “here” cannot be the page.

Stein's disorienting practice answers Emerson's call for a writing that reorders a revisable world. He declares:

All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations, and dance before our eyes. And yet here again see the swift circumspection! ... Literature is a point outside of our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may be described. The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it. (408)

Creating her own peculiar hodiernal circle in order to pierce it, Stein begins “The Novel” section of *Lucy Church Amiably* with a statement of purpose: “To bring them back to an appreciation of natural beauty or the beauty of nature hills valleys fields and birds. They will say it is beautiful but will they sit in it” (47). Stein's declaration begs the question: What is “it”? Natural beauty? The beauty of nature? A landscape of hills, valleys, fields, and birds?

Thoreau reverberates throughout this passage, particularly his declaration in *Walden*: “Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly” (387). In obscuring the location of her own Thoreauvian moment, Stein questions the “Wherever” in Thoreau’s practice—asking, in effect, “Where is the Wherever?” If Stein’s place-for-sitting-in is a landscape, Stein works hard not to clarify it as such. As in Mary Austin’s work, such baffling seems purposeful, for in the landscape of *Lucy Church Amiably*, “There is no difference between the country and the city between high hills and meadows in the bottom of the valley so she says” (48). By refusing both deixis and differentiation, Stein’s writing refuses to inhabit any “here” that her reader could point to, or start from. In her deployment of Emersonian thought, Stein sets “here” in motion, perhaps along an unbroken circular path.

Explaining a world that accounts for such untethered drift, Emerson writes: “The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding” (409). Emerson could well be talking about Stein’s writing in this passage, tracing the way *Lucy Church Amiably* draws attention to location in order to dislocate it—and set the reader spinning. Emerson champions such strikes at the foundations—of text and of thought—in service of revisionary spatial imagination. As Angus Fletcher writes:

When Emerson imagined the combination of place and space, he identified it as a play of circles which could bend, collide with each other, deform each other, and finally reform. In his essays Emerson plays back and forth between ideas of place and space, in order to favor the latter. He gives to the natural American disorder—in

a dark moment his *Journal* calls ‘miscellaneousness’—the benefit of being contained in a circle of American space, which his sparkling geometry describes. (53)

Fletcher’s “natural American disorder”; Emerson’s “miscellaneousness”: Both are versions of what I call, in Dickinson’s work, the “wilder orders” that find their model in the marsh, swamp, and bog. For Stein, a wilder order sourced in the marsh manifests itself in her text’s matrix of tenuous, messy, and obscure relationships in which sites and selves gain prominence through participation in a larger, spacious whole. Emerson, in a journal entry from 1834, writes: “I philosophised upon this composite, collective beauty which refuses to be analysed. Nothing is beautiful alone. Nothing but is beautiful in the whole” (Mumford 635). Stein explodes Emerson’s vision (and upends Thoreau’s practice of sitting still) in *Lucy Church Amiably*, in which relation trumps realism and linear progression:

Everybody sits alone and not everybody sits alone and not and everybody sits alone and not everybody sits alone. Nobody sits alone who is not here and here and everybody who sits alone is everybody who is here and here. Everybody anybody.
(25)

7. The Seventh Uncertainty: Reckoning the Landscape of the Text

I have been considering two landscapes: the marsh, and the landscape of the text that the marsh informs. Perhaps I can reconcile their separation through a third landscape that circulates between the two: the landscape of the mind or, even better: the marshy intellect. In the Klamath Marshes, John R. Campbell alludes to the mobility of mind that

accompanies thought engaged with the marsh, describing a process of observation in which the self merges with its environment. He writes, “I begin to understand that the background surges forward to envelop the subject, that landscape both encompasses and allows the personal, and that we *are* the landscape we see” (26). I would add: we are the landscape we *read*. My methodology and Campbell’s observation echo Emerson’s declaration: “There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us” (405). The marsh facilitates such permeating dissolution because it reminds us, in Campbell’s view, that “place is not a product at all; it is better characterized, if one must, as a pattern” (7). A pattern models and, in doing so, proliferates. What does the marsh model? As I have tried to show throughout this chapter (and throughout this dissertation), swampy places such as the marsh exemplify the uncertainty and instability that encourage the mind to inhabit active, interstitial places in which it might question the soundness of received structures of thought. As an instance of what Fletcher calls “American space,” the marsh is flexible enough to contain, without constraining, the wilder orders of Emerson’s “miscellaneousness.”

The force of disparate information playing through space figures in *Lucy Church Amiably* as inundation, for Stein likens the pressure and presence of writing to that of rain. Rain creates Emersonian compositions, establishing and rearranging environments through a ranging and connective propagation. To illustrate:

Lucy Church heard them say that they liked continuity.

It is more continuous to have clouds than rain snow than rain mist than rain hail than rain rain than rain. It is more continuous to have hawks than rain poplars then rain oxen than rain and floods than rain. It is more continuous to have meadows

than rain pinks than rain lilies than rain it is more continuous to have hills than rain turns than rain rivers than rain. (97)

Rain whelms the passage—as a word and as the phenomenon that the word signifies—binding together the components of Stein’s paragraphical environment even though, semantically speaking, other presences (clouds, snow, mist, hail, hawks, poplars, oxen, etc.) are more continuous. Stein’s sentences ostensibly assert the less-continuousness, or absence, of rain, but the accretive repetition of the word *rain* (which appears sixteen times) evokes instead its dominant continuity and presence, drowning out any other meaning the text might convey. Rain appears in every sentence. The paragraph accommodates such inundations, allowing itself to be variably emptied and filled of meaning the way the marsh responds to rainfall, allowing itself to be variably emptied and filled with water. I return to Stein, who claims: “Inundation in a meadow is very different from inundation in a marsh a marsh can be small very small and high very high and prettily so” (87). Stein prefers the marsh to the meadow for its paradoxical capacity to be both small and high, which is another way of saying small and deep. The marsh, as it rises, requires fathoming, in the same way that the paragraph, as it builds, requires interpretation and re-interpretation. Both landscapes—the paragraph and the marsh—are sites of flux and pleasure.

Not all readers will find such textual shapeshifting pretty, or comforting. As Peter Quartermain observes of Stein’s writing:

The transformational strategies in which her writing abounds render impossible the reader’s *possession* of meaning.... It is difficult to know what we know, or even that we know, for we can only see clearly (and therefore “know”) what is static. Her writing

is completely antiauthoritarian, cultivates its own indeterminacy of meaning because it takes place in and is part of a world that is itself indeterminate. (23)

The marsh emblemizes what Quartermain calls the indeterminate world, provoking the mind to make new determinations. For Stein (and for Stein's reader), this thrillingly creative stance requires, as Meyer observes, forgetting whatever knowledge has come before this moment of reading, seeing, writing, or imagining. Only then can the world be responded to anew and, in Meyer's estimation, aright:

To see things as they are, and not merely to observe what is anticipated or remembered, one has to rid oneself, *empty oneself*, of everything one already knows—one has to get out of 'the habit,' as Stein put it, 'of knowing what one is looking at[.]' (162, italics mine)

The emptying of mind that Stein's writing mandates is a practice of what I call the marshy intellect. Emptying text of meaning in order to refill it, her writing reflects and refracts the activity of the novel's marshes, which empty and fill and flood, "often hav[ing] in the fall an inundation and sometimes in the summer" (173). Whereas Wallace Stevens wrote, "One must have a mind of winter," perhaps Stein would write, "One must have a mind of the marsh."

Dydo describes *Lucy Church Amiably* as "a fluid landscape where nothing restricts the imagination" (203). Endorsing my argument for Stein's attention to the compositional suggestiveness of inundation, Dydo goes on to say: "Stein never ceased to observe the weather creating new compositions with changing light, and water moving in the landscape

in its many forms” (204). Donald Sutherland also observes the communicative presence of precipitation in Stein’s text, using the term “climatological calligraphy” to describe the intimacy between natural phenomena and Stein’s writing. In doing so, he draws attention to Stein’s “belief that people are formed by the climate they live in—not merely the temperature but the movement of light and air and water” (142). I have been positing that the marsh, where air and light and water and intellect are brought into stunning interplay, would have made a particular impression on Stein and her writing. Highlighting the transmogrification that occurs by way of the marsh-inscribed mind, Sutherland asserts:

In writing *Lucy Church Amiably* [Stein] had seen everything as a natural phenomenon existing in itself except for its existence and movement within the landscape, and everything could be brought to exist and move in the book just as it was seen to exist in the landscape. While the stylistic organization of the book is intense and continuous enough *to float it*, so to speak, as a thing in itself, the composition does reflect or parallel in great detail the intricacies of relation and movement in the real landscape. (144; emphasis mine)

Sutherland’s conception of Stein’s style as an inundating force on which the novel depends, along with his sense that *Lucy Church Amiably* closely relies on the natural world of the Bugey for its content, reveals that Stein’s floating text succeeds—by way of the marsh’s aesthetic provocations—in loosening itself from the establishments of the present to access that point outside present day experience through which, in Emerson’s wording, another circle might be drawn.

The other circle, in this case, is Stein's novel: by loosening landscape from the land, Stein is free to remake it on the page. As Ellen E. Berry explains:

'Landscape' is Stein's metaphor for a paradoxical textual dynamic composed of intense nonpredictable and nonteleological movement along with moments of simultaneity and stasis, an endlessly changing textual space that, as such, escapes the rigid hierarchies of realist fiction and the imperative toward formal coherence of modernist texts. (90)

Berry's adjectives (*nonpredictable* and *nonteleological*) and nouns (*simultaneity* and *stasis*) could describe the marsh, which escapes the "rigid hierarchies" of land and water by inhabiting a place between them. Its stillness belies its variable shape and depth, or solidity and liquidity—shiftily confounding those who wish to find foundation there. Stein's writing is marshy in that it perplexes conventional strategies of meaning-making, offering multiple meanings through unfamiliar orders. The relationships that ensue from such disorder are innovative and unsettling. The peculiar ecology of *Lucy Church Amiably* reveals itself in passages such as this one:

All gold is put into water and all water is put into butter and all butter is put into apples and all apples are put into trees and all trees are put into flourishing and all flourishing is put into welcome and all welcome is put into translation[.] (12)

As in the rainy passage I cited earlier, here Stein is especially interested in creating accumulative structures in which discrete entities (gold, water, butter, apples, etc.) render

themselves less remarkable than the proliferation of which they become part. The act of writing or, in Stein's words, translation, funnels the components of this particular landscape into a larger matrix of relationships. In writing, "all...is put into." The word *welcome* signals the pleasure that Stein locates in language's accommodation.

8. The Eighth Uncertainty: Shedding Marsh-light on Meaning

Lucy Church in in delight. How many are there to be sent. Lucy Church in in
delight. Lucy Church in in delight. How many are there to be sent. Lucy Church in
in in delight in delight how many are there how many are there to be sent. Lucy
Church in in delight.

Gertrude Stein, *Lucy Church Amiably*

*

marsh-light *n.* a will-o'-the-wisp.

1865 C. P. CRANCH in *Serm. Slavery & Civil War* 35 Rise then, O countrymen!

Scatter these *marsh-light hopes of Union won Through pardoning clemency. 1870

W. MORRIS *Earthly Paradise* III. iv. 213 With gleaming, sand-choked, reed-clad pools,

And marsh-lights for the mock of fools. 1927 *Daily Express* 17 Sept. 5/3 In nine

times out of ten..the premonition is shown afterwards to be a mere marsh-light and

delusion. But the hundredth time it is the truth.

9. The Ninth Uncertainty: The Grammar of the Marsh

I am dangerously close to describing Stein's writing exclusively in terms of inundation, which I do not want to do. It is tempting to read Stein's novel in terms of rushing water; other critics have done so, perhaps encouraged by Stein herself, who signals her writing's relationship to water in the "Advertisement" that introduces *Lucy Church Amiably*: "*Select your song she said and it was done and then she said and it was done with a nod and then she bent her head in the direction of the falling water. Amiably*" (7). The watery nature of *Lucy Church Amiably* especially informs feminist readings of the text, including DeKoven's claim that the novel "is not only centered thematically in the female vision of positive continuity with nature; it is also replete with female images and subjects: all forms of flowing water, particularly waterfalls" (137). Stein herself would seem to endorse such a poetics, explicitly reminding her readers that an anti-patriarchal stance underpins her practice. She writes:

It is very fine to think in terms of water very fine to think in terms of water in connection with how do you do in relation to manufacture, very fine to think very fine to think in terms of water and of mother's milk very fine to think very fine to think in terms of water and in terms of mother's milk very fine to think very fine to think in terms of water very fine to think in terms of water in respect to manufacture and in mother's milk very fine to think in terms of water in respect to manufacture. (216-7)

Aligning inundation and procreation, Stein announces that her patterns of mind find their source somewhere in the conjunction of the natural world's water and the female childbearing body's milk. To think solely in terms of water would be to think in terms of transparency—but Stein is anything but transparent, as her passage reminds her reader. Mother's milk infuses the passage with a literal and figurative cloudiness. I imagine a woman pouring milk into a glass that is already half-full of water; I imagine the milk complicating the clarity of water with a nourishing obfuscation. Obfuscation, after all, provokes the imagination to be brave in its creation of meaning: it is under a clouded sky that Emerson finds himself "glad to the brink of fear" (10). "My writing is as clear as mud," Stein writes in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), "but mud settles and clear streams run on and disappear" (123). She might have said, "My writing is as clear as milk." She might have said, "My writing is as clear as the marsh."

Veering away from the suggestiveness of inundation to focus more closely on suggestiveness of the marsh, I'd like to think that the figure of inundation was a marsh-light, or will-o'-the-wisp, leading me astray so that, in a very Steinian motion of circling back, I can return to the marsh. The marsh-light's imprecise flickering provides another marshy emblem for the perspectives of uncertainty and digression that my chapter constructs around the experience of reading *Lucy Church Amiably* in relationship to its marshes. When DeKoven claims that "the actual experience of reading the text [is a] mysterious movement through half-glimpsed territories of meaning" (138), she could be describing a strategy of reading that heedlessly allows the marsh-light's illumination to guide it, no matter how inchoate or unreliable those flickerings may prove. To follow the marsh-light is to be willing to be lost, and to go back, and to repeat. For instance, here is the entirety of Chapter XXIV:

If men have not changed women and children have.

If men have not changed women and children have.

If men have not changed women and children have. (176)

Stein's repetition requires the reader and writer to go back. What DeKoven calls "mysterious movement" is not the unilateral motion of a river flooding in spring; rather, it evokes a kind of accretion through repetition. This return also evokes the Emersonian circle, the "primary figure repeated without end" (403); indeed, Emerson repeats the following sentence in "Circles" to remind his readers: "Permanence is but a word of degrees" (403, 404).

Marranca claims that Stein's "writing was repetitious and cyclical in shape because she wrote in nature, not of it. As early as *The Making of Americans* she understood repetition was a kind of wisdom" (110). Perhaps the wisdom of such repetition is that, in the case of Stein's text, it obfuscates and proliferates meanings. Had Stein written a single sentence—"If men have not changed women and children have."—her passage would not resonate as strongly, or as multiply. Even on second or third reading, I find myself revisiting the three sentences to make sure nothing has changed in them, primed by the word *changed* to want to discover changes in the text. Subtle inflections of tone and meaning suggest themselves, though always in the tenuous space created by the word *if*.

"Such tentative echoes must be kept light and must not lead us away from the marshlands into a world of fact and representation" (270), writes Dydo in reference to *Paisieu* (1928), a marsh-filled play that Stein wrote around the same time (and around the same landscape) as *Lucy Church Amiably*. Reflecting and refracting of meaning—indeed, the dissolution of meaning—occurs in the conditional, marshy space that *Lucy Church Amiably* makes and moves through. The novel inhabits a marshland, to return to Stein, "in the

around the water” (230), a fluid place that accommodates liveness, mobility, and abstraction of mind. Joan Retallack notes:

Throughout her writing life, Gertrude Stein was inventing new grammars for the new times in which she was living. This was a means of being in touch with contemporary rhythms and logics and of actively composing new ways of being in the contemporary moment. Her belief in the consequences of literary form [posits] that language is actually a way of living in the sensory specificity of one’s world. (75)

The sensory specificity that Retallack observes is the product not only of Stein’s experience of living in the marshy landscape of the Bugey but also her drive to reconfigure that landscape through unprecedented practices of thought and language. In adopting a grammar of the marsh, Stein adopts a language beholden to no predetermined order, present, or place. As Emerson writes, “The law dissolves the fact and hold it fluid” (403). He might have said: “The marsh dissolves the fact and holds it fluid.”

Stein’s renovation of writing’s relationship to the environment is visionary and critical. Adding to Emerson’s delight in dissolution her own critique of the masculine tradition of meaning-making, Stein highlights the quixotic aspect of attempting to affix names to the natural world in *Lucy Church Amiably*:

Mr. Arthur Mr. Hayes Mr. William have all named meadows and trees meadows meadows and trees indecision. All three have attempted to allow distant snow to show that is pleasantly all land. All three have been very much influenced by little knolls inclosing a stone. (34)

In this passage, Stein subverts names that men apply to landscape by slyly suggesting that their naming might be better named *indecision*: their Adamic impulse to regulate via naming represents an attempt rather than an accomplishment. They might as well try to control the snow. When Stein writes that these men have been “influenced by little knolls inclosing a stone,” she describes a summit or small mountain but also the tolling of a death knell. In other words, there is something already-expired in these masculine pinnacles of language use. Her writing points to another practice, in which stasis might be eschewed for a kind of Emersonian fluidity. Stein creates places to undo them, so that “in the midst of mountains there is no in the midst of mountains because there is a place that is very agreeable where they are” (117). She dares her reader to embrace the same undoing:

Could anybody think of her and not know her name. Could anybody think of her
and not know her name. Could anybody think of her and not know her name.

Could anybody think of her and not know her name. Two turtle doves can stand in
front of a standing photograph. (147-8)

The dare, for Stein and for her reader, is to resist naming, which fixes objects into a stasis very close to death. The double still life evoked by the two turtledoves in standing in front of an equally frozen photograph offers an incisive critique of language that denies the natural world its flux and mystery. As Emerson writes, “[I]here is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate, and spring.... Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit” (412, 413). Such transition finds its emblem in the marsh.

The marsh's signature ecological instabilities, as delineated by William Howarth (who I quote in the first chapter), bear revisiting:

Ecologists call unstable regions of this sort *ecotones* because they contain no fixed boundaries, only a gradient slope between solid and fluid...these areas have come by long association to express divided values: (1) difficulty or uncertainty, as in a quagmire, or morass; (2) change, since wetlands are transition zones, between water and land; and (3) contingency or possibility, because wetlands may foster new life.

(521)

For Stein as for Dickinson, instability proves to be a gift, providing her with a stunning example of the natural world's capacity for contingency and possibility. The wildness of the marsh suggests the most productive and provocative kinds of disorder, encouraging the pursuit of unconventional patterns of thought and language. Read as a rapprochement between language and the natural world it responds to, *Lucy Church Amiably* reveals, by way of the marsh, that the mind might return to nature by way of instability. Delighting in dwelling in meaninglessness, Stein is like Eve opening her eyes in the Garden for the first time. Only Stein's particular Eden does not disclose itself easily:

Lucy Church in an on the side opposite to that where there has been this which has been admirably admired as a marsh. Lucy Church entirely and in a way to extend itself not only up and down and not over but not very much higher this is by the way. (156)

Stein fills her paragraph with little words, many of them ostensibly prepositions, which resist establishing place or narrative perspective. Instead, both Lucy Church and the marsh float near each other in a munificent space in which Lucy Church radiates as if to touch the marsh.

10. The Tenth Uncertainty: Love in *Lucy Church Amiably*

Theorizing a form by which to apprehend the novel's structure, Berry envisions *Lucy Church Amiably* as a text in which "desire for affiliation replaces desire for the end; sexual differences collapse; the boundary between subject and object as well as among human, animal, and nonanimate, blurs and remains in flux" (91). Such blurry—or, from my perspective, marshy—affiliation documents, in DeKoven's description, Stein's "re-espousal of continuity and cohesion, without concomitant return to clarity, order, coherence" (131). DeKoven's invocation of marriage—through the word "espouse"—derives, most likely, from the variations of love and marriage that appear throughout *Lucy Church Amiably*.

Stein's engagement with feeling announces itself at the novel's outset. These are the first three sentences of the book:

Lucy Church Amiably. There is a church and it is in Lucy and it has a steeple and the steeple is a pagoda and there is no reason for it and it looks like something else. Beside this there is amiably and this comes from the paragraph. (7)

The assembling of words into a paragraph allows the word "amiably" to come into existence as the paragraph stages the relationship between writing and affection: writing and reading

lead to feeling. Stein's perplexing description of Lucey, the ostensible setting of her novel, demonstrates less concern for the production of images than the production of feelings. She tells her reader about a steeple that both looks and does not look like a pagoda. There is "no reason" for the steeple/pagoda, but various permutations of the object appear and reappear throughout the text anyway, as if to assert the negligibility of the object and its stability.

In Emerson's view, "The simplest words,—we do not know what they mean, except when we love and aspire" (413). Stein would seem to agree when she asserts that a novel ought to incorporate both information *and* the feeling by which to interpret that information. She writes that *Lucy Church Amiably* is the product of her desire to "put into a book what is to be read in a book, bits of information and tender feeling" (171). She accentuates the aesthetic by making information, or meaning, hard to pinpoint: the reader aspires to comprehend her text. But the feeling that Stein produces, for most readers of *Lucy Church Amiably*, will probably be some combination of bewilderment and frustration. So, where is the love? *Lucy Church Amiably*, not surprisingly, bears little to no resemblance to conventional love stories. As Dydo writes:

Traditional narratives are love stories about boys and girls, men and women. Love stories conclude with weddings and marriages which in turn mark regular, chronological family histories or patriarchal narratives. Stein rejects this narrative form. She is looking for love stories that are not determined by the patriarchy and not tied to rigid roles of gender and sexuality. (147)

Stein's determination to rewrite love in indeterminate fashion yields moments such as this one:

John Mary with their devotion to Josephine and to wedding wedding in a pleasure of recognizing porcelain in swimming pleasure in recognizing that they are circling what is circling in a half circle mushrooms are circling in a half circle and they are matches and are so cold pleasing so called pleasing to the palate and pleasing so called half a circle so called very largely so called so called meadows as they are very nearly higher than a mountain a marsh or anything. (115)

The wedding that Stein evokes in this passage occurs not between people, but “in a pleasure of recognizing”—in the delight, in effect, of seeing the world. This is, in its origins, an Emersonian and Thoreauvian practice. As Cavell writes, “For Emerson and Thoreau you must learn to sit at home or to sit still in some attractive spot in the woods, as if to marry the world, before, if ever, you take on the burden of others” (108). Stein's text illustrates that this marriage is really, un-hypothetically possible, though her particular pleasure follows not a linear, but a circular, trajectory: “circling what is circling.” In this circularity, and in this circularity's eschewing of traditional narrative's final, conclusive brand of marriage, Stein opens a space for the imagination to love the world for availing itself to be re-imagined.

Stein writes, “believing very well believing” (234), evoking in her lovely slip the way belief intimately entwines with love. Thinking about the world requires feeling about the world, which leads to thinking and feeling about new worlds—a dynamic, in Stein, that fluxes and proliferates. *Lucy Church Amiably* accommodates multiple marriages, which are relationships of vision that lead to the visionary: “When this you see you can marry me.

When this you see you can marry me marry marry undeniably marry and see see” (27). Such Steinian marriages are necessarily provisional, indeterminate, or obscure. As Meyer points out, Stein highlights

the impermanence of any connection one might make. It was not there were none, but that every connection was temporary, a placeholder. The essential thing was the making of connections, not the connections themselves. The best explanation of what one was doing in writing was therefore to be found in the writing itself. By taking the ‘composition’ as its own explanation, as Stein suggested, both the reader and the writer were freed to make their own connections and to draw their own conclusions. But they could only exercise this freedom within the constraint of trying to understand how the composition might be explained in its own terms, how it would explain itself; and the impossibility of ever getting this explanation exactly right was what enabled the writing to live on in any particular account of it. (164)

Meyer’s understanding that Stein’s writing creates a world rich with connective potential underscores my own uncertain explanation of *Lucy Church Amiablely* in terms of marshes. The connections I’ve drawn are necessarily speculative rather than right: the pleasure lies in making them. I read Stein to read into the marsh, and to follow the feelings I find there. My practice flows from John R. Campbell’s: “I frequent the marshes,” he writes, “to sense the massive past and the continuous love, however threatened, that will carry forward into an unknown age” (32).

CHAPTER 4

The Swamp in Susan Howe

I enter the forest, where each pair of trees suggests a threshold. I pass between the trunks of Tuliptrees, Red Maples, and Northern Red Oaks. Tangled underfoot I find Virginia Threeseed Mercury, Starved Panicgrass, and Nimblewill. Sunlight pools in wavering places on the forest floor. In another time, I might have lost myself here and been afraid. In another time, the names of the native plants might not have come so readily to me. In another time, the text on my computer screen would certainly not greet me with the digital exclamation: "Welcome to a wild place: this block in 1609!" This is what happens when the intrepid explorer roams through the website of the The Mannahatta Project, which re-imagines the ecology of Manhattan, block by block, as it might have been before Europeans arrived. The wild place I've virtually walked into is The New York Public Library.

Everything here is green. The Mannahatta Project's virtual rewilding of Manhattan allows the Internet user to participate in a kind of plant-effected erasure: I click on a city block in Googlemaps and, from an aerial perspective, watch foliage overwhelm it. Only a red upside-down teardrop dropped in the forest canopy reminds me where I am, virtually speaking: on the west side of Fifth Avenue between 41st and 42nd Streets. Evoking the impossibility of return by reminding its visitors how far from this forest New York has come, The Mannahatta Project suggests that the contemporary mind might still imagine an alternate version of what has happened to the environment of this island since 1609, or at

least attend to the existence of a different version of this island as it might have been—in the past and in the continuing sphere of a subjunctive present. The New York Public Library might have been a wilderness of trees and plants and animals, crisscrossed by game- and foot-trails known intimately by the native population of the Lenape. In the virtual realm of The Mannahatta Project, the passage of time avails itself to the ecologically-conscious consideration (or reconsideration) that Gary Snyder calls the practice of the wild. He writes, “The ephemerality of all our acts puts us into a kind of wilderness-in-time” (154). By mapping the wilderness of 1609 over the urban wilderness of 2010, The Mannahatta Project suggests that the particular time in which wilderness exists is anything but linear.

The website reminds readers that the goal of its elegant ecological reconstruction is not simply to look backward. Rather, The Mannahatta Project painstakingly imagines natural history not only to destabilize present conceptions of Manhattan’s landscape but also to find clues as to how to imagine its natural future. As the website announces:

The goal of the Mannahatta Project has never been to return Manhattan to its primeval state. The goal of the project is to discover something new about a place we all know so well, whether we live in New York or see it on television, and, through that discovery, to alter our way of life. New York does not lack for dystopian visions of the future.... But what is the vision of the future that works? Might it lie in Mannahatta, the green heart of New York, and with a new start to history, a few hours before Hudson arrived that sunny afternoon four hundred years ago?

The call for a new start to history is audacious, stirring, and visionary. It is also one that the poet and scholar Susan Howe has been making throughout her career. Whereas The Mannahatta Project principally relies on the transporting power of visual aids—specifically, computer-generated projections of how a location might have looked in 1609—to rewild the physical landscape, Howe uses words to rewild the material and literary landscapes in which she finds herself writing.

The Howe Project, like The Mannahatta Project, operates on the conviction that “[l]ost origins leave the door open—in their very gesture of closing—for the elaboration of new visions of the human universe” (Collis 68). Howe sees the future in older texts in the open stacks, where she reads to recuperate the American intellectual landscape from temporal restriction. Her methodology takes advantage of what she calls the “spiritual and solitary freedom of an inexorable order only chance creates” (*SLT* 14) and, like The Mannahatta Project’s, allows her to lay a wilderness of her own envisioning over the landscape she finds in the library. Peter Nicholls writes, “Howe’s wilderness is a text composed of gaps and traces. It is also like the archive, from which knowledge of a historical wilderness can now be drawn” (589). Though Howe stages her imaginative re-mappings in the indoor, literary wilds of libraries, she positions herself as a time-twisting scout whose “retrospective excursions” (*SLT* 15) take her into a “lexical inscape” (*SLT* 18). Tracking those early texts whose strangenesses move her to pursue them, Howe conveys the strangeness of speaking and writing in what she describes as the wilderness of language and literary history.

As Howe concludes in an oft-quoted passage from *The Birth-mark*, “It’s the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. All the broken dreams...We are the wilderness. We have

come on to the stage stammering” (181). However interior Howe’s literary wildernesses may seem, they represent an extension of the wilderness of the natural world, as do the people whose voices speak there. Explaining the vital connection between language and landscape in a talk at the Kelly Writers House in 2010, Howe offers: “But somehow, through words, um, the landscape enters through words. I mean literally words have the power to represent what *was* once, what is gone now in the landscape but was there somehow[.]” As her stammered “um” conveys, Howe struggles to articulate her belief in the wilding influence of words and their complicated relationship to what *was* and *is* wild in the natural world—because such articulation is difficult work. Borrowing Howe’s methodology by using Howe’s own uncertainty as the subject of this chapter, I will consider Howe’s poetics as a retrieval and reclamation of the natural world’s wilderness, looking in her words for the landscape—specifically, the swamp—that verges through them.

A Wild Place

Virginia Threeseed Mercury Red Maple American Hornbeam Starved Panicgrass Prairie
 Fleabane Virginia Creeper Black Cherry Roundleaf Greenbrier Black haw American
 Chestnut White Wood Aster Northern Red Oak Flameleaf Sumac Mapleleaf Viburnum
 Nimblewill Smooth Rockcress Wild Sarsaparilla Smooth Yellow False Foxglove Parasol
 Sedge Scaldweed Nakedflower Ticktrefoil American Burnweed Virginia Strawberry Licorice
 Bedstraw Fragrant Bedstraw Black Huckleberry Spotted Geranium Cream Avens American
 Witchhazel Eastern Redcedar Mountain Laurel Trailing Lespedeza Woodland Flax Trumpet
 Honeysuckle Feathery False Lily of the Valley Partridgeberry Common Evening-primrose
 Switchgrass American Lopseed Clammy Groundcherry Climbing False Buckwheat Christma

Aligned with Emily Dickinson, Mary Austin, and Gertrude Stein in her disregard for traditional ideas of order, Howe renders the landscape of thought in New England and the mid-Atlantic with spatial and synchronic abandon. In any given Howe collection, the author's subjects enter into a charged field of affiliation principally because Howe sees them as related, and not because of taxonomic proximity. In Howe's methodology, her own thinking, perceiving self organizes critical inquiry, and her personal experience contextualizes that inquiry. For instance, in the essay "Personal Narrative" that opens her most recent collection, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), Howe foregrounds her solitary walks along the Long Island Sound as the initiators of a literary investigation that draws Jonathan Edwards, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, Henry James, and Wallace Stevens into its purview. She writes: "This particular landscape, with its granite outcroppings, abandoned quarries, marshes, salt hay meadows, and paths through woods to the center of town, put me in touch with my agrarian ancestors"(13). Howe's encounter with the rugged New England shoreline pivots on her encounter with her own personal history, and thrusts her into Yale's Sterling Library—another rough country. Like The Mannhatta Project, the Howe project simultaneously looks backward and forward in time and sees, in both directions, wilderness:

In Sterling's sleeping wilderness I felt the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms. The future seemed to lie in this forest of letters, theories, and forgotten actualities. I had a sense of the parallel between our always fragmentary knowledge and the continual process toward perfect understanding that never withers away. (14)

Some of the phantoms soliciting Howe become manifest in her texts. Her selections reveal Gaston Bachelard's conviction that "[a] phantom lovingly described ceases to act as a

phantom” (17) as love for her subjects drives Howe to forage deep in the library for the forgotten or silenced voices that she will, in her texts, revive. That she revives them in poetry suggests that she shares Thoreau’s conviction that “[t]he imagination requires a long range. It is the faculty of the poet to see present things as if, in this sense, also past and future, as if distant or universally significant” (588). Howe’s ranging imagination, coupled with the often evasive and elliptical poems that it generates, underscores the personal, if not private, nature of what Howe calls the process toward perfect understanding. Howe invites her reader to find her own wilderness—in Howe’s texts, or in the library.

My opening paragraph’s evocation of a personal and uncertain approach to a wild library is, as Howe’s readers will recognize, an imitation of Howe, whose scholarship has been one of the models for mine throughout this dissertation. My imitation is also an acceptance of what I perceive as Howe’s invitation, methodologically speaking, to join her in the library-as-wilderness. Howe’s solitary excursions into the library shape the beginnings of her texts, most explicitly in: *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), *Pierce-Arrow* (1999), “Melville’s Marginalia” in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993), and *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. When I venture into the virtual wilderness of The New York Public Library as The Mannahatta Project envisions it, I click on tabs—*Mammals*, *Plants*, etc.—to unfurl lists of the native populations of which I am virtually in the midst. (I almost wrote “in the mist,” perhaps because the website opens with the visual code for going-back-in-time: a slowly dissolving mist that, as it dissipates, reveals a darkly wooded Manhattan.) “Welcome to a wild place!” the website exclaims. The Project’s architects could very well be speaking about language, which, as Howe demonstrates, might be the wildest place of all.

A Wild Place

s Fern Norwegian Cinquefoil Black Oak Carolina Rose Wreath Goldenrod Claspig Venus'
 Looking-glass Highbush Blueberry Early Blue Violet Fox Grape Striped Prince's Pine
 Roundlope Hapatica White Baneberry Jack in the Pulpit Alternateleaf Dogwood Marginal
 Woodfern Tuliptree Rock Muhly Virginia Mountainmint Smooth Blackberry Prostrate
 Ticktrefoil Forked Bluecurls Slimspike Threawn Pignut Hickory Whorled Milkwort Devil's
 Darning Needles Allegheny Hawkweed Chestnut Oak White Vervain Slender Threeseed
 Mercury Slenderleaf False Foxglove Winter Bentgrass Upland Bentgrass Tall Thimbleweed
 Lyrate Rockcress Densetuft Hairsedge Oval-leaf Sedge Pennsylvania Sedge Mockernut
 Hickory Pipsissewa Black Bugbane Moccasin Flower Dillenius' Ticktrefoil Smooth Smal

The preceding list of plants and the one before it—excerpted from The Mannahatta Project’s inventory of the wilderness-that-was-The New York Public Library in 1609—might be the computer-age descendants of Henry David Thoreau’s meticulous yet wonderfully unpredictable inventories of the flora and fauna he finds around Walden. Much like Emily Dickinson’s *Herbarium*, Thoreau’s *Journal* expresses the wildness of an environmentally-determined order within the confines of the linear progression of days in May:

Chickadee’s <i>tull-a-lull</i>	May	4	
First cricket on Cliff		5	
Shad-fly		5	
Toad in garden		5	
Wasps		6	
Willows suddenly green		6	(140)

My adoration of the natural world and my practice as a poet make me particularly susceptible to the suggestive power of plant and animal names. To me, both lists—The Mannahatta Project’s and Thoreau’s—insinuate nascent poems by isolating unusual words and allowing their sounds to jostle one another. Such is the seduction of parataxis, which invites the reader to participate in the meaningful coordination of names, species, and information—in effect, to make a landscape out of a given list’s components. The Mannahatta Project’s lists of the flora, fauna, terrains, and human populations that might have existed in any particular square block of Manhattan unfold at the click of a button, thrusting material toward the visitor and suggesting, as Howe does, that the wilderness,

should she choose to enter it, is hers to make and re-make. I accepted the invitation: I moved the words from a vertical list into what pretends to be a paragraph.

This reformatting is another imitation of Howe, though in reverse. Here is a list of words taken from Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and arranged to resemble a Thoreauvian naturalist's log:

Muffled discourse from distance

mummy

thread

undertow

slough

It is almost as if "Muffled discourse from distance" is the heading under which the rest of the words fall. But Howe's composition of these words into verse structures creates a less orderly text. Here are the lines as they actually appear:

Muffled discord from distance

mummy thread undertow slough (SLT 16)

Taking advantage of the compression of the lyric as well as the white space of the list, Howe's words swell to fill their interstices and margins with suggestiveness rather than straightforward meaning. Describing her practice, Howe writes, "I believed in an American aesthetic of uncertainty that could represent beauty in syllables so scarce and rushed they would appear to expand..." (SLT 16). Her aesthetic choices produce what she calls "a

vocalized wilderness format of slippage” (*SLT* 17), where the unlikely, uneasy arrangements of words outside the familiar scaffolding of the sentence demonstrate their often-overlooked pliability. Howe places words in a wilderness-in-time in which they *seem* to mean something, or seem to have meant something, or seem as if they might one day mean something.²¹ It is, of course, possible that they mostly mean something to Howe: the personal nature of Howe’s word selection lends her work the aura of a private genre like the journal or naturalist’s log.²²

Tracing such glimpses of the natural world in Howe (and looking especially hard for the swamp) leads me to one of her earliest collections, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978), which borrows its title from William Byrd’s *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728), an account of a surveying party’s endeavor to establish a disputed colonial boundary between Virginia and North Carolina through the Great Dismal Swamp. Howe’s poetic engagement with Byrd’s swamp narrative, including her use of it as one of her collection’s source texts, positions her practice in the context of a swamp aesthetics that I have been excavating throughout this project. Aspiring to imagine along with the swamp rather than subjugate it, Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line* proposes that to tread the borders of the American swamp requires a language that treads the borders of comprehension.

²¹ The evocativeness of almost-meaning in the natural world is one of the concerns of my second chapter, in which I observed that Austin senses the almost-meaning of tulares in California, likening the swamps to writing. “Dotting the valley floor with a dark and fugitive message that Austin senses but cannot decipher before she loses sight of them, the swamps *must* mean something because they *almost* mean something. Hence her recollection of the tulares as intricate blurs and, most notably, hieroglyphs. They are the desert’s script.” Howe’s wild textual landscapes invite the same participatory and exploratory reading.

²² Many of the other texts in this dissertation fall into that category of private writing, or writing that protects privacy: Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain*, Emily Dickinson’s *Herbarium*, Jonathan Edwards’s *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*. I plan to (one day) elaborate on the swamp as Emily Dickinson describes it: a place for secrets.

A Wild Place

Small-leaf Ticktrefoil Panicleleaf Ticktrefoil Field Horsetail Roundleaf Thoroughwort Red
 Fescue Rough Hawkweed Rattlesnakeweed Hairy Pinweed Hairy Lespedeza Northern
 Bayberry Blackgum Witchgrass Canadian Lousewort Black Chokeberry Dwarf Cinquefoil
 Common Cinquefoil Narrowleaf Mountainmint American Wintergreen White Oak Scarlet
 Oak Littleleaf Buttercup Blisterwort Bristly Dewberry Black Raspberry Toothed Whitetop
 Aster Pennsylvania Cathfly Gray Goldenrod Blue Ridge Blueberry New York Ironweed
 Summer Grape Devil's-tongue Spring Forget-me-not Waxflower Shinleaf Widowsfrill
 Eastern Poison Ivy Downy Yellow Violet Sanddun Sandbur Coastal Sweetpepperbush
 Intermediate Woodfern Northern Evening-primrose Marsh Blue Violet Groundnut C

My textual wild places aspire to imitate not only Howe's "vocalized wilderness format of slippage" but also her signature formal strategy of arranging poems in quadrangles that hang in the middle of the page like windows in a wall. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from *Secret History of the Dividing Line*:

green chaste gaiety purity sh inca
 deity snare swift leaf defile dispel
 poppy sh snow flee falcon fathom sh
 flame orison sh children lost fleece
 sh jagged woof subdued foliage sh
 spinet stain clair sh chara sh mirac

(FS 116)

Howe's poetic apertures open onto a wilderness of language that bears traces of the wilderness of the natural world, glimpsed in (and through) words such as: *green*, *leaf*, *poppy*, *snow*, *flee*, *falcon*, *fleece*, *foliage*. The first line evokes a pastoral wonderland that shades into a more threatening environment of predator-prey relationships and inclement weather by the second and third lines. The wilderness that the children find themselves in by line four is home to fire and prayer and animal sounds and, perhaps most ominously, silence. I see the swamp in the last line, in words such as *spinet* (an obsolete word for a thicket or thorn), *stain*, and *chara* (a botanical term for aquatic plants that grow underwater and emit a fetid smell). Read as an expansion of Thoreauvian thought, particularly as it appears in his *Journal* (to which I will return throughout this chapter, for its wildness and its swamps), Howe's strategy

recalls Thoreau's observation: "Sometimes I would rather get a transient glimpse or side view of a thing than stand fronting to it...The object I caught a glimpse of as I went by haunts my thoughts a long time, is infinitely suggestive, and I do not care to front it and scrutinize it, for I know that the thing that really concerns me is not there, but in my relation to that" (475). Howe's poem operates on a similar conviction, providing her reader with suggestive opportunities to build a relationship with her text and those glimpses of the wilderness it offers. By leaving abundant white spaces within her quadrangular poems, Howe allows her reader either to imagine those pieces the author might have left out of the text or imagine those pieces she (the reader) might like to put in.

Unlike a list of species, Howe's arrangement testifies to a sonic logic. (Read any line out loud to hear the economy of appearing and reappearing sounds at work). The word *sb* punctuates and interrupts the development of lyric utterance, and begs the questions: Who is silenced? Who is doing the silencing? "Across the surface of every lake there sweeps a hushed music," says Thoreau (13). The *sb* could be an expression of the natural world: the sound of the wind over water or through trees, the rush of a stream over rocks, or the implied imperative of what Robert Pogue Harrison describes as: "The mute closure of foliage" (4). *Sb* is also the librarian's chastizing refrain, perhaps directed at the authors whose books line the shelves, and/or Howe herself. Howe's wilderness is a difficult place to speak, but *SH* are also Howe's initials, and their reiteration in the excerpt above reminds the reader that Howe implicates herself in the wilderness that she makes in *The Secret History of the Dividing Line* (and concurrently reminding her that *sb* might stand for *secret history*).²³ Howe's English is English made strange—as strange the New World would have been to those Europeans who first encountered it, and as strange as a darkly wooded Manhattan seems to

²³ For a similar reading of this passage, see the end of Fiona Green's "Plainly on the Other Side": Susan Howe's Recovery."

its 2010 resident. Her poetry communicates the sense of being lost (one of the words that appears about halfway through the verse section I quoted above), and lost for words, in the wilderness.

“The Library a wilderness of books,” muses Thoreau. He sees each book as a tangled and rotting swamp, where decomposition leads to composition:

The volumes of the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries, which lie so near on the shelf, are rarely opened, are effectually forgotten and not implied by our literature and newspapers. When I looked into Purchas’s Pilgrims, it affected me like looking into an impassable swamp, ten feet deep with sphagnum, where the monarchs of the forest, covered with mosses and stretched along the ground, were making haste to become peat. Those old books suggested a certain fertility, an Ohio soil, as if they were making humus for new literatures to spring in. I heard the bellowing of bullfrogs and the hum of mosquitos [sic] reverberating through the thick embossed covers when I had closed the book. Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils. (118)

What might be considered sickening impassability and monstrous hunger do not, in Thoreau’s thinking, mark the swamp as the site of dead-end destruction: rather, the swamp catalyzes the new. The swamp is the place not where trees go to die but where disparate voices sing. To ignore language’s capacity for renewal would be akin to looking at a swamp and only seeing death: an older text’s material and ideological decay prepares it to be renovated by the contemporary reader and writer. Thoreau faces what might be fearful and finds it thrilling. Joining Thoreau in the swamp of language by echoing his claim, Howe

writes: “Often a damaged edition’s semi-decay is the soil in which I thrive” (*SLT* 15). As my reading of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* will demonstrate, William Byrd’s *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, a text about the swamp, will provide the imaginative swamp for Howe’s particular flourishing.

In another place in his *Journal*, Thoreau writes:

That central meadow and pool in Gowing’s Swamp is its very navel, *omphalos*, where the umbilical cord was cut that bound it to creation’s womb. Methinks every swamp tends to have or suggests such an interior tender spot. The sphagnous crust that surround the pool is pliant and quaking, like the skin or muscles of the abdomen; you seem to be slumping into the very bowels of the swamp. (447)

The return to a creative wellspring in Thoreau’s sketch resembles, more than anything, evisceration, but the violence his description evokes is, in Howe’s poetics, the violence that the writer must be willing to engage—to perform, and even suffer—if she wants to arrive at a place from which to reinvent language. In order to dismantle language, Howe must take on the dark slurry of the swamp, where creation bears traces of death. She must take on silence and also the sinister risk of permanent silence. She writes, “I cut out my tongue in the forest” (*FS* 102). She might have written, “I cut out my tongue in the swamp.”

A Wild Place

ommon Ladyfern Common Hackberry Tall Blue Lettuce Devil's Beggartick Canada
 Mayflower Common Yellow Oxalis Pennsylvania Smartweed Field Pussytoes Spreading
 Dogbane Sicklepod Downy Yellow False Foxglove Gray Birch Hitchcock's Sedge Bitternut
 Hickory Mat Sandbur Partridge Pea Sweet Fern Roundleaf Dogwood Great Plains Flatsedge
 Common Persimmon Philadelphia Fleabane Woodland Sunflower Illinois Pinweed Sweet
 Crabapple Virginia Groundcherry Eastern White Pine Tall Rattlesnakeroot Basil
 Mountainmint American Black Currant Zigzag Goldenrod Composite Dropseed Lowrie's
 Blue Wood Aster Early Meadow-rue Lowbush Blueberry Narrowleaf Vervain Sixweeks
 Fescue American Spikenard Spleenwort Beggarticks Smallspike False Nettle Northern Wate

Thoreau would have enjoyed imagining The New York Public Library as The Mannahatta Project does: overgrown. After a particularly appalling trip to the libraries in Cambridge and Boston, he writes:

I have sometimes imagined a library, *i.e.* a collection of the works of true poets, philosophers, naturalists, etc., deposited not in a brick or marble edifice in a crowded and dusty city, guarded by cold-blooded and methodical officials and preyed on by bookworms, in which you own no share, and are not likely to, but rather far away in the depths of a primitive forest, like the ruins of Central America, where you can trace a series of crumbling alcoves, the older books protecting the most modern from the elements, partially buried by the luxuriance of nature, which the heroic student could reach only after adventures in the wilderness amid wild beasts and wild men. (111)

The fantasy of discovering the Machu Picchu of libraries predictably appeals to Thoreau's nature-loving sensibility, but it also raises the stakes for reading. Recasting the literary-minded individual as a machete-wielding explorer who must survive the trials of the wilderness in order to earn the right to select a book from a shelf and open it, Thoreau suggests that he (for the swashbuckling student whom Thoreau imagines—slaying beasts and perhaps even wild men—is, I presume, a he) must learn to read the natural world before he may read the literature woven into its ecological fabric. Thoreau's urge to imbricate literacy and landscape anticipates Anne Whiston Spirn's belief that: "The meanings landscapes hold are not just metaphorical and metaphysical, but real, their messages practical; understanding may spell survival or extinction. Losing, or failing to hear and read,

the language of landscape threatens body and spirit, for the pragmatic and imaginative aspects of landscape language have always coexisted. Relearning the language that holds life in place is an urgent task” (11). In Spirn’s poetics, landscape doesn’t just provide the setting for the library—landscape *is* the library. Like Thoreau, she raises the stakes for reading, claiming that humanity’s physical and cognitive futures depend on landscape literacy.

Synthesizing aspects of Spirn’s theory of landscape and Thoreauvian vision, Gary Snyder sees language as another example of what Thoreau calls the luxuriance of nature. Enmeshing words more firmly in the natural world than either Spirn or Thoreau, Snyder asserts what might be a natural history of language: “Language is like some kind of infinitely interfertile family of species spreading or mysteriously declining over time, shamelessly and endlessly hybridizing, changing its own rules as it goes” (7). Breeding and dying and breeding and dying again: language’s capacity for fecundity and decay align it with the swamp, whose fluxing ecosystem demonstrates, as Barbara Hurd writes, “how closely bound are absence and presence, decay and the spirit” (112). Snyder frames language as a living thing, as does Howe, whose practice reverences language at its most feral. Imagining Howe in a Thoreauvian wilderness where language is as organic as Snyder claims it is, Rachel Tzvia Back argues that Howe’s work derives from the “attention to and emphasis on language as itself dynamic, volatile, and protean, and from the very real difficulty—experienced in the texts by writer and reader both—of tracking (forgotten voices, lost footsteps) through overgrown and obliterating literary and historical landscapes” (6). Howe’s poetics reverses Spirn’s: in Howe, the library is landscape.

Back’s argument places Howe—in pursuit of the uncertain to the point of forgetting to preserve oneself—in the environment of thought that Hurd claims is the swamp’s. “What space is this that seems to open up only at those moments when our usual protective

stances have been obliterated? Why is it we only see that space when we teeter on some precarious brink? What kind of vision don't we have? . . . Does it take a dream, a near-death, a bone-deep vulnerability to sense it?" (109). Hurd's queries echo Thoreau's own swamp-triggered questions, in which he develops a poetics of risk:

What is that pretended life that does not take up a claim, that does not occupy ground, that cannot build a causeway to its objects, that sits on a bank looking over a bog, singing its desires? . . . I left my shoes and stockings on the bank far off and waded barelegged through rigid andromeda and other bushes a long way, to the soft open sphagnous centre of the swamp. (405)

Howe's forays into the library are similar excursions into the unknown. She performs such explorations because, as Thomas Gardner writes, she "is particularly drawn to those aspects of voice that reveal a writer poised, sometimes quite unknowingly, on the uneasy edge between the enclosed and the boundless" (110). To assume these precarious authorial stances herself, Howe positions herself on the edge of the library, where she is both seduced and scared by the promise of abundance and oblivion. Describing the stacks in a discussion at the Kelly Writers House in 2010, she says: "They're very dark. Very silent. I could do a whole number on the sort of weird seductive quality of stacks. They're sexy places too. . . . It's a little dangerous up there because there could be a lurking killer. They have that kind of musty smell. But they are of course wood and dark."

Dark, weird, seductive, sexy, dangerous, wood, and dark: Howe's adjectives stir up the swamp (whose weird and wonderful attributes I hope to have, by this point in the dissertation, made familiar to my readers), as does the smell of decay. My insistence on locating Howe in the swamp represents a divergence from those readers (including the poet-

scholar herself) who've consistently imagined Howe in a wood, or wilderness. But, as Lucy R. Lippard writes in *The Lure of the Local*, "If landscape is a way of seeing, there are potentially as many landscapes as individual ways of seeing" (61). The swamp is not only my way of seeing but also my way of reading and relating. When Howe juxtaposes her own entrance into the library with a description of Thoreau's swamp, which he entered (in her words) "as a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*" (SLT 17), I leap to presume that Howe's library is her swamp.

A Wild Place

r-starwort Muhlenberg's Sedge Virginia Springbeauty American Squawroot Flagrant
 Flatsedge Showy Ticktrefoil Dutchman's Breeches Deertongue Northern Bush Honeysuckle
 Dogtooth Violet Trumpetweed Sweetscented Joeopyweed Greater Fringed Gentain
 Whitegrass Northern Bugleweed Lowland Yellow Loosestrife Pinesap Oneflowered
 Broomrape Royal Fern American Ginseng Thin Paspalum Erect Knotweed Swamp White
 Oak New York Fern Southern Arrowwood Riverbank Grape Sweetflag Red Columbine
 Hairy Woodland Brome Silver False Spleenwort American Beech White Ash Lanceleaf Wild
 Licorice Butternut Poverty Rush Canadian Woodnettle Northern Spicebush Groundcedar
 Whop-poor-will Flower American Elm Nightcaps Emmons' Sedge Broadleaf Sed

In contending that Howe can be read in relation to—and in reverence of—the suggestiveness of the swamp, this chapter calls attention to the poet’s approach to her favorite subjects: the library, language, American literary history, and personal history. Howe’s practice evokes the swamp indirectly, offering the ambiguity, variability, and capacity to unsettle of the swamp—and immerses her in the swamp aesthetics that I have been assembling throughout this dissertation. Howe’s particular swamp aesthetics emerge in her belief in an omnipresent American wilderness, her paratactical and ambiguous verse structures, and her Thoreau-inspired excursions into language’s most unnervingly swamplike redoubts. Modeling a provocative poetics of losing oneself that derives from Thoreau and from the conventions of nature writing—in which the solitary (usually male) author sets out to discover something in the wilderness and, after some escapade, does—Howe positions herself trembling on the brink of writing, poised to “[s]et out to learn what fear was . . . no pocket compass or notched tree” (*FS* 100). Recasting uncertainty as her objective rather than a step toward the category of epiphany her male forbears sought and found, Howe experiences disorientation as a form of revelation. Her poetry finds compensation in such trials of subjectivity, and suggests that the swamp might offer an astonishing way of being.

Lostness lingers around swamp aesthetics throughout this dissertation: Emily Dickinson loses herself in the language of flowers in her *Herbarium*, Mary Austin willingly loses the reader she purports to guide through *The Land of Little Rain*, and Gertrude Stein might be said to offer a primer on being lost in *Lucy Church Amiably*. Swamps are places to lose oneself and, as Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line* demonstrates, swamps are places to *lose one self*. Howe’s strategy of intermingling texts produces an account of multiple selves speaking at the same time in the swamp where temporal distance collapses (there are 250 years between Byrd’s text and Howe’s) to the point of irrelevance, and cacophony

proliferates. Characteristically, Howe implicates herself in the swamp she creates in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*: the word *MARK* that appears frequently in the collection might refer to her son and/or her father, who edited Oliver Wendell Holmes's letters in the volume *Touched with Fire: The Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Harvard University Press, 1947)—a text which becomes, along with the dictionary and Byrd's text, another source for the poems.

Before Howe insinuates herself into them, Byrd's Histories are already plural. He writes two descriptions of mapping the Great Dismal Swamp: one a private diary, one a formal report. The diary *Secret History of the Dividing Line* provided Byrd with the raw material for the longer *History of the Dividing Line*, which was published in 1728. Byrd's parallel histories evoke two different swamps, and his imagination seeps through and between both: Byrd uses the notes from the diary to fashion the public report of a swamp that, remarkably, he barely encountered. His position as commissioner allowed him to delegate exploration, and he stayed on the swamp's outskirts throughout the expedition and described a swamp (or swamps) that existed primarily in his mind. As David C. Miller points out: "His impressions are second-hand, worked up from notations in his diary (the "Secret History") that were based on accounts by members of the surveying party that actually entered the swamp" (207). Here is Byrd's description of treading into the fringes of the Great Dismal Swamp, the closest he seems to have gotten to immersion:

[W]hen we got into the Dismal itself, we found the Reeds grew there much taller and closer, and, to mend the matter was so interlac'd with bamo-briars, that there was no scuffling thro' them without the help of Pioneers. At the same time, we found the Ground moist and trembling under our feet like a Quagmire, insomuch that it was an

easy Matter to run a Ten-Foot-Pole up to the Head in it, without exerting any uncommon Strength to do it. (62)²⁴

Writing from the swamp's edges, Byrd casts the swamp in terms that are, for his time, conventionally menacing. The swamp is a hyperlush looming tangle of vegetation; the swamp threatens to suck a man down into its muck. The only way to survey it is to destroy it—which, presumably, would have been the job of Byrd's bushwhacking "Pioneers." The above passage comes from Byrd's formal report, but the *Secret History* discloses that Byrd's response to the Great Dismal Swamp is to flee. He concedes: "Then we took leave, recommending both [the bushwhackers] & the Surveyors to Providence" (65).

The Dover 1967 edition of *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* places the two histories alongside one another, so that Byrd's *History* appears on the verso and his *Secret History* on the recto. Reading this slightly schizophrenic, imbricated text, I often turn the page to find myself in what appears to be the same place and time—reading descriptions that I sense I've already read, albeit in slightly altered forms, and doubting my progress through both the Great Dismal Swamp that Byrd's party traverses and the swamp that the text itself begins to resemble. To further discombobulate things, not only does Byrd write two histories of his party's exploits, but he also refers to himself in the third person—as "the Author"—in the *History*, while maintaining the first-person "I" in the diaristic *Secret History*. Byrd's text becomes the story of multiple stories told by multiple voices produced by the swamp that the author is commissioned to survey but resists entering.

²⁴ My pagination comes from the Dover 1967 edition of *Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*.

Consciously appropriating the poly-vocality that Byrd stumbles into, Howe reconceives his formative American encounter with a swamp in which, as Miller observes, “Meaning is pre-ordained, almost wholly intentional” (213). Byrd eschews entertaining the possibility that the swamp might offer a threshold to the new in favor of encountering a Great Dismal Swamp whose story is already fixed in his mind, and he undertakes to draw a single line through the swamp as if to determine its unilateral plot—which, as Byrd’s proliferating text reveals, the swamp undermines. In Howe’s pursuit of uncertainty, on the other hand, meaning might be said to be almost wholly *unintentional*. Howe consents to imagine along with the swamp that Byrd shies away from, accepting the invitation implied in those questions that, to return to Hurd, the swamp asks: “What space is this that seems to open up only at those moments when our usual protective stances have been obliterated? Why is it we only see that space when we teeter on some precarious brink? What kind of vision don’t we have?” (109).

Anne Whiston Spirn writes, “Landscape, as language, makes thought tangible and imagination possible” (15). Ignoring Spirn’s language of landscape—in other words, attempting to confine it to Procrustean forms and economies—harms the mind that traverses it. In *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, Howe envisions this damaging development as an accompaniment to the settlement of the American frontier:

Crowds assemble on the plain
 followers, disciples, pseudo disciples

 wire fences along property lines
 I know the war-whoop in each dusty narrative

the little heir of the alphabet

lean as a knife

searches the housetop in tatters. (FS 99)

The twentieth-century American poet scurries back and forth across a roof as if marooned there by a rising flood. Arguably, she feels helpless: she inherits a moldering alphabet that tells, over and over again, the same story of the American landscape, mapping a landscape in limited terms that limit its existence. As Howe writes elsewhere in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*: “*My map is rotten and frayed with rain*” (FS 90). Landscape might be seen and written in multiple ways, but subjected to one story, landscape becomes a flat, featureless, fenced plain. It also becomes unremarkably plain. Howe’s response to this state of literary and ecological emergency is to fight back: lean and presumably sharp as a knife, she carves another account of the American wilderness out of Byrd’s particular dusty narrative. Her rewinding of language reverses the dynamic that Spivak theorizes and suggests that language, as landscape, makes the wild tangible. Indeed, the lostness that most readers feel when they read Howe’s work speaks to her work’s existence as a wild place. Howe’s practice exemplifies what Bachelard calls the “poetic function of giving a new form to the world which does not exist poetically if it is not ceaselessly reimagined” (54-5). The unsettled environment of Howe’s poems creates a wilderness whose fluid being on the page proliferates in the imagination of her readers, and in the natural worlds her imagination leads her to see.

Further elucidating the power of Howe’s language to create a wild landscape, Rachel Tzvia Back writes that *Secret History of the Dividing Line* “sets the reader—and the text to

follow—firmly in the unsettled and unsettling American expanse that William Byrd and party contended with, attempting—and ultimately failing—to tame” (21). This is the first page of Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line*:

mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a
tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval
free also event starting the slightly position of
O about both or don’t something INDICATION Americ

made or also symbol sachem maimed as on her for
ar in teacher duct excellent figure MARK lead be
knife knows his hogs dogs a boundary model nucle
hearted land land land district boundary times un

(FS 89)

Welcome to a wild place. The Mannahatta Project’s plant-effected erasure of Manhattan finds its counterpart in Howe’s blank spaces and tangle of words. Her poem reads like a half-obliterated dictionary entry because it is: going into the guts of the swamp *and* the swamp of language in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, Howe wades into the dictionary, where words might stagnate in alphabetically-ordered columns without her creative interference. Explaining the poet’s strategy, Back explains that Howe

places that which is literally on the margins of language’s most authoritative book—the dictionary—into the center, negotiating all the while the dictionary’s arbitrary

separation of words to fit into columns with her own careful attentiveness to the look and meaning of every group of letters. The authority of the dictionary entry is subverted by Howe's alternative reading strategy *down* the page instead of across, resulting in an alertness to the subjectivity of cultural marks and markings. (21)

Howe's poetics generates a second, secret dictionary of her own making. Her rewriting of the dictionary is also a rewriting of American literary history, but such rewriting can only follow the chaos she creates by placing the margins of the dictionary at the center of hers. As Hank Lazer writes, "Howe seeks out and inhabits a linguistic frontier on the verge of disorder; at that frontier she begins to remake and renew that order" (66).

The parataxis of Howe's verse still, to me, suggests the naturalist's log, and positions her as an environmental writer. But Howe's log is a log in disarray: she generates a text that suggests that writing might represent the natural world in a form other than the naturalist's carefully-observed descriptions and neat lists. The connections Howe might have made bloom and multiply in the places where the text suggests them. Howe includes language in her vision of wilderness, and her project communicates—especially in its partially formed, partially familiar words, such as: *ha*, *Americ*, *ar*, *nucle*, *un*—the natural history of language as Snyder envisions it, declining and hybridizing and shapeshifting over time. The numbers that aspire to systematize the text drift in space rather than organize the conglomeration of words that, in their unwillingness to be ordered, convey the disorder (and attendant terror) of the swamp. The regulatory power of words such as *mark*, *boundary*, *tract*, *boundary*, *model*, and *district* (among others) is undermined by words such as *manic*, *free*, *maimed*, and *knife*. The swamp of language resists resolution, as the willfully vague last line of the first stanza suggests: "O about both or don't something[.]" Similarly, the last line of the second stanza

stammers “land land land”— fumbling for what to say next. Such stammering yields to the implied imperative for silence and erasure in the last syllable: *um*. The land’s demand for silence might be a precursor to its demand for poetic vision. Bachelard writes, “Poetry then is truly the first manifestation of silence” (25).

In *Secret History of the Dividing Line*’s particular swamp of voices, Howe’s is the only woman’s voice, and the only voice that communicates through poetry. Simulating a formative encounter with American landscape and the language it provokes, Howe’s poem endeavors to create terrestrial, imaginative, and literary space for more women writers, and more poets, to speak. Howe’s poem endeavors to create more wildernesses like the one Byrd and his party encountered, and in which Byrd felt afraid. The swamp, which models fecundity as well as the positive outcomes of uncertainty and decay, models the kind of revision of order that Howe’s poetics of risk insists upon. The writer must be willing to pursue the chaos that creates the parataxis that invites new creation. Kornelia Freitag writes:

[I]n Howe’s poem the wilderness becomes an image for potentially liberating natural and intellectual forces. The ordering of the American continent by men like Byrd into clearly laid-out, profitable, well-taxable, and neatly circumscribed entities from East to West is disarrayed Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line* is her effort to disrupt ‘man’s hierarchical position’ over space, over nature, over history, and over women and to reinscribe women into the American discourse without simply reversing the hierarchy. (311, 319)

Opening the field for more modes of writing about the environment, Howe depends on the personal histories and imaginations of her readers. As Eleanor Hersey observes, “Rather

than making straightforward, didactic claims about the value of 'the environment,' Howe employs a fragmented, nonlinear style to demonstrate the subjunctive nature of all human experiences in which we live and work" (132). Howe's hunt for the swamp in American experience suggests that there might be as many swamps as there are individuals who wish to imagine with them. Even Byrd recognized the swamp as a powerful source of new creation, writing: "However this dirty Dismal is in many parts of it very pleasant to the Eye, tho' disagreeable to the other Sences, because there is an everlasting Verdure, which makes every Season look like the Spring" (87).

A Wild Place

ge Broadleaf Enchanter's Nightshade Blue Waxweed Flattened Oatgrass Wavy Hairgrass
 Hoary Ticktrefoil Smooth Ticktrefoil Nutthall's Ticktrefoil Downy Rattlesnake Plantain
 Grassleaf Rush Cinnamon Fern Hophornbeam Pennsylvania Pellitory Procession Flower
 Bushy Knotweed Rabbittobacco Torrey's Mountainmind Early Saxifrage Narrowleaf
 Whittop Aster Shiny Wedgescale Feverwort Culter's Root Great Ragweed Rattlesnake Fern
 Cockspur Hawthorn Rare Clubmoss Virginia Water Horehound Dwarf Ginseng Purple
 Cliffbrake Blue Skullcap Low False Bindweed Bristleleaf Sedge Red Hickory Summer
 Coralroot Autumn Coralroot Eastern Hayscented Fern Flaxleaf Whittop Piedmont
 Staggerbush Lyreleaf Sage Landceleaf Figwort Canada Germander Purple Meadowpars

In The New York Public Library, I traverse a thicket as overgrown and swampy as The Mannahatta Project spurs me to imagine it. Verging, blooming, tangling, blowing, or seeping—wild places, as Howe’s work reveals, move across the thresholds of the words I use. The wild place of the swamp, as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, shadows American women’s experimental texts and those patterns of mind that they disclose. The wild place of the swamp is also within. When Thoreau imagines intimacy with wildness, he envisions a swamp: “It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires our dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of Concord, *i.e.* than I import into it” (407). As Thoreau would have me understand it, the swamp I find close at hand is the swamp I’ve been dreaming of.

Dream has suffused my excavation of swamp aesthetics. As any reader will readily observe, the swamps to which I’ve referred throughout this dissertation have been those I’ve imagined rather than particular swamps in particular places. I did not look for Emily Dickinson’s swamp in South Amherst, I did not find Mary Austin’s tulares in California, and I did not travel to France to wade in Gertrude Stein’s marshes. Bachelard writes, “We look with aesthetic passion only at those landscapes which we have first seen in dreams ... [I]n human dreams [is] the preamble of natural beauty. The unity of a landscape appears as the fulfillment of an oft-dreamed dream. But the oneiric landscape is not a frame to be filled with impressions, it is a matter which multiplies” (36). My methodology derives from a similar faith in the imagination’s instincts, and from the particular fruitfulness of the swamp as a place from which, through which, and with which to read American women’s

experimental writing—in this dissertation and, I hope, beyond it. I return to Hurd, and to my cursory consideration of the role of dream in my second chapter: “In a swamp[,] we are arrayed in mystery, one foot in a seepole and one in a dream,” Hurd writes (43). To pursue a dream, I wrote, is to subject a mystery to time, protracting it into a sequence that verges on narrative or explanation. To pursue a dream is to believe in its possible reality. Spirn claims, “[W]e dwell in what began as dreams” (267). Swamp aesthetics, of course, was something I dreamed, and still dream, as an explanation for a strain of innovation in American writing by women. That swamps themselves are elusive and endangered (especially for a New York City resident) might have allowed me to imagine more than I otherwise would, but I pursue swamp aesthetics because to dream of a swamp might offer a promising method of preserving its presence in the American landscape of thought, if not the American landscape. Like The Mannhatta Project, critical thinking might envision the presence of a swamp not only as it might have been but also as it could have been, right now, even in the library in which I write. As Spirn offers, “[E]very landscape has both real and potential form—what is, what has been, what will, what might be” (19).

A Wild Place

nip Slippery Elm Common Serviceberry Whorled Milkweed Crinkleroot Sand Bittercress
 Scarlet Hawthorn Eastern Bottlebrush Grass Violet Woodworrel Smooth Solomon's Seal Pin
 Cherry Clustered Mountainmint Sleepy Silene Eastern Hemlock Arrowleaf Violet Bluntlobe
 Cliff Fern Silver Maple Bushy Bluestem Tower Rockcress Yellow Birch Fringed Brome
 Shagbark Hickory Richweed Whitemouth Dayflower Brittle Bladderfern Velvet Panicum
 Wild Yam Virginia Wildrye Lace Grass Blue Huckleberry Thinleaf Sunflower Vanilla Grass
 Bluntleaf Waterleaf Black Walnut Marsh Pea Wood Lily Brown Widelip Orchid Indian
 Cucumber Wild Job's Tears Mountain Woodsorrel Mayapple Bigtooth Aspen Sand
 Blackberry Oneseed Burr Cucumber Cat Greenbrier Smooth Carrionflower New York

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