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GEOCRITICISM IN DEPICTIONS OF THE AMERICAN WEST:
AN ANALYSIS OF CLAIRE VAYE WATKINS'S *BATTLEBORN*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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BY

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ABSTRACT

GEOCRITICISM IN DEPICTIONS OF THE AMERICAN WEST: AN ANALYSIS OF CLAIRE VAYE WATKINS'S *BATTLEBORN*

BY FIONA RUANE

Geography is text and text is geography. This is the core concept founding this thesis, which argues towards the expansion of geocriticism in analyzing the western landscapes of Claire Vaye Watkins's 2012 short story collection *Battleborn*. Current geocritical scholarship argues that textual depictions of landscape contribute to that locale's place-making and derivative lived-experiences. In expanding on the posited relationality between extra-literary landscapes and their textual depictions, this thesis argues that the unique landforms composing a physical geography, and its subsequent social geography, create singular geocritical lenses analyzing the role of landscape in Watkins's texts and how these texts interrogate the role of landscape in their narratives. First, I argue that the stratification of the Black Rock Desert landscape creates stratified social orders defining its processes of mining and belonging in "Man-O-War". Second, I argue that "The Diggings" integrates histories of geographically-exploitative and religious colonization to illustrate ongoing cycles of (neo)-colonizers positioning the Sierra Nevada foothills as Edens, destroying their geographies, and failing in their avaricious pursuits of geographic manipulation. Thirdly, I argue that San Francisco's landscape within "Graceland", in retaining physicalities of past, present, and future geologic epochs, exists as a site of geographic-epochal conflict confronting humanity's intervention in the global descent toward the Anthropocene. These three unique geocritical lenses aim to argue towards the expansion of geocriticism as an emergent practice and illustrate the necessity of geocritical application in analyzing the American West's diverse and extraordinary geographies.

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INTRODUCTION:
UNDERSTANDING GEOCRITICISM AS LITERARY THEORY IN THE AMERICAN WEST

I cannot imagine a single greater tragedy than not possessing a formative and spiritual connection with the lands of the American West. Somewhere and some time between taking my first breath in San Francisco, exhausting my melodramatic adolescence in the forested shades of Groveland, and confirming my coastal elitism in the emergent adulthood of my tenure in Los Angeles, this belief seeped into my brain, body, and bones so much that my identity is now inseparable from the geography. My consumption of the American West brought me to Claire Vaye Watkins's short story collection *Battleborn* (2012), a series of evocative, nostalgic, and lovingly harsh depictions of the western landscapes that have shaped my personhood. I encountered *Battleborn* alongside learning of the geographic process of place-making, the process by which physical and human characteristics transform a space, a neutral geographic landscape, into a *place* possessing and enforcing specific meanings. As these assigned meanings become socially inherent to the characteristics of a space, the landscape begets specific lived experiences and interpretations of its (in)tangible geographies.

Each re-reading of *Battleborn*'s storied geographies — Nevadan ghost towns, Tahoe apartments, and Los Angeles movie ranches — brought me closer to, and made me more fanatic of, the diverse *places* of the American West. These places exist in a rare intersection of biodiversity, geographic infancy, and traceable human development, creating a dense constellation of physical and social geographies. The American West is one of the most physically biodiverse regions in the United States and the world, with its greater geography composed of mediterranean shrublands, deserts, alpine tundra, coniferous forests, rainforests, and grasslands. These biomes are in their geologic infancies and have not yet entered their

geologic adolescence. California and Nevada's present-day biomes only began to take their contemporary shape around 8,000 years ago, making these physical geographies incredibly young on the global geologic scale. Furthermore, humans have only lived in these geographies for the past 15,000 years, a blip in the timescale as compared to Northern Europe (45,000 years) or Egypt's Nile Valley (400,000 years). These intersections between nascent physical geographic formation and human occupancy give us the distinct, privileged ability to research landscape's modern relationship to humans tangibly through points of origin *and* in one of the most geographically diverse regions in the world.

And diversity begets diversity: human development and relationships with geography look different between biomes, allowing the West to forge unique ties between humans and landscapes across deserts, forests, grasslands, and mountain ranges. Each of these ties result in exciting processes of place-making, which make the lived experiences of Western geographies singular and extraordinary. A Humboldt township predicates their livelihoods, economies, and education on logging industries, leading to mass migrations resulting in ethnically mixed working-class communities while centuries of San Andreas Faultline activity create a south-facing coastline of ideal sediment deposits, producing year-round swells in Santa Cruz eventually forming a "locals only" exclusionary surf culture. In the American West, geography is everything and everything is geography. Thus, literary depictions of the American West posit that geography is *text* and that *text* is geography. I apply this relationality to Watkins's *Battleborn* and its depictions of western American geography to define, develop, and refine the emergent literary theory of geocriticism. In arguing for text as geography and geography as text, I propose geocriticism as a crucial lens for understanding not only the literature of California, but also for rethinking the relations that mark the American West and California itself.

Geocriticism is an emerging literary theory melding textual analysis with geography's study of space, place, and environment founded and developed by French scholar Bertrand Westphal.¹ American scholar Robert T. Tally Jr.² later translated Westphal's work and brought geocriticism to the United States, authoring and editing numerous interdisciplinary essays, books, and collections on spatial literary studies, geocriticism, and literary geography. Together, Westphal and Tally established geocriticism as a formal study across contemporary French and English literatures. Though many scholars and researchers continue to dabble or explore geocriticism based on Westphal's and Tally's work, the field remains in its infancy and rarely ventures outside the initial frameworks established by its founders.

Westphal and Tally define geocriticism as theory explaining how literature contributes to a geography's place-making — the process where physical and human characteristics transform a general *space* into a specific and subjective location imbued with meaning and informing lived experience. Westphal's geocriticism argues that text works to construct a place through three conceptual devices: spatiotemporality,³ transgressivity,⁴ and referentiality.⁵ Through these theoretical concepts, Westphal constructs geocriticism on the thesis that text works to transform a space into a place alongside the characteristics defined by geographical inquiry: physical characteristics like landforms and tangible objects and human characteristics like language, activity, and religion, all of which imbue meaning into a given space to construct a built place.

¹ Westphal's theory began in his 2007 essay, "Geocriticism," which he later developed in his book, *Geocriticism: A User's Guide* (2011).

² Tally and Westphal have since become close collaborators in their joint venture to define and expand geocritical studies, with Westphal providing a forward to Tally's edited volume, *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2011).

³ Westphal's view that spatialization has taken a supremacy over time in literature to redefine time-space à la Bakhtin's chronotope.

⁴ The idea that text contributes to the fundamentally fluid and progressing nature of space.

⁵ The relationship between reality and fiction, which exists between the spaces of the real-world and the spaces of text.

There is no existing scholarship on *Battleborn*, Watkins's debut publication, though there is some ecocritical analysis of her subsequent 2015 novel, *Gold, Fame, Citrus* and its dystopic depiction of Southern California during a neo-dust bowl. The sparse scholarship on Watkins's work pigeonholes her as an ecocritical author whose depictions of a dystopic, drought-ridden California argue for environmental preservation as a work of climate-change fiction.⁶

Ecocriticism⁷ arose as literary theorists' response to an increasingly human-centric world when climate change and environmental preservation became chief concerns in the 1980s and 1990s, as their ecocritical readings argued for literary shifts critiquing humanity's role in environmental degradation and prioritizing earth-centered interpretations. Ecocritical scholars lump Watkins and her prose with authors like Margaret Atwood and Jim Crace who have 'similarly' written post-apocalyptic fiction that addresses environmental injustice, argues for earth-centered approaches to literary analysis, and questions the role of humans in the natural environment (D'Erasmus 98). The general classification of Watkins as an ecocritical author is not unusual considering the lack of scholarly exploration of Watkins's already small oeuvre. Though Watkins's novel does explore ecocritical themes of the social, cultural, and political consequences of the inevitable environmental destruction in the Anthropocene, it is reductive and incorrect to label *Battleborn* as an ecocritical text in the same vein. Doing so misses the nuance of what *Battleborn* sets forth to accomplish.

Where *Gold, Fame, Citrus* and other climate-change fiction or ecocritical works illustrate an apocalyptic and human-driven destroyed environment, *Battleborn* uses physical geography as a neutral yet structural presence that defines how and why characters interact with the land and

⁶ Existing scholarship on *Gold, Fame, Citrus* ecocritically evaluates Watkins's depiction of the "Amargosa Dune Sea," an expanding desert enveloping a drought-ridden California in sand.

⁷ Ecocriticism formally emerged in William Reuckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Cheryll Glotfelty defined ecocritical theory in her 1996 book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, which became the foundational text for ecocriticism.

with each other. In *Battleborn*, the relationships between physical geographic space and lived experience both drive the plot and enact mutual change. This relationality is not based in calls to action nor the pure argument that a relationship between physical environment and literature simply exists, as a straight ecocritical reading of the text would suggest. Rather, *Battleborn* investigates how an environment's physical characteristics construct the social geographies through which literary (and lived) experiences occur. A geocritical reading expands on this process to argue that the depictions of those literary experiences thus inform the reader's or the zeitgeist's construction of a landscape's physical and social geographies. Thus, geocritical texts like Claire Vaye Watkins's *Battleborn* use the physical environment as an engine exposing the mutual relationality between a given place and those existing within it. Further, the relationalities within geocritical texts traverse individual themes pertaining to the lived experiences of the spaces and places which it depicts, ultimately deviating from ecocriticism's overarching mission of ecocentric themes promoting environmental justice in response to ecological crises.

Yet, my understanding of geocriticism applies Westphal and Tally's framework in the reverse to argue that extra-literary geographic characteristics of a given place inform derivative analyses of a text depicting and existing within that given locale. This framework states that physically and socially analyzing the place-making of an external geography essentially constructs the intra-literary interpretations of Watkins's short stories. This reversal of traditional geocritical thought does not undermine the literary theory, which has largely prioritized defining its formal academic parameters as an emergent literary practice over application to literary analysis. Rather, it builds on and strengthens geocritical thinking by emphasizing the all-encompassing relationality between extra- and intra-literary spaces, places, and lived experiences. In doing so, geocriticism enacts a cyclical process: as I use extra-literary depictions

of geography to form my intra-literary analysis, my thesis becomes itself a geocritical text place-making those analyzed geographies and thus affecting extra-literary depictions.

My geocritical inquiry into Watkins's *Battleborn* short stories therefore responds to two major deficits in existing scholarship: the lack of research on *Battleborn*'s stories, which remain underexplored and underanalyzed despite their literary richness and having received much critical praise, as well as the sparse application of geocriticism to literary analysis. *Geocriticism in Depictions of the American West* bridges these gaps through the creation of geocritical lenses specific to each story's chosen geography and resultant place-making, thus providing *Battleborn* with a (hopefully) deserving piece of scholarship whilst expanding on geocritical thought. This expansion of geocriticism brings a new theoretical framework applicable to western American literature's depictions of landscape. This allows for singular explorations into the spatialities and place-making processes of these resource dense and biodiverse landscapes, framing these analyses in greater and more dynamic contexts beyond the contemporary themes of ecocriticism centered in conservation and activism.

In my application of geocriticism to *Battleborn*, I specifically posit that real-world geographies inform the literary analyses of Watkins's chosen environments to the point that these two entities are inextricably linked. Through geocriticism, I take a literal approach to place-making as the essential link between physical geography and Watkins's literature. First, natural landscapes compose physical geographies as *spaces*, neutral landscapes where physical phenomena exist without the attachment of constructed sociocultural meaning. Second, humans begin the process of place-making with the addition of built landforms, physical features in a space humans have built to control, contribute to, or exist within natural space. Humans finalize the creation of a place by attaching sociocultural meanings to the human experience so that the

place informs how humans perform activities, interactions, and societal systems; in other words, the development of a physical geography leads to an intangible social geography which further affects how humans continue to live in and change their environments. This process of place-making in natural physical environments critically informs analyses of *Battleborn*, whose geographies undergo multiple stages of place-making over time.

Analyzing the extra- and intra-literary place-makings of the geographies — that is, how the real-world has systemically transformed and added meaning to these spaces *and* how Watkins's characters have performed their individual place-makings in tandem to the real-world — reveals how Watkins's stories critically rely on geography to deliver their themes, give complexity to their occurrences, and root their seeming arbitrariness in greater geographic processes which transcend *Battleborn*. Understanding how place-making fundamentally shapes Watkins's depictions of the American West, a region so heavily defined by its physical and social geographies, gives us the geocritical methods through which we can continue to analyze prose the non-literary like film, art, architecture, urban planning, migration studies, and policy. Geocriticism and place-making as a greater framework allows us to flexibly explore how spatialities and geographies interact with human intervention, encouraging unique lenses and perspectives specific to the chosen geographic place; geocriticism does not invite a singular interpretation of place-making or of the role of geography in text, instead inviting a curated analysis of a geography on the basis of tailored extra-literary research and intra-literary depiction. This creates space for the inherent dynamism of geography, as the characteristics of a place constantly change due to what humans occupy it, what interactions occur there, and what environmental shifts have transpired.

When we understand these Californian and western American landscapes by the specificity of their unique geographies, biomes, and environments, we treat them and their derivative literature with more care. The relationships between humans and environment differ greatly between landscapes — and between one inch for a worm. For that reason, scholarly inquiry into literary depictions of western American landscapes has a duty to recognize what and how physical characteristics create the spatial conditions dictating humans' lived experiences. Geocritical application, therefore, aims to deconstruct ecocriticism's use of environmental portrayals as a call to generalized, occasionally paternalistic, environmental activism. California's vast physical and social geographies necessitate whole analyses speaking to the singular characteristics constructing these environments. Only in wholly understanding the composition of these diverse western landscapes can we begin to ameliorate or support relationships between those existing on these landscapes and between humans and landscapes at large.

I have divided *Geocriticism in Depictions of the American West* into three chapters, each exploring a singular short story, geographic domain, and derivative geocritical lens from the *Battleborn* collection. Chapter 1, "Stratigraphic Thought in the Black Rock Desert," examines the stratigraphic lens in Nevada's northwestern Black Rock Desert, featured in the short story "Man-O-War." Stratigraphic thought introduces the creation and application of a spatially-created environmental perspective, defined through how the colonialism extractivism of the Black Rock's stratified sediment deposits result in persistent racial stratifications affecting the social permittance of belonging in the desert.

Chapter 2, "Religious GeoColonialism in the Sierra Nevada Foothills," examines the religious geocolonial lens in the Gold Rush town of Angels Camp, featured in the story "The

Diggings.” Set in 1850, the religious geocolonial lens explains how Christianity’s role in California’s first place-making processes (the establishment of the Spanish Missions and Manifest Destiny” has defined and instated cycles of *geocolonialism*, colonization rooted exploiting California’s affable physical *and* social geographies.

Chapter 3, “Geographic Epochal Conflict in San Francisco,” examines the geographic epochal lens in San Francisco and its western coastline, featured in the story “Graceland.” This chapter explores how San Francisco’s Peninsula contains physical geographic remnants of the ancient Pleistocene epoch (which took place from 2.6 million to 12,000 years ago) while concurrently representing the current Holocene epoch *and* the impending Anthropocene epoch, a theorized epoch defined solely by the negative impacts of human activity. The simultaneous and coexistent physical representations of these epochs argues for a reconciliation of ecocentric rhetoric positing an aggregate death of whatever pristine geographies existed prior to human presence in California.

Altogether, the composite chapters of *Geocriticism in Depictions of the American West* aim to demonstrate how a text’s depiction of extra and intra-literary landscape in its narrative forms a specific geocritical lens. Because these lenses rely on the specificity of the landscapes and narratives of their origin, the diverse settings and differing stories of *Battleborn*, they examine their given texts distinctly and singularly to emphasize how the significance of geographically-led works exist within the particular characteristics of a place. In these differences lie the strength of geocritical exploration, as the spatial differences between these chapters necessitates an exploration of physical and social geographies solely existing under the realm of geocriticism.

I. STRATIGRAPHIC THOUGHT IN THE BLACK ROCK DESERT

I first learned about stratigraphy when classifying rabbit brush and red brome in the Mojave Desert as part of a geography practicum course. My professor Dr. Glen MacDonald pointed to the distinct layers of colorful sediment in the red rock formations, formed from over 50 million years of mineral settlement and exposed when the Garlock Faultline shook the singular deposit into a mosaic of canyons. Strata is like a cake: it's formed layer by layer and understood through expository pieces exhibiting each layer of cake, frosting, rock, sediment, soil — even sprinkles, vegetation, candles, and fauna on the top.

Stratigraphy is the geologic and geographic study of these layers, first formed by Western scientists and developed during the Enlightenment era. To stratigraphists, each layer operates as a microcosm of the environment from which it settled, allowing researchers to characterize ancient landscapes and climate. Stratigraphists first harvest the raw data from a cylindrical core sample from any natural formation composed of organic matter on a range of sites. Stratifications of annual tree rings compose trees; stratifications of nitrogen, carbon, and oxygen deposits trapped in layers of ice compose desert polar ice sheets; stratifications of sand and minerals compose deserts. Of all the available stratified samples in the world — each revealing unique insights into specific environmental histories — only desert stratigraphy provides accessibility to climatic *and* anthropological records alongside long-term chronological data. Desert stratigraphy's intersection between physical and social remnants of ancient environments make the landscapes highly prized geographies for interdisciplinary research and insight into millions of years of environmental and human histories.

Though stratigraphists aim to recreate past climates objectively as environmental historians, the process of world-building most effectively describes their work. In

reverse-engineering environments, stratigraphists imbue geographies like the Black Rock Desert with subjective narratives going as far back as the strata does — so, billions of years.

Subjectivity appears in how stratigraphists describe the physical appearance of an environment, basing their descriptions in scientific inquiry but expanding on that quantitative data with overarching and illustrative depictions. For example, stratigraphists have long researched vast and rich mineral deposit layers on the Black Rock playa⁸, finding aqueous fossils and petrified wood amongst the layers of silt accumulation (Gale). Analyzing these fossil and wood samples has led to the seemingly quantitative, objective conclusion that the desert was once underwater and once a dense forest.⁹ In forming this narrative conclusion, stratigraphists must contextualize these samples, informing their analysis with biases and evidence external to the geography.

However, there is no ensuring the absolute correctness nor objectivity of these deductions; thus, they imbue billions of years of neutral landscapes with human-led characterizations of space and meanings through the process of place-making (Yusoff 239).

Stratigraphy relies on subjectivity in its retellings of earth's narratives; the practice reveals its biases in how it creates, classifies, and ranks the earth's eras (epochs) and materialities neophilically through the geologic Law of Superposition, the law stating that bottom layers of sediment are older than younger surface layers. As each stratum microcosmically represents the environment from which it originated and settled, stratigraphists interpret stratification as an effective rank of earth's eras, physically representing a linear progression from the unevolved,

⁸ The Black Rock is also referred to as one of many “playas” in the Great Basin Desert, an exceptionally low part of the desert where glacier meltwater would drain into as a terminal basin. During the ice ages, North American glaciers would stream into the Great Basin, settle into playas like the Black Rock, and evaporate to leave arid landforms of rich silt, sand, and salt behind. The stratification of these playas is a consequence of the glacial-interglacial cycles, in which Earth's orbital variations would result in alternating periods of cold glacials (ice ages) and warm interglacials (glacier melt) that allowed for the ritual sediment deposit of silt, sand, salts, and minerals. Earth is currently in an interglacial period called the Holocene (Brewer 197).

⁹ See Susan Lindström's article “Submerged Tree Stumps as Indicators of Mid-Holocene Aridity in the Lake Tahoe Basin” for more information on the forested era of the Black Rock playa.

barbaric epochs of yore through the progressive, evolved contemporary (Yusoff 244). Thus, the Law of Superposition allows white, colonial stratigraphists to ‘objectively’ world-build nonwhite societies and ancient earth as primitive and to justify social Darwinism through a comparison of stratally ancient materialities and advanced, surface stratum materialities (Yusoff 83).

Because stratification acts as a physical scale of progression representing the earth’s positive evolution and development, the most valuable stratum is the one most positioned atop all else and closest to the atmosphere (Yusoff 240). Human-centric activities predicated on the logic that superpositioning evidences progression illustrates stratigraphy’s ethos that human progression moves upward and atmospherically: when humans mine and descend below, it is with the explicit goal of bringing wealth to the surface; the world’s most ‘progressive’ societies engage in space exploration and aviation, aiming to bring their first-world citizens physically *higher* than the rest of the world’s earth-dwellers (Yusoff 242–244). In this way, stratification posits that earthly deposits and materialities are not inherently valuable, but gain their wealth upon existing on the surface stratum of worth and participating in Western, hierarchical, surface stratum systems like coloniality, capitalism, and private property ownership.

As stratigraphists developed their practice through the 19th century peak of modern European colonialism and imperialism, physical geographic stratigraphy argued for the natural emergence of a *social* stratification and for the spatialization of racial, and socioeconomic disparity (Yusoff 241). Where the physical stratification of the environment shapes and defines resultant racial and socioeconomic stratification on that given environment is where the geocritical lens of stratigraphic thought begins to take shape. Proliferated colonial systems confirmed the relationality between physical and social formations in its need to group, rank, and classify human-experiences under a unifying plane by a scale giving ‘merit’ to white, affluent,

European powers; in this way, stratigraphy became the single “lexicon” informing and sustaining white colonialism’s scale of progress, thus determining *who* is deserving of ownership and economic and social power (Yusoff 240).

Kathryn Yusoff outlines this process in her book *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race*, applying the lens to modern histories and occurrences of stratified spatialization. Yusoff posits that, when paleontologists argued for the “natural emergence of the social surface” as objective and resultant of their physical stratigraphic research, colonists used the subjective, superimposed sociologic order set forth by stratigraphists to spatialize and physically order racial and socioeconomic classification (Yusoff 241). She uses two historical instances to exemplify the created parallels between physical and social stratification: first, she describes how, during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, white colonial powers kept enslaved Africans in the physical “depths of the strata” by keeping them in *below* in slave ship holds, in the triangular trade’s seabed, in underground dungeons, in mines, and in the earthen digs of plantations and prisons; second, she describes how, when Europeans first began colonizing the Americas, white colonists stole Indigenous land and erased the Indigenous off the earth’s surface so as to bury what they considered barbaric and reimagine the surface stratum more positively (colonized, white, capitalist, etc.).

As researchers have long obsessed over the Black Rock Desert as a landscape ideal for physical stratigraphic exploration, its physical geography and resultant geography makes an ideal subject for Yusoff’s lens of stratigraphic thought. The Black Rock Desert is a subset of the far larger Great Basin Desert, covering nearly all of Nevada in addition to parts of California, Idaho, Oregon, Wyoming, and Mexico. Though one small playa in the sprawling Great Basin, the Black Rock is singularly geologically rich because its geography provides unique intersections of

volcanic activity, mountain ranked, mineralization, lake deposits, geothermal activity, and low elevations (Gale). These intersections, especially the Black Rock's low elevation, distinctly shaped how layered deposits of minerals settled and fossilized on the playa, allowing the playa to feature millions of years worth of ash, clay, silt, sand, and salt deposits (Beck and Jones 161).

When stratigraphists first came to evaluate the Black Rock, their practice came in the form of 19th century western mining, where desperate miners acted as amateur stratigraphists studying the Black Rock's layers to best locate and extract deposits; when formal prospectors found Nevada silver ore, they researched, surveyed, and studied the deposits and the stratigraphy to confirm the rich existence of silver amongst the striation (Smith 152). The 1859 discovery of the Comstock Lode, the first major silver deposit, begot droves of federally and privately funded stratigraphic cartographic projects, and by 1885, stratigraphists had mapped nearly all of Nevada's natural resource deposits (King 384–385).¹⁰

As part of the Silver Boom, stratigraphists and miners established the Silver Camel Mine along the southeastern edge of the Black Rock Desert and mined silver from 1908 through 1915 (Mires 592) (USGS E3). In formalizing stratal exploration and aiming to exploit natural western resources, extractivist and colonizing miners sought to improve the contemporary stratal layer by placing valued stratal deposits onto the surface stratum. As this practice quickly defined Western Nevada, miners formed racial borderlands by establishing extractivist, settler towns whilst displacing Northern Paiute Indigenous Peoples (Numu Peoples). After white miners quickly populated Western Nevada in 1959, Nevadan governance systemically forced Paiutes from their

¹⁰ Geologist Clarence Rivers King extensive mappings of Nevada's stratigraphic deposits and geographies contributed to the founding of the United States Geological Survey; King would serve as the first director of the USGS, map the United States's 40th parallel, and give foundation to all subsequent 20th century exploration through his cartographic practice.

Nevada lands to the newly established Pyramid Lake Reservation, southwest of the Black Rock (Knack 50). Thus, a stratified social hierarchy and social geographic notion of belonging and ownership formed from a systemic extractivist, colonial effort towards disrupting and devaluing the desert's physical stratification for the benefit of those permitted to exist atop the contemporary stratum. White, stratigraphic miners reimagined identities of belonging, exalting white bodies and existence atop the stratification while erasing brown bodily presence from the stratum altogether just as Yusoff posited in her original description of the lens of stratigraphic thought.¹¹

In this way, interconnected and mutually affective physical and social stratifications compose Nevada's Black Rock Desert and the application of Yusoff's lens of stratigraphic thought best analyzes the stakes of these stratifications in informing lived-experience atop the desert's surface stratum. Her lens of stratigraphic thought argues that white coloniality physically spatializes social difference by the same superpositioning logics informing environmental stratigraphic practice. This extra-literary lens is applicable in analyzing intra-literary depictions of desert stratification when considering how a landscape's physical stratifications define its derivative social stratifications, which further beget colonially constructed physical spatializations. This geocritical lens of stratigraphic thought expands on Yusoff's original definition to consider how colonial forces place-make an extra-literary landscape by creating resultant social stratification informed by how those colonial forces interact with that landscape's landforms; an intra-literary analysis of that landscape, therefore, considers the interconnectedness of the landscape's physical and social stratifications and their relationship with environment.

¹¹ See page 13.

Physical and social stratification defines and controls the narrative of Claire Vaye Watkins's "Man-O-War," a short story following the short-lived relationship between an old, white, neo-colonial miner living on the Black Rock who encounters, mines, a young, brown girl. The story begins with Harris, the old and lonely "rock hound," on his ritual 'mining' of fireworks left behind on the playa each morning of the fifth of July as part of Independence Day celebrations. Amongst the fireworks he finds the young, ailing, dehydrated Magda, whose group of fellow degenerate teenagers have left her behind on the playa's surface. Harris takes Magda back to his home and the two begin an unusual friendship that disrupts the social stratifications informing how Magda and Harris relate to each other and to the landscape's physicalities defining their constructed social relationality. As these two disparate characters upset the social stratification the Black Rock enforces, their departure from established social geographic hierarchy rewrites the physical geography's stratification, giving new layers and new meanings to the surface stratum enforcing the stratifications they temporarily break free from. The application of stratigraphic thought to Magda and Harris's experiences of the Black Rock's physical and social geographic stratifications argues that, as physical stratification reinforces the resultant social stratification informing lived-experiences, a disruption of the social stratal systems will dismantle the mutually reinforcing systems, thus redefining the physical surface stratum which Magda and Harris exist from and on.

It is not just the presence and the extra-literary interpretation of the Black Rock Desert geographies which propels the use of the geocritical lens of stratigraphic thought. Watkins uses Harris's view of his world, his lived-experience of the Black Rock Desert as a home and a specific place, to illustrate how the desert's extra-literary stratifications physically and socially impact how Harris navigates the story. First, Harris himself sees the playa through an extractivist

lens and a mining-laden: he navigates the desert landscape by what physical materialities of value exist on the surface stratum as delineated by the colonial extractivism established in the Silver Rush. When Harris drives across the desert, he uses “Ruby Peak” as a navigational north-star and notes the difficulty in navigating a place “each stretch of nothing looking nothing like the next, east looking like south looking like west” (Watkins 122).

The Black Rock Desert is Harris’s entire world — he reveals this overtly when lamenting that he has always lived in the rural Great Basin expanse and dreamed about venturing elsewhere in his youth (Watkins 139–140). However, Harris’s demonstration of knowledge in his navigation of the desert reveals how growing up atop the desert’s physical stratification has dictated his ability to *belong* on a land not his own; he even says describes this to Magda later in the story when she comments on how intimately he knows the physical geography: “ “It’s all Indian land,” he said. “Tehcnically” ” (Watkins 138). Harris’s *belonging* originates in colonial extractivism, as he lives on Native land (decades after Nevada governance violently and forcibly removed the Paiute from the Black Rock and making them foreign), navigates using particular landforms (named after and based in the extractivist discovery of ‘valuable’ materialities unearthed from the stratification), and shows his comfortability on the confusing lands (whilst acknowledging the physical factors contributing toward making the landscape unnavigable for those not benefitting from colonial extractivism).

Watkins emphasizes how colonial extractivism creates stratified processes of belonging in creating a second character who can *belong* on the playa alongside Harris: the Bureau of Land Management supervisor, Harvey Bowman, who is the only other living being endemic to the Black Rock. Harris describes Bowman as a “Jack Mormon” who drives a “BLM Jeep” to scour and monitor the playa (Watkins 126–127). In working for the Bureau of Land Management, a

federal government department managing hundreds of millions of acres of land, particularly in the west, Bowman represents the neo-colonial political interests (the BLM promotes multiple uses of its land, like ranching, recreation, timber harvest, etc.) alongside Harris's private mining aspirations.¹² Bowman's character serves to establish the social stratification derived from human-centric physical stratal disruption. The resultant social stratification establishing notions of *belonging* exist in all neo-colonial forces which place-make the Black Rock from an arid space and former drainage basin into an effectively segregated dormant mine where white inhabitants seek to dismember stratal materialities by their colonial, capitalist pursuits regardless of vocation.

Because colonial ownership of the physical stratification Black Rock encourages Harris to *belong* on the playa and top the social stratification over brown and Indigenous bodies, Harris maintains his extractivist, stratigraphically-based, perspective when he encounters, 'mines', discovers Magda on the playa floor. Harris has already established himself as a kind of miner, a kind of stratigraphist roaming new valuable deposits on the surface stratum, when Watkins introduces us to him. Harris sets out to 'mine' these fireworks, valuable in their own capitalist right *and* valuable in their mineral composition, each year, finding Pyro Pulverizers, Black Cat artilleries, Screamin' Meemies, Fortresses of Fire, Molten Core mortars, Wizards of Ahhhs, and "one Man-O-War, a hard-to-find professional-grade shell pack" (Watkins 121). But amongst these treasures, Harris mines a new materiality lying adjacent to "the pile" of his mined loot (Watkins 123).

Though Harris understands his world through the lens of the mine and recognizes the assigned value to mined items, using an extractivist perspective on how materialities compose

¹² It is worth noting that the vast majority of Nevada lands are owned by the federal government; the Bureau of Land Management manages the majority of federally owned Nevadan land and Nevadan land outright, making it one of the most neo-colonial federal forces affecting place-makings in contemporary Nevadan environments.

the stratified world around him, he finds the most comfort and solace in the physical nature of these deposits, their realness more than their beauty or capitalist value. It is possible that Harris finds such peace in these materialities because that is where he derives his belonging from, his role in the social strata as symptomatic of his ownership over physical strata and physical positionality on the Black Rock. In moments of anxiety and theoretical conversation, Harris avoids the non-real by examining, mining, and rooting himself in digging materialities, “looking absently for something to catch the glint of the sun” (Watkins 139–140). At the end of the day, when viewing the intangible sunset of many colors, Harris acknowledges the objective beauty of the sky, but personally views it nothing but “dust particles, pollution, sunlight prised by the slant of the world” (Watkins 141). Though Harris, far more than the average person, knows the worth of precious gems, ores, jewels, and rocks, he maintains an extensive rock collection of “feldspars, quartzes, olivines, micas...gneiss and granoblastics...shale, siltstones, breccias...limestones, gemstones and his few opals” (Watkins 126).

In shirking the traditional extractivist practice of prioritizing capital gain, Harris shows a neutral, passive, dismissive, or even avoidant attitude when faced with the intangibilities of the world or even the values ascribed to many materialities he knows have surface-stratum worth; though, this passiveness toward personally giving capitalist value toward materialities does not signify Harris’s rejection of or even ignorance toward the colonial extractivist processes that have brought and sustain his being to the playa. Instead, this phenomena speaks to how much Harris’s notions of belonging have informed his life, as he does not consider external capitalist or extractivist occurrences and prefers to main reclusive in the geography which gives him meaning. This understanding calls into question the nuanced notions of Harris’s belonging on the

desert, prompting if, perhaps in the desert entirely forming his identity, Harris belongs *to* the Black Rock Desert.

When Harris discovers Magda, he maintains his extractivist perspective while perpetuating his positionality in the stratified social order, maintaining his sense of belonging, power, and physical position over Magda. First, Harris considers Magda as he would a mined mineral or gem, noting that “her navel was pierced, had one of those dangly pink jewels nestled inside” (Watkins 123). Harris has already demonstrated his propensity toward the materialities considered valuable by extractivist, capitalist coloniality via his ‘mining’ of the fireworks and in allowing the Silver Rush’s colonial legacies of stratal disruption inform and perpetuate his sense of belonging and ownership on land he explicitly does not own — land he should actually exist on as an environmental ‘other’.¹³ His distinct focus on the “pink jewels nestled inside” Magda, as a miner finds gems nestled inside a stratification or a rocky crevice, illustrates his extractivist view of the desert and how his identity rests on extractivist activities in which a desert’s landscape provides valuable materialities for colonizers to extract and deliver to their surface.

Thus, Magda — through Harris’s extractivist perspective — embodies, and *is*, another materiality subject to Harris’s hierarchical ownership of the surface stratum and all that lying physically and socially beneath him. However, though Harris first recognizes the “jewels” and encounters Magda as he would a “mined” good atop the surface stratum, at no point does he ever ascribe value to her or to her materiality (her body). The extent of Harris’s colonial stratal interaction with Magda is based in his social positionality, represented further in how he stands above Magda, lying on the playa floor, and circles her, thus emphasizing how Harris’s physical

¹³ An ‘environmental other’ is an individual or group made to feel or appear unnatural in a given place due to how that locale has been place-made, how physical or social forms have constructed senses of intangible significance around who or what can rightfully exist in a meaning-imbued space. Marginalized communities most often experience being ‘environmental others’: immigrants, persons with disabilities, Indigenous communities, etc.

body existing *above* Magda's represents, and is derived from, the consequences of a physical stratification undergoing colonial intervention.

Harris's extractivist lens demonstrates that Magda exists as an environmental other, as colonial-led activity on the playa has formally expelled brown bodies like hers from rightfully belonging in the Black Rock's space and has made them foreign objects. Her initial bodily discovery, her lips that "were dry and cracked white as the lake bed itself" and the sun beginning to burn her hot skin, creates a nearly surreal image of the Black Rock killing Magda by absorbing her into its strata and away from navigating life atop the surface. The first impression Harris gives us of Magda, other than the fact that she looks like a young, Mexican girl, is her inability to survive without him, on a land once entirely belonging to brown bodies. Harris also characterizes Magda by her association with the firework kids, the boys who would get so drunk they would leave their fireworks behind after "they'd drink like men, like their fathers and uncles, like George fucking Washington" (Watkins 122). For Harris, this archetypal group of local kids — hailing from "Gerlach, Nixon, Lovelock and Indian kids from the Paiute res" — do not (and cannot) exist on their local playa unless they assume a pseudo-colonial positionality emulating Harris and Bowman, all American-figures using the land for colonial use (Watkins 121). The closest that brown bodies may come to 'belonging' on the stratified Black Rock is through a performance of drunk, colonial whiteness on the most American day of the year.

Harris continues to 'mine' (investigate) Magda, considering her a kind of motherlode discovery as he finds companionship possibly worth more than even the elusive Man-O-War firework. In getting to know her physically and emotionally — he carefully describes and reflects on her beauty and her body, and listens to her rants about a lackluster and careless boyfriend — Harris still evaluates Magda through an extractivist lens, investigating the stratal

layers of her foreign body as a stratigraphist researches a foreign deposit within desert strata, though he still refuses to give her materiality any ascribed value. With her “pink jewels” comprising her outermost strata, Harris then discovers her metal fillings and “a solid silver molar” the same way a Nevadan miner finds a silver ore in a subterranean Black Rock mine (Watkins 129). The more Harris ‘mines’ and analyzes Magda’s physical and emotional layers, the more Harris positions her as a foreign object he is willing to accept on the surface stratum of his belonging. His acceptance of Magda as a brown, bodily materiality and as person, atop a physical stratification intent on erasing or othering Indigenous bodies, disrupts the social stratification embedded into the Black Rock. Furthermore, this acceptance gives a new ascribed value to Magda’s *intangible* offerings, her companionship and company manifested within her material body (which grows more and more of a belonging as Harris ascribes more value to Magda’s presence in his world, on the surface stratum of the playa).

This acceptance occurs over the course of two days, where Harris demonstrates a marked interest in wanting Magda’s approval, when he achieves by demonstrating his knowledge of and belonging to the Black Rock’s surface stratum. He takes her to a secret swimming hole only he is privy to and cooks her a sunset dinner (Watkins 138–141). Harris’s demonstrations of belonging to Magda signal a disruption of the social stratification as Harris navigates them through the landscape. His wanting to please and even be subservient to Magda is the text’s first major social stratal reversal, illustrating that the growing bond between Magda and Harris — initiated by Harris bringing Magda into his lived-experience of *belonging* on the playa where Magda had previously been an environmental other — serves to accomplish something greater than the creation of a mere, unlikely friendship. Harris ascribing value to an intangibility, despite the pervasiveness and all-consuming nature of his extractivist worldview, in addition to him wanting

to use his belonging to usher the excluded Magda into his world and within his social stratification marks a decided turn in how Harris chooses to experience the relational strata of his home, the Black Rock Desert.

Harris's acceptance of Magda still lies in his extractivist lens, as his view of the world remains inseparable from internalizations of stratigraphy-led mining. But only after seeing Magda's *intangible* value can he also understand her material and bodily value in a more equitable way, demonstrative of his acceptance of Magda onto his physical stratum and thus his social stratum. When he discovers Magda is pregnant, he compares her belly to a geode, as developing internally without exposure to the surface stratum (Watkins 130). Later, when she sweeps her hand across her belly, she does so in "the way a person might brush the dirt from a fossil to expose the mineralized bones underneath" (Watkins 137). In comparing Magda, and what lies beneath her bodily surface stratum, to two precious, valued materialities discovered in stratigraphic exploration (geodes and fossils), Harris uses his extractivist lens to emphasize the value he places on Magda's personhood; he places an evidently high value on Magda through the direct comparisons Harris makes between her personhood and treasures of the strata, but also in how he imagines a future with Magda where the two of them jointly raise the baby, belong on the playa, and enrich Harris's lived experience on the surface stratum as his most valuable discovery yet: "though he knew better, deep down in the bedrock of himself, he couldn't help it. He thought, She will need a stroller. She will need a car seat. How the barren cling to the fertile. We, he thought, we will need a crib" (Watkins 145).

Though Harris's want to bring Magda into his life appears paternalistic or a part of his role on the Black Rock strata seeking ownership and deriving wealth from uncovered treasures, his comparisons of Magda's body to stratal treasures serve to elevate her positionality atop the

Black Rock's stratum rather than assert ownership. When Harris describes Magda's body as a valuable fossil or geode emerging from underneath a superpositioned layer, he sees her brown body as breaking from the social stratification which has erased her body entirely. For Harris, Magda's body bears unseen internal beauty and value, revealed in the time spent together in which Harris has begun to reimagine her role from an environmental other into a valued materiality celebrated on the surface stratum.¹⁴ At this point in Harris and Magda's relationship, Harris has completely reimaged how his experiences derived from the formative stratifications of his life inform his lived experiences with Magda; in first finding value in her intangible offerings, accepting her on his (or near his) social stratum, and *then* ascribing value to her materiality as a "mined" entity (which we know Harris often sees as neutral or comforting, rather than as entirely exploitative), Harris has redefined the original stratigraphic thoughts constructing his entire world, his entire Black Rock desert.

Thus, Magda and Harris's relationship — through redefining ascriptions of capitalist value and giving way for a white, extractivist, colonial force to foster a sense of belonging for an Indigenous, environmental other erased from the physical and social strata almost entirely — reshapes the interactions between the Black Rock's physical stratification and its resultant social stratification. The interchanges between Harris and Magda on the stratum culminate in a final attempt to reverse the process of stratigraphic thought and redefine how the Black Rock's stratigraphy enforces social geographies of belonging. This stratal subversion comes when Harris ignites the Fourth of July fireworks which he originally mined, which are composed of valuable

¹⁴ I feel a responsibility to note that, even though Harris never romantically or sexually acts on Magda and that the two of them are reimagining their role in the social stratification, their relationship will always be power imbalanced and, frankly, weird — weird on the basis of Harris being a bit of a freak, but also because of the particular violences Indigenous and brown women experience at the hands of white men in the United States, especially near and around Native reservations.

mineralities, and which he associates with Magda and her original one notion of belonging bringing her to the Black Rock in the first place:

“That green? That’s barium powder,” ... Another shell rocketed into the sky—*boom*—raining down a brilliant hissing red.

He bent his face to her ear. “Strontium,” [...]

They burst—*boom—boom—boom*—into two spheres of light, one a steady-burning fountain of blue, and the other wiry spokes of purple turning orange.

“What’s that one?” Magda whispered.

“The blue is copper,” he said. “Pure ground copper.”

The last four shells whizzed into the air, all at once. When they burst—*boom—boom—boom—boom—boom*—Magda jumped a little and buried herself into him. Harris turned to see her face, his home, the whole wide valley lit by dazzling yellow light. He held her.

“And that one?” she whispered.

“That,” he said. “That’s gold.” (Watkins 144)

This tender moment between Harris and Magda, when considering the larger stratigraphic stake affecting physical and social strata in the desert, illustrates the myriad of ways in which Harris has reconsidered the role of striation in his life. First, where before Harris would possibly sell, most likely just keep, the fireworks — still acknowledging their capitalist value — his lighting of the fireworks and erasure of their surface-stratum value shows a disregard for the stratal systems he has defined his life by. This disregard for those colonial systems is even more

potent as he disregards these systems *for Magda*, a person those systems aim to erase from the strata and keep from benefitting from stratal deposits. Second, when Harris lights this firework tribute to please Magda, he superpositions her wants, needs, desires, and lived-experiences over his own by reimagining the Black Rock's stratification to include the atmosphere as the ultimate stratal layer. As this atmospheric act erases the fireworks' capitalist value, creates a shared ownership over the fireworks and their ignition, reimagines an activity previously delineated as specific to one excluded and stratially erased demographic, and simply seeks to please Magda, Harris's atmospheric dedication to Magda illustrates how their intangible connection encourages him to reimagine the social role of stratification altogether.

Furthermore, when Harris lights the fireworks, he deconstructs them into the valuable earthen materialites used to give the fireworks their color, definition, and purpose. As these materialities (barium, strontium, copper, and gold) fall to the desert floor, they return to and enrich the stratification from which extractivists forcibly removed them, further illustrating how Harris's lighting of the fireworks disrupts colonial stratal systems. As Harris and Magda have formed a relationship that subverts the social stratigraphic positioning that have defined the rules of their existence and belonging, their intangibility effectualizes a sedimentary change that will forever be embedded as one stratal layer, one component of history, in an environment that will preserve that narrative for thousands, if not millions, of years.

Lastly, this literary moment in which Harris and Magda subvert the colonial stratigraphic systems takes a stratified, textual form. In creating a textual landform which readers disseminate meaning from during the process of reading (place-making), the dialogue between Harris and Magda physically constitutes equitable sediment deposits and layering, with Magda and Harris equally contributing toward creating a physical literary form representative of a change in a

physical geography *and* the resultant social geography, though Harris and Magda's subversion has made it so a change in the Black Rock's physical geography (and in the text's physical geography, as there have been no prior textual forms taking such stratified, sedimented shape) derives from new notions of belonging redefining Harris's and Magda's lived experiences in the stratified social geography.

Despite Harris and Magda revolutionizing their relationship to each other, and thereby to the land of the Black Rock, their progress is short lived and temporary. Magda's abusive father finds her the morning after the fireworks display and drives her away Harris, with the latter only noting that "a pale cloud of dust behind it swelled, then settled, then disappeared. She was gone" (Watkins 151). Magda's forced exit from the Black Rock and re-entry to her own stratified life — determined as such in part from the Black Rock Desert's effect on her lived experience in rural Nevada, but also resultant from external social structures, such as those existing between father and daughter — thus creates a new layer of sediment that re-covers the surface stratum. This new stratal layer both works to fossilize Magda and Harris's revolutionary, singular layer of stratal subversion in the not-so-distant past, while erasing it from tangible memory; these histories, the narratives between Harris and Magda, will always exist, but they will never speak as clearly nor as personally as they did during that one night of total stratal subversion.

The application of stratigraphic thought towards Harris and Magda's relationship with each other and with the physical and social geographies of the stratal Black Rock argues that revolutionary departure from stratigraphic thought, through processes of stratal subversion, first creates social stratal change, then resultant physical stratal change. As Yusoff has revealed how an environment's physical stratification both creates and reveals mutually relational social stratification and as "Man-O-War" has illustrated this geologic lens's applicability to geocritical

literature, an inextricable intersection between socioeconomic and racial difference, physical environment, literary depiction, and place-making, textual interpretation exists. Stratal subversions can and should occur in any part of this inextricable intersection; when it does, new literary strategies of resistance emerge that seek to re-order how colonial place-makings maintain their social control over an environment or look to enact environmental regeneration that deconstructs the encoding of superpositions informing human-centric activities in a shifting, dynamic, stratal American West.

II. RELIGIOUS GEOCOLONIALISM IN THE SIERRA NEVADA FOOTHILLS

Californian youth is specifically shaped by two historical events: the Spanish Missions and the Gold Rush. The mere mention of these two colonial systems beckons in fourth-grade memories of creating a to-scale diorama of Mission San Antonio de Padua and trekking to Coloma's South Fork of the American River to attempt to pan for gold. The Missions and the Gold Rush have adversely affected this Californian and most others like me. Arguably more importantly, these two events forged California's entry into the union and provided the emergent state with its formative histories, cultures, infrastructures, industries, trade, laws, religions, and *people*. Thus, the Missions and the Gold Rush have adversely affected and constructed every part of the California we know today, beyond fourth grade classrooms.

Californians often consider the Missions and the Gold Rush two disparate events separated by their contrasting geographies: the Spanish built the Missions along the California coastline while the Gold Rush encouraged mining in California's eastern half in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Despite the difference in their locale and physical geography, Christianity and religious colonization has motivated and informed colonial activity across Californian landscapes by promoting the same cycles of religious inaugurations and geographic manipulation: in happening upon a seemingly "pristine" California landscape, colonists "discovered" Edenic physical *and* social geographies, positioning them as such because of the potential to reap, extract, change, and civilize the existing geographies in the likeness of European idyllicism. These religious geocolonial processes go as far back as Columbus's discovery of a pure, untouched New World primed for civilizing European settlement and primitive Native Americans ripe for Christian conversion. The religious geocolonial cycles of the Spanish Mission and Gold Rush are the most influential processes affecting ongoing colonial

projects in California landscapes. In their respective transformations and attempts to realize these geographies from Edenic to Edens¹⁵, they continue to inform contemporarily occurring cycles of neo- religious geocolonialism specific to the abundance of natural resources of the American West.

The corrupt nature of these colonial practices — in using a religious guise to degrade physical and social geographies for economic or political gain — make these colonial pursuits of the Edens inherently falsified and adulterated. Colonizers were, and are, incorrect in glorifying and deifying California as an Eden, the one biblical “promised land” locale meant to be unobtainable and flawless. California is neither flawless nor limitless in its abundance, but an earthly land requiring mutual partnerships with and investments from its occupants.¹⁶ In this way, cycles of religious colonization have positioned California as a False Eden, thus corrupting their own religious values and embedding those corruptions into lasting physical and social geographies begetting succeeding religious geocolonial cycles. Each of these cycles results in avaricious corruption, as any religious colonialism based on these religious *and* geographic corruptions ultimately self-cannibalizes and dies by the same sword it once lived by.¹⁷

Religious colonialism defined and informed all European and American ‘discoveries’ of the uncharted New World, posing California as a mysterious and exotic land. Spanish missionaries and Westward Expansion Era explorers and miners predicated their movement toward and within California on the idea that only by delivering religious salvation to these

¹⁵ I have derived this specific, cyclical geocritical lens from the greater scholarly exploration of religious colonialism in California. More information on the religious colonial relationships between Californian lands, the Spanish, the Westward Expansion can be found in Kent G. Lightfoot’s book *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants* and Robert J. Miller’s book *Native America, Discovered and Conquered*.

¹⁶ This argument towards positioning of California’s lands as necessitating mutualism and human investment arises as a response to colonial romanticism, the European romanticization of foreign and exotic landscapes, and to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic, the philosophy shifting human role in environment from “conquerer” to “plain member and citizen” in recognition of the complexity of biotic communities — see Aldo Leopold’s book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949).

¹⁷ “Those who live by the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

barbaric lands could they fulfill God's will, using this ethos to justify extractivist colonial activity bringing global capitalism and economic pursuits to untouched lands. The Spanish Empire conducted California's first colonization through the establishment of the Mission System, a series of religious settlements lining the Pacific coast from present-day San Diego to Marin County. Starting in the 16th century Exploration Age and continuing through the 19th century, Spain extensively explored California looking for idyllic geographies composed of rich natural resources — gold, arable lands, hardwoods, minerals, and spices — that could benefit Spain's global economies, house growing mission settlements, and convert affable Native Americans to Christianity. The primary goal of the Spanish Empire, missionaries, Franciscans, and explorers was to exploit California's physical and social geographic resources under the guise of religious devotion and the perennial search for gold.¹⁸ While the Spanish Empire failed to fully discover and exploit California's gold deposits, it succeeded in its conspicuous religious goal of converting Natives, entering them into the Spanish social order, and capitalizing off their religious devotion and labor (Treutlin 292).

These same corrupt religious motivations to discover, conquer, tame, and exploit Californian geographies reappeared in the Westward Expansion Era, the second cyclical iteration of religious geocolonialism in California. This era, characterized by Americans' push toward and claim of the West, started nationally with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and started in California with Jedediah Smith's 1827 expedition of the Sierra Nevada. In the wake of the Spanish Empire's systematic conversions and mission establishments, American colonizers seeking California as a new world rooted their religious colonialism in Manifest Destiny: the philosophy

¹⁸ This perennial search is still embedded in California's lived experience through the name "California" itself, with Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés naming the land after a mythical paradise featured in the popular Spanish romance novel *Las Sergas de Esplandián* by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo. Cortés named California as such believing that the abundance of gold in the landscape would actualize California into the paradise it was named after. See Tirey L. Ford's 1926 novel, *Dawn and Dons; The Romance of Monterey*,

motivating the Westward Expansion Era, stating that God had destined and entitled Americans to explore and conquer the Wild West. This entitlement grew further with the 1848 discovery of California gold, initiating the Gold Rush and catalyzing the establishment of gold-seeking, capitalist settlements built on the backbone of the Manifest Destiny ethos.

As desires for geographic exploitation hid behind missionaries' and miners' overt religious motivations, these two colonial forces sought to transform Californian landscapes into their definition of an idyllic landscape as God sought to create humans in His likeness (Genesis 1:26). This transformation came through in *which* physical and social geographic landscapes colonial forces sought to transform. For the Spanish Empire, their manipulation first through isolating specific mission lands based on two general criteria, ideal physical and social geographies, established in conjunction by Spanish Royalty, the Catholic Church, and the explorers themselves; together, this council grouped the prerequisites for political, Christian, and economic success under the single mission of forging an interconnected network of religious outposts. The prerequisites described an idealized, Edenic land able to sustain holy, religious practice: 'friendly' Natives, arable land, navigable and resourceful topography, proximity to other missions, and trade waters access (Gentilcore 46). This intertwining of priorities — political, religious, and economic — reveals the corruption inherent to the Mission system, as missionaries advertised and maintained that the missions were a solely religious project.

The Spanish Empires' sole search and isolation of potential mission geographies was consequential and informative, as this initial exploration stage of religious colonialism place-made California lands for all subsequent cycles of religious geocolonialism, especially the Gold Rush. While Spain built the missions along the coast, far from the sites of the goldfields, lesser known Spanish expeditionaries like Gabriel Moraga and Fray Pedro Muñoz

ventured into the Central Valley and into the Sierra Nevada foothills with the goal of scouting land for an inland mission system to parallel those hugging the coastline, using the same guidelines and prerequisites as previous explorers to identify ideal physical geographies of potent water, lush forage, and arable land in conjunction with ideal social geographies of potential proselyte Native Americans (Muñoz 223–224).

The Moraga expedition found these Edenic traits in the Sierra Nevada foothills and by the Tuolumne and Merced Rivers, present-day Mariposa and Calaveras Counties (Muñoz 228–233). Through the religious colonial lens of Spanish Mission exploration, Muñoz wrote about “excellent [grass covered lands] suitable for planting and grazing ... an abundance of cherries,” and gentle Native Americans who “want a mission and desire to be baptized” (Muñoz 233-239). Each of these descriptions, sourced directly from Muñoz’s diary, illustrate how biblical descriptions of Eden informed missionaries’ search of ideal geographies. Muñoz’s description, of naive men and women living on abundant land along a river, echoes Genesis 2’s description of Eden almost exactly. Moraga and Muñoz’s exploration and ‘discovery’ of these geographies ideal for religious geocolonial manipulation was consequential even without the establishment of missions or discovery of gold: Muñoz’s descriptions of the Sierra Nevada geographies world-built the landscapes through his religious colonial perspective, permeating his perspectives the land throughout the western world and encouraging western settlement; and Moraga’s expedition motivated colonial settlement through the colonial practice of trailblazing, forcibly changing the physical landscape and social interpretation of the environment by creating a single route and rhetoric of exploration.

When the Moraga Expedition named trails, rivers, valleys, and Indigenous villages in maps, reports, royal and church communications, they reimagined an uncharted California land

from “a pristine empty space, devoid of influence” into a conquered *landscape*, a mutually understood geography existing within a “shared public discursive experience” (Boggs 32). In their trailblazing, the Moraga Expedition made the unknown geographies collectively known under a single, common interpretation; these interpretations function equally to Muñoz’s narratives, as both use that religious colonial lens in pursuit of Edenic landscapes and inform their social geographies by encouraging colonial entitlement. These colonial trails and European names persisted through the next stages of California’s and the Sierra Nevada’s colonization, as Westward Expansion Era expeditionaries traveled to and through California with the same religious entitlement and by the same trails established by the Spanish.

As part of their own process of effectualizing their ideal physical and social geographies, the proceeding religious geocolonial Gold Rush cycle similarly cultivated wild landscapes in their extractivist mission. First, Forty-Niners and Westward Expansion expeditionaries used the Spanish Empire’s colonial trails, and expanded upon them, through the same trailblazing processes. Jedediah Smith was one of a litany of Manifest Destiny-motivated trailblazers who traveled through existing and pioneered new trails in efforts to map and conquer the American West, as best summarized by the pioneer and missionary Thomas Flint in 1825: “Nothing can or will limit the immigration westward, but the Western Ocean” (Clark 3). However, where the Spanish missionaries sought to position the California wilderness as idyllic and Edenic through a religious settlement process directly emulating biblical depictions of landscape, the Forty-Niners sought a newly developed physical and social geographic place uniquely characterized by their own demographic.

The process of transforming, manipulating, and mining this physical geography attempted to realize the Edenic potential of the western Sierra Nevada foothills into an Eden

reality, a social geography where men could experience the egalitarianism and wealth defining their ideal, atypical society. The emergent and alternative settlements, however, resulted from social structures based in the collective belief in religiously-led entitlement to land and resources, the existence of an abundance of gold and other natural resources, and the egalitarian labor efforts required to extract those resources. Through this collective belief, mining camps contain social geographies based in privatism, self-governance, and social equilibrium, giving new relief to populations of miners suffering under traditional American socioeconomic class systems and social rigidity in the east (Gressley 435). Rumors of the miners' classless and egalitarian societies catalyzed the religious colonialism encouraging miners to practice western extractivism; thus, these unique 'Edenic' social geographies proliferated the idea of available, opportune wealth alongside the actual physical presence of gold, dually contributing towards the Gold Rush's explosion from a population of 15,000 to over 250,000 by 1951 (Gressley 433–435). Under the guise of the Manifest Destiny ethos, the promise of gold, and the idyllism of an otherworldly geography characterized by abundance, freedom, equality, and opportunity, the Gold Rush encouraged a specific, religiously-led settlement of California echoing the Spanish Missions in innovative fashion.

But the creation of this Edenic social geography required a physical geographic manipulation, encouraging miners to destroy the Sierra Nevada, leaving the land gashed and scarred, the soil depleted, the trees logged, the rivers polluted, and the wildlife endangered (Starr 65). The process of realizing this Eden meant the Sierra Nevada goldfields became characterized by an "essential selfishness and underlying instability, a fixation upon the quick acquisition of wealth," and the idea that God had destined these men to do so (Starr 65). These consequences of attempts at Edenic effectualization place-made the Sierra Nevada foothills atop the existing

legacies left from the Spanish missionaries, whose persistent trails, place-names, and mappings made their cycle of Edenic religious settlement a permanent fixture within proceeding lived-experiences of the foothills.

When each of these cycles of religious geocolonialism landed in the Sierra Nevada foothills, the colonizers of the Spanish Missions and the Gold Rush similarly positioned the physical and social geographies as Edenic through their economic pursuits veiled under the guise of religious expansion. Cycles of colonizers went forth in their physical and social geographic manipulation with this intentional corruption in mind, looking to capitalize on the characteristics of given landscapes with the overt goal of religious expansion and the subsequent goals of growing their economies and political prowess. However, in conducting the mission settlements and the goldcamps, the Spanish Empire and the Forty-Niners religiously corrupted themselves first by positioning California as a limitless Eden dedicated to their pursuits, then by using Christianity as a primary means by which to effect physical and social geographic manipulation for economic pursuits.

Though its geographies possess great wealth, lushness, and ability to sustain life, there are no inherently religious qualities to the Californian landscape, despite this being what colonizers falsely predicated their developments on; it is more accurate, and righteous, to position California lands as akin to an Ophir, a land laden with resources and gold, rather than a Promised Land. When colonizers from the Spanish Empire and the Westward Expansion Era falsely positioned Californian geographies as Edenic, using religiously corrupt motivations to manipulate and destroy landscape as part of transforming physical and social geographies to reflect that of Eden, cyclically forces these colonizers into an inevitable avaricious downfall. Through this specific cannibalizing religious corruption, rooted in Californian and Sierra Nevada

landscapes, I have defined a specific analytic lens through which we can analyze how those landscapes still experience these legacies: religious geocolonialism as a geocritical process.

Applying this cyclically informed religious geocolonialist lens to extra-literary or narrative depictions of Californian colonial events reveals how sequences of religious geocolonialism — that is, religious colonialism explicitly benefitting from the inherent qualities and manipulation of a given space's physical and social landscapes — reoccur and influence the subsequent colonial activity on and the perception of that land. The use of this geocritical lens argues that California's geographies experience geocolonialism continuously and cyclically with neo-colonial efforts being sustained in the first religious colonial efforts beginning 300 years ago. This lens argues that recurring religious geocolonial cycles posit that white Americans recreate and exist in the legacies of California's prior religious geocolonizers, using religion to position California as an Eden in their respective, selfish, avaricious pursuits. By using religious corruption to create this False Eden, manipulating endemic physical and social geographies, white colonizers create lasting cycles of religious colonialism to control California's landscapes.

As the religious geocolonial lens resists defining California as an Eden — refusing to do so because giving legitimacy to that positioning allows colonial forces to corrupt Christian attributes for extractivist, exploitative human-centric activities — I argue that a purer religious lens would position the landscapes as akin to an Ophir, a biblical land particularly wealthy in exotic resources and gold.¹⁹ The Bible, though praising Ophir as a city uniquely abundant in natural resources, like gold, does not exalt, nor glorify, nor explicitly feature this land in its texts. Instead, the text refers to the Ophir as a plentiful supplier of gold, silver, ivory, wood, and precious stones — nearly all of which colonialists sought to extract and export from California beginning with Hernán Cortés (Christopher Columbus in a larger, encompassing view of the

¹⁹ “The servants of Solomon who brought gold from Ophir brought algum wood and precious stones” (2Ch 9:10).

New World) and continuing through contemporary extractive processes like logging and oil drilling. Positioning California as an Ophir biblically recognizes the superb wealth and lushness inherent to the state's physical geographies, especially in the Sierra Nevada, while maintaining its identity as an earthen state necessitating equitable relationships between human-interest and environmental preservation; some scholars have positioned other western mining regions in Utah and Nevada Ophirs, arguing that this comparison arose from Mormon populations become avid miners in the 19th century (Francaviglia). Despite the nearer accuracy of this biblical framing, California's colonizers have embedded these religious geocolonial cycles, through geographic manipulation, so deeply that they persist through neo-colonial systems like the National Parks; thus, the geographic legacies of Spanish Mission system and Gold Rush persistently define the Sierra Nevada as an Edenic Promised Land.

The Boyle brothers, Claire Vaye Watkins's characters from her historical surrealist short story "The Diggings," enact a religious geocolonial cycle of their own during the Gold Rush, responding to the Spanish Mission system's Gabriel Moraga and Fray Pedro Muñoz, the Westward Expansion Era's Jedediah Smith. In their journey to and within the Sierra Nevada and mining town Angels Camp, the brothers Joshua and Errol position the wilderness as an abundant Eden destined to bring them successful profit. In actuality, they undergo a series of trials and self-destructing religious corruptions, with Joshua attempting to maintain his Christian faith and devotion while Errol begins worshipping the gold as god almost immediately and entirely. The Sierra Nevada wilderness challenges Joshua and Errol's differing faiths and sanities, until Errol reaches a breaking point in his false idoltry and descends into mining camp madness, a descent coinciding with the miners having exhausted the physical geography's resources and whatever idyllicism existed within the mining camp's social geography.

The Boyle brothers first position the Sierra Nevada wilderness as an abundant Eden through Edenic, yet entirely storied, descriptions of the landscape's rich physical geography and egalitarian social geography before they journey towards California. Joshua can only describe this kind of abundance religiously, framing California through his own Christian inclinations, saying, "in California gold was what God was in the rest of the country: everything, everywhere" (Watkins 184). As the brothers move through the trails towards the goldfields, they aim to physically move through the same rhetorics and lived-experiences established by and perpetuating the influence of the original religious colonial trailblazers: Gabriel Moraga, Fray Pedro Muñoz, Jedediah Smith. Joshua's religious narration, in tandem to the brothers' physical embodiment of the westward explorers, invokes the previous eras' religious geocolonialism in the Sierra Nevada so that each stage of the brothers' journey exists within the cyclical parameters set forth by their predecessors.

This first stage arises in Joshua's Christian identity, his devoutness paralleling the religious motivations of the Spanish missionaries and the Manifest Destiny explorers, while Errol's worshipping of gold parallels the religious corruption of those same forces and their extractivist coloniality; Joshua's parallels to devoutness exist within Errol's parallels to religious corruption and geographic destruction, thus signalling that the first stage of the brothers' journey marks the inevitable corruption of Joshua's Christian devoutness. Joshua equating California gold with a godly, omnipresent force which exists in "everything, everywhere" — referring to how men worship gold as their god — illustrates his descent into religious corruption. This worshipping of gold, this ethos, is what Errol prescribes to as devoutly as a priest, or as devoutly as Joshua believes in God, and while Joshua's religious corruption is slower to the take, Errol's gold-obsessed characterization serves to represent the droves of men willing to undergo personal

and religious corruption for capitalist, economic gain. Therefore, while motivations and processes behind the brothers' dual descent into religious corruption seem disparate, they are driven by the same geographies and exist within the inevitable cycle constructed for them over centuries of alike religious geocolonialism.

Joshua further undergoes religious corruption in believing in the supposed Edenic social geographic nature of the gold camps, noting that California is distinct and apart from "the rest of the country." This narrative points to how potential miners made California's landscapes singular and 'promised' by deifying the land's physical geographic features and derivative social geographic features. Men made California 'Edenic' via the rich presence of gold in the land, rivers, and valleys and via the egalitarian, lawless social order resulting from classless abundance in a land not yet made an American state. Here was the opportunity for any man, regardless of family history or class, to conquer an undeveloped, untouched, pure land and find wealth amongst a group of similar lads looking to do the same.

The goldfields gained a reputation as egalitarian and opportunistic, given that "unskilled, uneducated, and penniless men" could gather up to five hundred dollars in gold per day at the same rate as anyone else in the mining camp (Shinn 108). Men saw the goldfields as Edenic not just because of their religious colonial history or their abundance of wealth or the lushness of the Sierra Nevada land they sat on, but because "the mines put all men for once upon a level" and the materialities and niceties of traditional society were left behind, "clothes, money, manners, family connections, letters of introduction, never before counted for so little" (Shinn 110). The physical abundance of the California goldfields ushered in new social geographies that, for these poor and luckless men, felt Edenic in their freedom from the social boundaries of conventional life. Therefore, the miners' belief that the goldfields exhibited a conjunction of abundant

physical geographies of wealth and the egalitarian, social geographies of socioeconomic freedom made the mines feel *Edenic*, or at least religiously blessed under the guise of the religious factors bringing them there (and thus encouraging false worship and personal corruption in the pursuit of the blessed gold). “Don’t you see,” Errol says to Joshua after they arrive in the Camp and begin their search for gold, “this is the greatest church there is” (Watkins 225).

This was the same logic the Spanish missionaries predicated their mission projects on, using rich physical geographic landscapes as means which to give lower-classes — barbaric Native Americans, by their colonial view — access to new social geographies and abundance; again, missionaries constructed this systematic conversion process under the guise of pure religious expansion, but would perform acts of religious corruption in using converted populations for extractivist and exploitative geographic activities enriching the Spanish Empire. However, this abundance — even in the biblical sense — is not solely attributed to the Eden, but also to the Ophir, the landscape characterized solely by abundance of natural resources, particularly gold. The difference between the positioning of California as an Eden versus an Ophir lies in the Ophir’s lack of religious promise nor God; instead, the landscape represents idyllic physical geographies of gold-laden lands. In this way, though the Sierra Nevada foothills are best biblically positioned as an Ophir, California’s religious geocolonialists sought the Edenic positioning in the praxis of justifying their enacting of religious entitlement in beginning extractivist activities resulting in systemic economic, political, and religious gain.

Having the Edenic goldfields in mind — Joshua still invoking his devout, Christian faith in his personal journey toward Angels Camp and Errol still foaming at the mouth for gold — the two set out on a trek from Ohio to the western Sierra Nevada to effectualize their own gold-laden destinies in the rumored Eden. When the brothers face a series of wilderness trials alongside

another westward-ho company, Joshua frames the journey to California religiously, characterizing their trailblazing as a pilgrimage and an Old Testament pursuit of a Promised Land. They first camp in the harsh, arid Hundred Mile Desert (Carson Sink), struggling with lack of food and water just as the Israelites did in biblical deserts of Sin and Sinai in their search of “the Promised Land” (Watkins 186–187) (Exodus 16). This pilgrimage also directly echos the months- and even years-long pilgrimages undertaken by Spanish explorers and Manifest Destiny expeditionaries; the works of Moraga, Muñoz, and Smith are entirely based around the explorations of, mappings of, experiences in, and struggles during their expeditions toward discovering the Promised Lands they always held in the front of mind (classified as such by vulnerable and abundant physical and social geographies). Thus, the pilgrimage towards Edenic Angels Camp marks another mandatory stage of the brothers’ inevitable journey towards completing another cycle of religious geocolonialism.

When the majority of the company leave the brothers and wagons behind in search of water, Joshua presumes the company left them behind entirely, waiting for them to die: “we had been deserted, left to die in that sink, thirsty and scalpless” (Watkins 187). This is the first appearance of the physical geography of the west, and its appearance gives the brothers a biblical style trial and begins to disillusion them from Edenic glorification of the west. Their desert thirst parallels the plights of the Old Testament Israelites, who believed they would starve to death in their wilderness journey (Exodus 16:3). Joshua’s allusions and comparisons to the Israelites’ pilgrimage further argues for against Edenic positioning and for understanding California as an Ophir because of their journeying toward an attainable locale of abundance rather than the singular and purposefully unobtainable garden (Exodus 3).

There exists difference between the two pilgrimages, though both groups contained travelers which entered a desert wilderness, experienced drought and hunger, and believed that their leaders had left them to die in their pursuit of a promised land; this difference arises in how Joshua and Errol's journey stays inherently false, as they pursue a False Eden (instead of a genuine land, an Ophir) and glorify that land as part of their colonial practice. This practice is based in the coloniality of trailblazing, in which the men exploit and extract from, and change the physical lands they occupy so that they may reach the deified destination. In this physical manipulation, the brothers physically trailblaze with the social intention of seeking a blessed land, thus recreating the journeys of Gabriel Moraga and Jedediah Smith.

Amidst the struggles of their pilgrimage, Joshua reveals that he has long experienced auguries, strange predictive visions that constitute "a form of prophecy" and provide him with uncompromised truths and means of survival (Watkins 187). Joshua does not consider these auguries Christian, speaking about them separately from his devout Christian practice and recalling that his auguries appear in times of relatively insignificant conflict and with little Christian significance. Joshua's first augury of the trip prophesies stormy, mountainous deaths when the rest of the company wishes to bridge the Carson Sink and cross the Sierra Nevada so that they may descend into the western foothills. Joshua delivers Errol his prophecy as if Errol were his apostle: "We cannot go with them ... I had seen his dead body in those mountains as clearly as I saw his live one before me now" (Watkins 189). A few days later, Joshua and Errol starve from the desert floor while watching a storm rage over the mountains, learning the company died in the mountains (Watkins 190). This is not the first augury and divine truth of "The Diggings," but the first augury in Joshua's life that he considers momentous, meaning the auguries have gained significance as Joshua ventures westward towards the falsely Edenic

Promised Land. This debut of the augury also shows the power it has over Errol as it appears only *like* a message from God, though Joshua maintains a secular view of his auguries and forgoes any likeness between him and an Old Testament, Moses-style prophet.

The augury eventually leads the brothers through more pilgrimage style trials in the desert shadow of the Sierra Nevada, until God rewards them with them with a “rescuing she-ass,” a burro with “the black cross of Bethlehem” who leads them to a meltwater river (the Carson River) on the Sabbath, a day of biblical significance meant for rest and worship (Watkins 191–2). Joshua’s assertion that God has “rescued” the brothers after dutifully subscribing to the augury further invokes the application of the religious geocolonial lens, as the Christian devotees of the missions and of Manifest Destiny saw their explorations as trials, rewards, and entitlements from God, who bestowed these specific gifts to their specific colonial journey. Furthermore, though Joshua alleges a secularity to the auguries, his view that God has *rewarded* him by following the augury illustrates that his pervasive religious lens makes the auguries false prophetic divinations evidencing Joshua’s own descent toward personal and religious corruption.

As Joshua and Errol let God rescue them, let the she-ass guide them through the Sierra Nevada and deliver them to the goldfields of Angels Camp, the brothers physically step into the legacies of former religious colonial trailblazers. Physically following Frémont and Carson’s rhetoric of exploration gives renewed life to their religious colonialism, as Joshua and Errol will physically see the landscape as Frémont and Carson saw it. As they hike along the Carson Trail as part of the California Trail, the multi-branched route bringing emigrants to the California goldfields,²⁰ Joshua and Errol step in the trail forged, named, defined, and documented by the main proprietors of 19th century religious colonialism in the American West. Regardless of their

²⁰ Westward Expansion Era expeditionary and Manifest Destiny figurehead John C. “The Pathfinder” Frémont named the trail after his guide, Kit Carson, the first American to discover the Carson River and trailblaze that area of the Sierra Nevada in 1844 (Hopkins) (Frémont).

awareness of Frémont and Carson's existence or how divine they deem their pilgrimage, Joshua and Errol's choice in following the Carson Trail signifies how religious colonial effect on physical landscape ushers in cyclical geographic experiences encouraging further corruption and exploitation of the Sierra Nevada 'Eden' — an Eden which explicitly cannot and does not exist, while the presence of gold, lumber, and other natural resources compose both the geographies of the foothills and of the biblical location of the Ophir.

These cycles require the initial religious guise, the use of Christian devotion in exploiting the landscapes' characteristics — the auguries take this form, for the Boyle brothers. Joshua considers the auguries as a separate form of prophetic truth disparate from his Christian practice, they still evidence another form of religious corruption in how Joshua and Errol use them as tools to realize their geocolonial project, their journey to strike it rich in the Promised Land. Joshua's auguries are the one other thing Errol believes in as deeply as he believes in California gold. Therefore, even though Joshua and Errol subscribe to and worship different religions and idols, they share a faith in the auguries to deliver them survival and prosperity, making them the only purity in their relationship to each other and to their religious practices. Both brothers quickly sour this purity, however, as Errol falsely interprets and exploits Joshua's auguries to find and worship gold, with Joshua even conceding that Errol sees Joshua's auguries as his only value: "I had long known my brother had brought me to California not for my strength or my intellect or even for my company. He had brought me so that my auguries could make him rich" (Watkins 201).

Joshua himself later corrupts the purity of his auguries by faking a vision of striking it rich, wanting to stop Errol from descending into gold-fever by proselytizing an ample presence of gold, saying to Errol "I have seen it ... Oh, I have *seen* it" (Watkins 201). Joshua says this

while shaking the mustard jar housing their meager deposit of flakes, reinforcing the divine nature of his augury by imbuing his prophecy with Christian significance; the Mustard Seed Parable, a famed biblical passage, denotes how the Kingdom of Heaven grows from a small amount of genuine faith as sprawling fields grow from the tiniest mustard seed (Matthew 13). When Joshua, holy man that he is who once said “I knew that the Word was my calling,” presents a false, lying augury with the air of an Old Testament prophet, he knowingly corrupts his remaining true devotion so as to begin the extractivist stages of gold mining and end his and Errol’s exhaustive search for the perfect, gold-laden, Edenic wilderness geography (Watkins 192; 198–200); once again, this geography does not, cannot, and will not exist, on the basis that Errol’s religiously based entitlements and expectations are impossible to fulfill, but also in that physical geographies, especially prior to their place-makings, are dynamic and neutral environments that do not aim to serve one purpose, demographic, or pursuit, despite the actions of every cyclical process the Sierra Nevada has undergone.

Under the guise of religious entitlement, Joshua and Errol begin the extractivist process of gold mining, forever altering the landscape’s physical and social geographies which defined it as Edenic initially. When Errol goes mad in searching for gold in the plot, he mines for days at a time and destroys the idyllic bank Joshua once described as an agreeable and comfortable place, a “sunny slough where the water was shallow and slightly warmer” (Watkins 200). Informed by a religiously driven entitlement to the geography’s gold — as the Spanish Empire felt entitled to the mission lands, California gold, and Native American populations; as the Westward Expansion Era figures felt entitled to settle the west and make permanent their narrative rhetorics on western landscape — Errol digs slews of deep pits, akin to graves, and grows violent against Joshua and the two neighboring miners until Errol eventually grows silent, stands on the banks of

the destroyed sand bar bloody and crazed, and lets Joshua run away from the goldfields entirely (Watkins 240).

Fueled by the guise of a deceptive augury — which itself is a falsely Christian prophetic vision manipulated by Joshua — Errol's final descent into a gold-fever madness culminates in his symbolic diggings of graves or grave-like holes, signifying both how the pursuit of gold has brought Errol to his demise and brought the Sierra Nevada foothills to their near demise as well. This long-awaited establishment of the landscape as a space undergoing a specifically earthen destruction further proves the foothills' likeness to an earthen biblical land of abundance, an Ophir, over the pristine, almost invincible characteristics of the biblical Eden. Over the course of the short story, Joshua and Errol have physically altered all the land on which they have claimed, mined, fished, and camped on as part of realizing their vision for the Edenic lands they imagined God had promised to them. This religious search for gold, predicated on religious entitlement in pursuing extractivist exploitation of land, and ultimate failure is what destroyed Joshua, Errol, their relationship, and, eventually, Angels Camp itself.

Furthermore, through these actions, they have grown the economy, population, and power of the camps, whose infrastructural and social structures encouraged a geocolonial system predicated on natural resource extraction and exportation. This is the exact cyclical process the Spanish Missions and Manifest Destiny figures underwent, first having used false religious entitlement and visions to justify the destructive manipulation of an idyllic physical geography until a social geography begetting the colonial system's capitalist and political power grows and expands. And just as the Rush and will to find gold brought Joshua and Errol to California, that same want for gold drove Errol, and Joshua as a consequence, to a specific destruction that is irreparable. Avaricious and self-cannibalizing conclusions always finish the religious geocolonial

cycles in California, with the missions disbanding after converted Mexican and Indigenous populations fought against the conversion practices Spain enacted as part of their religious expansion, and with the Manifest Destiny and Westward Expansion Era ending at the start of the American Civil War after the establishment of new western states and territories called conflicts in slavery expansion; more applicably, the large figureheads, like Jedediah Smith, died at the hands of Native Americans whose lands these figureheads occupied, manipulated, and damaged and whose people these figureheads killed and enlisted in religious expansion.

Joshua and Errol are just one microcosmic example of how extractivist, white Europeans recreate and exist in cyclical legacies of California's prior colonizers. Their religious corruption illustrates how these religiously guised, motivated, and systemic colonial movements pose California as a potential Eden to justify their subsequent physical and social geographic destructions in pursuit of economic, political, and social power. The Sierra Nevada still holds the weight of these legacies and encourages their renewal, in neo-colonial processes like the National Parks system and recreational colonialism, both of which encourage white occupation of Native lands by sustaining Eurocentric and American-centric rhetorics of outdoor exploration and wilderness philosophies, codified through the educational, legal, and economic institutions constructing these systems (Boggs 12).

Today, the Sierra Nevada is best known for its public lands, whose preservation John Muir pioneered and defines neo-colonial and contemporary interpretation of the lands today. Muir sought government ownership, white occupation, and Native genocide of and in the Sierra Nevada through the same deification and biblical, Edenic lens of his predecessors, convincing the American people and lawmakers to create Yosemite National Park because the valley was a "temple" that "blessed evangels of the mountains" and whose rain showers provided him with a

“thundering baptism”. Muir concluded his seminal, and successful, essay declaring, “what a psalm was that!” (Muir). In 1890, nearly forty years after Joshua and Errol’s era in the Sierra Nevada foothills, Muir established Yosemite National Park as a permanent fixture serving recreational and spiritual enlightenment to white, American visitors who believe in the religious affectation of the geography and cast a similarly Christian lens on the land.

Beyond the narrow geographic scope of Yosemite, the forests, grasslands, and foothills of the Sierra Nevada — and California at large — still predicate their place-makings on histories of religious settler colonialism framing these landscapes as Edenic in what activities and forms of recreationalism they provide: weekend canoe trips with the in-laws, forested escapes from the urban 9 to 5, much-needed adrenaline rushes from backcountry ski touring. Settler colonialism, produced by canonized Western environmental artists, activists, poets, writers, and historians produce this rhetoric of “the outdoors,” in which ‘pristine’ environmental spaces have actually been place-made by the rugged frontiersmen and explorers of the missions and the Westward Expansion Era (Boggs 29). Thus, our contemporary notions of The Great Outdoors, of exploration and existence in our supposedly preserved earthly Edens, remain rooted in the same religious geocolonial processes which structurally formed outright cycles of colonialism. This exalting of landscape is not just a product of religious falsehood, but also place-makes these geographies as ‘pristine’ and ‘untouched’ wildernesses to mask these religious geocolonial cycles, hide human influence, and continue the ongoing processes of recreational colonialism that gives preference to certain, Christianity-informed, humans. This narrative, therefore, does not just create a false dichotomy between *particular* humans and nature, but also subjects these lands to a singular geographic treatment that has been evidenced to destroy its physical

geographies as part of the place-making process ironically deeming them as ‘pristine’ and ‘untouched.’

The Sierra Nevada foothills still represent the mythic American West, the undeveloped Eden. This ethos is one of the foundational sociocultural ideas defining California and the West as a landscape particularly different from the rest of the world, with this difference being predicated on such colonial cycles that imbue religious meaning into what should be a secular landscape. These cycles continue in how California kids learn about the integration between religion, landscape, and resources in school, hearing stories of white men pioneering and forging thick wilderness geographies using nothing but their independence, grit, masculinity, and faith. We can see how these cycles continue in how tourists flock to the Sierra Nevada, and California lands at large, to see landscapes filled with golden histories and potential hiding in mountains, the dirt, the meltwater rivers, and the valleys. And when they enter these lands, they do it on the terms of Moraga and Smith, of Joshua and Errol and Muir, aspiring to see, experience, and develop on the same Edens they once did.

III. GEOGRAPHIC EPOCHAL CONFLICT IN SAN FRANCISCO

On December 2, 2025, an albino alligator named Claude passed away in his longtime home in the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. Claude was magnificent: a whopping ten feet of ivory scales and piercing pink eyes providing thousands of San Francisco children with a shared belief that only something giant and reptilian accurately represented their hometown. Despite his Louisiana birth and his tropical ancestry, San Franciscans associated Claude with their city as much as any sports team or celebrity or inside joke. The news of Claude's passing spread swiftly and tragically, people sharing photos of themselves with Velcro sneakers near the glass domes of the natural science museum staring down at Claude's "swamp," a sunken pit in the middle of the museum's marbled floors built specially for him. Thousands of San Franciscans grieved Claude's passing as they would a dear friend, a family member, or a mentor. This bereavement — which seemed so melodramatic to the out-of-staters and the transplants — showed the particular care San Francisco has for their giant, wild animals and how that love exists so naturally amongst glass and marble floors.

San Francisco has always been a site of conflict between the organic and the manufactured, the natural and the manmade. The vast majority of the city's perimeter lies along Pacific Ocean coastlines or the San Francisco Bay; the city features such natural spaces as Golden Gate Park, Park Presidio, Mission Dolores, and Twin Peaks; the oceanic weather patterns and hilly geographies foster microclimates hosting multitudes of unique ecosystems; the San Andreas Faultline keeps the city in tectonic flux and in control of geologic phenomena. In contrast, San Francisco is known for its architectural landmarks like the Golden Gate Bridge, Victorian homes, and the Transamerica Pyramid in its financial district; the city-land has become synonymous with tech companies and ushering in the Information Age; its small size has made it

the second most densely populated outright city in the United States and its progress continues to reflect a growing population, technological expansion, and infrastructural development.

The Academy of Sciences is one of many sites illustrating San Francisco's biophilic character, how the city's geographies foster, reflect, and even mimic human relationships with natural systems. Here is a site built in a sprawling urban park, constructed of glass and a grass roof, and intended for visitors to enter its space to learn about the natural world. San Francisco has turned highways into parks, fostered industry around its coastlines, and created programs encouraging citizens to foster human connection in outdoor spaces. But the city's move towards human progress and natural conservation is not just rooted in a contemporary biophilic fantasy, but by thousands of years of geographic and geologic evolution.

San Francisco, before Claude's time, housed dozens of species of megafauna, large animals exceeding or equal to 100 pounds: dire wolves, condors, saber-toothed cats, bears, llamas, elk, moose, bison, horses, mammoths, and lions. These species of megafauna lived during the Pleistocene, the geologic epoch preceding our current epoch of the Holocene. The Pleistocene occurred around 2.6 million years ago and ended 12,000 years ago. The era is most characterized by repeating cycles of glaciation (ice ages), the existence and extinction of megafauna, and the rise of humanity. Though this geologic era occurred globally and affected each corner of the globe, it most potently affected particular areas of the northern hemisphere where ice sheets carved new lakes, mountains, valleys, and alpine regions and glaciation cycles changed ocean levels along coastal environments: Scandinavia, the British Isles, Russia, and the western United States, particularly California.

San Francisco's Pleistocenic traits still appear in its current Holocenic landscape, both in how those traits have persisted and formed the city and in how humans integrate representations

of the epoch in contemporary development. Representations of the Holocene — characterized by a stable, warm climate and complex human development — naturally appear in San Francisco as a technologically advanced city developing culture, arts, economies, agriculture, research, infrastructure, and the like. Those inherent qualities are expanded on by San Francisco's exceptional development and investment in human-centric industries like housing, technology, and healthcare. Investigating how San Francisco's physical geographies — urban/Holocenic and environmental/Pleistocenic — define human experience exposes a tension lying within the city, an epochal conflict. San Francisco's biophilic identity merges the unique geographic histories informing the city's current landscape with distinct contemporary endeavors modernizing San Francisco through increased human-centricity and technological development.

This epochal conflict defines the use of the geographic epochal lens, a framework that examines a particular geography's epochs as concurrent, concurrent, coexisting, conflicting, and in conversation with one another. Applying a geographic epochal lens to San Francisco's physical geography examines how humans experience their Holocenic life in environments that build atop of and contain remainders of the Pleistocene. This lens also examines how San Francisco's physical geography displays the proposed departure from the Holocene and impending, speculative entrance into the Anthropocene, the theoretical geologic epoch characterized by human activity dominating any ecological, climatic, or geologic systems and by climate change, pollution, and species extinction; the parameters surrounding earth's impending entrance or ongoing existence in the Anthropocene are hotly debated by researchers today, with some asserting earth is on its way to the inevitable Anthropocene and others arguing earth entered the Anthropocene in the 1950s when human activity decisively surged (Waters).²¹

²¹ For further discussion on the debate on the Anthropocene's beginning, see Colin N. Waters "Candidate sites and other reference sections for the Global boundary Stratotype Section and Point of the Anthropocene series." Paul Voosen's "Pond mud proposed as Anthropocene's 'golden spike,' defining human-altered geological age," and Jan

San Francisco's geographies uniquely represent the concurrent physicalities of the Pleistocene, Holocene, and Anthropocene in its fundamental geographic characteristics. During the Pleistocene, masses of glaciers kept ocean levels so low that San Francisco was not a peninsula, but a singular land mass. The San Francisco Bay was a dry valley feeding dozens of megafaunal species, and San Francisco was thirty miles longer to the west where there is now ocean (Axelrod 848). When the Pleistocene ended — as characterized by the end of the last ice age — global temperatures increased, glaciers melted, and sea levels rose. The Franciscan Valley²² flooded to create the present-day San Francisco Bay and peninsula boundaries (Axelrod 848). As flooding inundated the prairies and valleys, the San Andreas Fault and Pacific currents pushed sand and sediment to form the western coastlines, sand dunes, and subaqueous sandbars that now foster one of the most ecologically biodiverse and nutrient rich coastal habitats (Howard 95). In these ways, though the Pleistocene occurred thousands of years ago, San Francisco's environment is entirely defined by the geologic and geographic events ascribed to this epoch, making the Pleistocene exist concurrently to the present-day Holocene.

San Francisco's geographic transition period between the Pleistocene and the Holocene is most characterized by human arrival, approximately 13,000 years ago (Johnson and Bartow 6). As humans entered the burgeoning peninsula, three characteristics inaugurated the Holocene: the end of the last glacial period, the rise of human settlement and development, and the near total extinction of megafauna. San Francisco was one of the few areas globally that experienced this transition to concentrated and acute effect in its final form of 49 square miles.²³

Zalasiewicz's "When Did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level Is Stratigraphically Optimal."

²² In *Geologic History of Middle California*, geologist Arthur David Howard refers to the San Francisco Bay as the "Franciscan Valley" when characterizing the environment's landscape during the Pleistocene, as no bay nor peninsula existed.

²³ Other locales acutely affected include northern hemisphere areas like Sweden, Siberia, and the Yukon.

As the Holocene materialized, coastal Californian geographies became one of the few ideal climates during the global climatic shifts, creating abundant hunting and gathering resources that supported uniquely dense human populations (Johnson 151). San Francisco became “an environmental refugium” for species seeking temperate climates and for hungry humans whose megafaunal prey had not yet evolved behavioral defenses nor the recognition of mankind as predatory (Johnson 150). The emergent Holocene created San Francisco as an ideal environment for fostering new, distinctive, and lasting relationships between landscape, megafauna, and humans. Thus, San Francisco’s contemporary Holocenic existence is most informed by this epochal transition, in which the city’s peninsula formed, humans settled, and megafauna went extinct. This transition coincided with the extinction event that initiated centuries of humans’ negative impact on California lands and ecosystems, ongoing activities most associated with the present-day Holocene and Anthropocene (Johnson 152). Therefore, San Francisco’s peninsula holds the histories and traumas of the coexisting Pleistocene and Holocene in its physical geographic characteristics and in its social geographic relationships between humans, land, and megafauna. As these aspects occur in the city concurrently, their characteristics conflict and coalesce to inform the lived experiences within San Francisco.

Claire Vaye Watkins depicts these coexisting epochal traits in the concluding short story of her *Battleborn* collection. “Graceland” is a short-and-sweet depiction of Catie, a young woman struggling to accept her mother’s death while living in San Francisco. Catie lives aimlessly and anxiously, constantly thinking about a doomed world where humans are becoming the largest land mammal and obsessing over megafauna like whales, gorillas, and bears. Her boyfriend, a marine biologist researching the Bay for PG&E, and her pregnant, grieving sister, Gwen, try to assuage the listless Catie to no avail, taking her on whaling trips and suggesting

meditative trips to the beach. But all Catie can do is manifest her worries in a series of epochal-anxieties, taking form in her obsessions about the discrimination Dumbo felt, children drowning at the Sutro Baths, and what megafauna her future niece will be able to see.

Catie's geographically-driven obsessions within and of San Francisco's epochal conflict-ridden are transferential expressions of her attempt to process her mother's death, evidenced in her navigations of the city and her reflections on its megafaunal composition. Though Catie's obsessions present as eco-anxieties, a fear of humanity-caused environmental doom, their derivation from San Francisco's geographies — places embodying a coexistence between Pleistocene, Holocene, and Anthropocene — characterize them as epochal anxieties, a fear of a collective environmental shift into a new global epoch. Catie's resultant obsessions with megafauna and scalar relativity are symptomatic of her epochal-anxiety, a specific reaction towards her grief experience in San Francisco's epochal conflict-ridden geographies which rejects generalized eco-critical readings and the heedless ascription of eco-anxiety to her character's geographic internalizations.

Catie's epochal anxieties comprise her grief process, a journey that stalemates on Oregon whale watching trips and when she returns to her mother's Las Vegas home after her death. Only when Catie bikes around San Francisco, thinking about megafaunal and maternal death in a geography of epochal coexistence, does she realize that she can never "be more than seven miles from anything"²⁴ and begins to process her grief after weeks of exploring death through megafauna and San Francisco landmarks. With this realization, Catie and her sister finally begin to grieve and accept their mother's death, with Catie only visualizing this through a restorative, mutual, and coexisting view of mankind and megafauna. Only when Catie lets go of her

²⁴ Referring to how the San Francisco Peninsula makes the city seven miles by seven miles and therefore prevents any person from being more than "seven miles from anything."

all-encompassing epochal-anxious visions characterizing the Anthropocenic relationship between environment and humans as entirely doom-and-gloom, can she embrace this epochal *coexistence* and recognize structures of the past while existing in a progressing present.

Catie views San Francisco as a dichotomous landscape warring between memories of the Pleistocene and an impending transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. This epochal conflict appears through Catie's obsession with megafauna, whose threatening extinctions cause her much strife and anxiety. Catie also demonstrates her internal epochal conflict through her navigation of San Francisco landscapes particularly formed during the Pleistocene's floods that human activity has since turned into symbols of anthropocentrism during the Holocene. Her obsessions with megafauna and physical monuments of epochal conflict exist solely within San Francisco's boundaries as she refuses to accept her mother's death, becoming numb upon exiting the city on her trips to Oregon and Las Vegas. In this way, Catie illustrates how, at this given moment, she experiences San Francisco as a site unique to epochal conflict, to warring and coexisting representations of the organic, megafaunal past and the threatening, fatal human-centric future.

Megafauna were a defining characteristic of San Francisco during the Pleistocene, and the few species surviving into the Holocene provide Catie with comfort, though she feels extremely anxious about the possibility of their extinction in the Anthropocenic scenario. This is the first thing we learn about Catie in the story's initiating passage:

All the great land mammals are dying. There were once birds the size of sheep. Pinnipeds used to be huge; walruses had tusks six feet long. Jackrabbits had feet like two-by-fours. Armadillos were as big as minivans. Now, they are all dying off. African elephants are

going thirsty, having to dig wells in the dirt with their trunks to find water. Bengal tigers are shot and skinned. Polar bears are drowning. Imagine! The world's largest carnivorous land mammal drowning, an entire species drowned to extinction. (Watkins 265).

As Catie begins discussing contemporary megafaunal extinction, she starts with general discourse about the megafauna of the Pleistocene. Catie becomes more specific to the contemporary and to San Francisco's geography with each sentence, referring to "pinnipeds" (seals) and "walruses," species that still remain in San Francisco. BUt her comparisons between megafaunal extinction and human-development becomes clearer when she compares the species to representations of human-centric activity: rabbits once had feet like "two-by-fours," the most common lumbar piece used in construction, and Armadillos were once comparable to "minivans," a large car intended for moving a horde of individuals across landscape.

Most ecocritical readings of Catie and of "Graceland" would characterize this fear of megafaunal extinction as a form of eco-anxiety, an emergent chronic fear of climate change and environmental destruction most affecting younger generations in the past three decades.

Interdisciplinary scholars have defined eco-anxiety as a "chronic fear of environmental doom, a description seemingly well befitting Catie's fear of megafaunal extinction (Pikhala 121).

However, Catie's fear of megafaunal extinction arises from a comparison of the Pleistocene to the Holocene/Anthropocene in recognition of how these epochs exist concurrently. When she focuses on how megafauna "used to be huge" during the Pleistocene, how contemporary megafauna compare to human-centric materialities (minivans) during the Holocene, and how she imagines mammals "drowned to extinction" in the Anthropocene, Catie roots her anxieties in the chronological development of megafauna in shifting epochs. Furthermore, Catie roots her

epochal-anxieties in her lived experience within latent epochal histories of San Francisco's physical geographies, a positionality the generalization of ecocritical eco-anxiety fails to consider.

Catie reinforces the use of a geographic epochal lens in defining her epochal-anxiety in the latter portion of her rant, as she specifically worries about how climate change could kill megafauna through rising sea levels and resultant drowning: "imagine the world's largest carnivorous land mammal drowning, an entire species drowned to extinction." For decades, climate geographers and geologists speculated megafauna's cause of death in California, misattributing megafaunal death solely to rising sea levels and climate change rather than human activity; this theory especially permeated in discourse about the extinction of megafauna in San Francisco, as the present-day peninsula was once a solid land mass with a prairie extending 30 miles west of where the coast is today. Therefore, many researchers prospected that the Pleistocene's rising sea levels caused San Francisco's megafauna to literally or figuratively drown, dying from a lack of habitat and flooding that primarily characterized the Pleistocene and the epoch's effect on that specific land mass. Considering the latency of these epochal histories in the specificity of Catie's epochal-anxieties, manifested in megafauna specifically *drowning*, further separates Catie's obsessions from the generalized ecocritical lens and towards a geographic epochal lens rightfully examining Catie's lived experiences in and the epochal histories of San Francisco.

Furthermore, when Catie refers to today's megafauna drowning, she intends to position this scenario in the context of the *Anthropocene* rather than the floods of the Pleistocene. She alludes to human activity and development creating a global climate change creating unnatural sea level rise, by which megafauna will similarly suffer, drown, and die. In this way, Catie's

initial passage does not just serve to introduce us to her fears of megafaunal death driven by the impending Anthropocene, but also informs the basis of the geographic epochal conflict lying within Catie's human experience. This single line of text, single human experience, contains San Francisco's coexisting epochal histories that conflict and mutually relate, the Pleistocene and the Holocene/Anthropocene having a stake in Catie's lived experience and recurring stages of megafaunal death.

These conflicting and relational epochs reflect Catie's underlying and latent grief of her mother, whose death is vastly unexplored in comparison to Catie's interest in megafauna. Catie's denial or unacceptance of her mother's death is best represented by her epochal-anxiety and the geographic epochal lens: Catie parallels the Pleistocene as the time her mother was alive, the Holocene as the current transition period of her mother's death, and the Anthropocene as the impending and inevitable epoch where her mother is fading memory. But in her refusal to accept her mother's death, Catie manifests her grief through epochal-anxieties making her fearful of the incoming human-centric world, as denoted by her fixation on San Francisco megafauna and Anthropocentric landscapes.

The root of Catie's distress of megafaunal extinction comes from her fear that "someday soon people will be the largest animals on the planet" (Watkins 268). As part of her derivative megafaunal obsession as part of her epochal-anxiety, Catie puts the world around her into categories of large and small. She and her sister Gwen are short, while their respective partners are tall — "Jacob, my brother-in-law, is six four. He has long ropy limbs and can pick Gwen up like the elephants in Dumbo pick up poles" (Watkins 269). Catie prefers a world of megafauna and tall people, wanting to be reminded of her smallness in a world where humans are becoming relatively larger as megafauna die out, but also as the presiding force on an increasingly

human-centric earth. At the same time, Catie wishes she herself were larger, even wishing for her unborn niece to be “averaged out” between her sister’s smallness and her husband’s largeness (Watkins 270). This reckoning of human size, both individually and collectively, further evidences Catie’s anxieties in an Anthropocentric world where humans are killing the megafaunal species providing Catie with her scalar identity and freeing her from the responsibilities largest species must undertake in a place of epochal conflict.

This internal conflict speaks to Catie’s persistent struggle of “being a part of the problem” in the world’s journey towards the Anthropocene; she wants to have a larger presence in preventing the world’s descent and preserving her identity as a small species, but also wants to be “comforted by [her] smallness” knowing that she is a single person in a large, impenetrable framework (Watkins 266). These scalar contradictions reappear as she grapples with the descent towards the Anthropocene alongside her journey towards accepting her mother’s death and the loss of the large, maternal figure in her life. She recognizes this conflict as her megafaunal obsession evolves, saying, “as a species we are getting larger. But we still seem so small” (Watkins 268).

Much of Catie’s megafaunal obsession and source of her wanting to avoid “being a part of the problem” comes from the movie *Dumbo*. Catie takes comfort in *Dumbo* as a symbol of her childhood, but also because of his dual largeness and smallness as an adolescent megafauna. As she rewatches the movie, she compares herself and her sister to *Dumbo* because the two of them have just become similarly alone in the world after the death of their father (*Jumbo Senior*) and now the death of their mother. In struggling whether or not to tell her unborn niece about *Dumbo*, questioning whether her niece will even have elephants by the time she becomes sentient, Catie further parallels the death of *Dumbo*’s megafaunal mother to the death of her own

mother; in the Anthropocene, when elephants no longer exist and when the memory of Catie's mother has faded, should Catie even tell her niece about what used to exist? (Watkins 278).

At the same time, Catie reexamines her role in protecting Dumbo as an imaginary megafauna, telling herself that she should avoid "being a part of the problem" by calling him by his given name of Jumbo Junior. Her connection to this megafauna illustrates just how far her megafaunal epochal-anxiety permeates into her lived experience and grief process, as she can only explain and understand her mother's death through megafauna and their relationship to earth's transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. Only through Dumbo can Catie initiate an examination of the relationships between herself, megafauna, extinction, maternal death, and the earth's epochal transitions; the revealed relationality between these concepts finally initiate Catie to think about her role as a daughter who has lost her mother and as a person in a world undergoing epochal change, thus asking Catie how she will avoid "being a part of the problem."

Catie exhibits the rest of her megafaunal obsession in numerous ways, wanting to bestow largeness upon the earth and preserve their legacy in realistically meaningless but earnest ways. She buys her unborn niece "plastical models of all the great land mammals, extinct and not" (Watkins 272). She sits around thinking about grizzly bears, and "how before the city [San Francisco] there used to be grizzlies on this Peninsula," while laying melancholy in her bed or when biking around San Francisco, so that she can "imagine grizzly bears loafing around through eucalyptus groves" (Watkins 281). Catie's day-to-day obsession with how megafauna fits into her world — and how she can preserve it for her unborn niece — defines the story's epochal conflict and the geographic epochal lens, demonstrating how Catie uses megafauna as a representative of a pre-human past and the megafauna's erasure as representative of a human-centric future. In addition, Watkins's depictions of Catie's megafaunal obsession and

epochal conflict are not isolated transition of the Holocene to the Anthropocene or isolated simply to Catie's epochal-anxiety: Catie derives her obsession with megafaunal extinction and human-centrism from her experiences within San Francisco geographies that are both relics of the Pleistocene and spaces of physical epochal conflict. Furthermore, Catie's obsession with megafaunal extinction and geographies of epochal conflict work alongside her refusal to accept her mother's death, meaning Catie cannot and will not move through the grieving process as long as she anxiously anticipates Anthropocenic doom and lets perceived epochal conflict haunt her.

For example, the first physical location Catie goes to is the San Francisco Zoo in an attempt to feel comforted by her smallness and the natural world. She describes how she sobs outside the Asian white rhino exhibit after seeing the western lowland gorillas and the giant anteater, eventually saying she is upset at "just the same old thing" (Watkins 266–267). Watkins chooses the San Francisco Zoo, and megafaunal exhibits, as Catie's first physical geography to illustrate the depth of her anxiety, but also to show San Francisco as a state of epochal conflict.²⁵ The San Francisco Zoo is located on the city's west side and borders the Pacific Ocean, meaning it exists in a Holocenic borderland where a vast prairie once stood before the Pleistocene floods; as Catie cries, she feels the ocean "fog mist on her skin" and notices how the ocean environment has engulfed the zoo in fog (Watkins 266). In physically experiencing the consequences of epochal transition into the Holocene alongside her grief, Catie directly parallels her grief process with San Francisco's geologic processes in a manner illustrating that it is not just the *presence* of

²⁵ The San Francisco Zoo further represents and drives Catie's epochal-anxiety as a physical geography of epochal-conflict in its long history of housing elephants in its historic "Elephant House" before removing elephants in 2005 after a series of notable elephant deaths and public outrage. The City of San Francisco itself also has a long history with elephants. Forty-Niners referred to the Gold Rush as "seeing the elephant," many San Francisco circuses featured elephants, and Golden Gate Park's Children's Playground featured a famed "elephant train." There are even rumors of a city ordinance requiring owners to keep their elephants on a leash if on Market Street. More local lore can be found in the following articles: Woody LaBounty's "Elephants in San Francisco: A Closer Look" and "Seeing the Elephant," and Nancy R. Chan's "San Francisco Zoo."

environment which informs her characterization, but the active ways in which geography retains physicalities of the past in a developing present personified by coexisting physicalities.

The zoo itself is an ideal example of the geographic epochal-conflict informing Catie's grief experience, representing the processes of Holocene and human-centric activity: humans have encaged the surviving megafauna as human entertainment, letting the animals who represent organic purity live in brutalist enclosures like the rhino, who "had worn his horn down to a stump, scraping it against concrete" (Watkins 266). Catie is understandably devastated by these human atrocities, but also by the personal devastation she places less emphasis on, that her mother killed herself six months ago (Watkins 266). When Catie cries at "just the same old thing," Watkins makes Catie's reason for saying so purposefully ambiguous, leaving it unclear whether Catie is crying at the zoo's Holocenic/Anthropocenic atrocities she seems most preoccupied with or at the tragic loss of her mother. This juncture proposes a parallel Catie feels and experiences between her mother's death and megafaunal extinction: Catie feels haunted by and cannot let go of the past (her childhood and the Pleistocene), struggles with her positionality in becoming larger but wanting to stay small (she must become larger in filling the familial gap her mother left while humans become the largest species on earth), and struggles to find personal solutions to her melancholic life or to the world's descent into the Anthropocene (she cannot accept her mother's death nor find ways to soothe her megafaunal concerns).

Catie's exploration of epochal conflict, and her using this lens as a framework for her grief journey, reappears in her obsession with the Sutro Baths, a defunct swimming pool complex in San Francisco's Lands End Park. The Sutro Baths look post-apocalyptic, only the algae-covered concrete borders of the pools stand where large, glass domes once encased the world's largest swimming pool complex, all within a stone's throw of the Pacific. The Sutro

Baths represent the Holocene evidently, in combining the natural wonders of the Pacific Coast with a large, industrial human-feat distinctly separating the natural world from the unnatural enclosed pools. However, the Sutro Baths most accurately represent a dystopic Anthropocene, in which human-centricity leads to changing climates, pollution, and major weather events that destroy the earth alongside human developments.

Catie emphasizes the industrial, manmade characteristics of the Sutro Baths, describing “a giant glass-and-iron dome housing seven indoor swimming pools—size saltwater and one fresh—right at the edge of the sea” (Watkins 267). The Sutro Baths were built right before the turn of the 20th century and burned down in 1966, no more than 10 years after the proposed beginning of the Anthropocene. This timing, in conjunction with its representations of a post-apocalyptic space existing in a borderland between the natural and the manmade, informs the Sutro Baths ruins as another site of epochal conflict. Catie confirms this by analyzing the baths with Holocenic and Anthropocenic perspectives, imagining life in the baths during its heyday while seeing the site now as endangered from human-centricity just like the megafauna: “the photographs show great tall slides shooting swimmers out into the water [...] but the beach has changed since those photos; the sea level now seems higher, the beach narrower. If you go to the ruins now and envision, as I have, the great dome of glass and iron rising from the cement foundations of the seven pools, all that’s left, you can easily imagine the entire structure slipping into the sea” (Watkins 268). Thus, when an obsessive Catie ponders the Sutro Baths, she analyzes a coastline made solely from Pleistocenic flooding, transformed entirely into a dichotomous, Holocenic landscape, and destroyed at the turn of the Anthropocene.

Catie’s exploration of the Sutro Baths as a landscape of geographic epochal conflict has no moral imperative, but rather investigates how the Sutro Baths’s coastline moves through and

survives epochal transition. When she observes “giant glass-and-iron dome” next to the Pleistocenic waters, she does not have an eco-centric perspective nor does she comment on the Sutro Baths’s demise.²⁶ Catie’s focus is on how the Baths embody each epoch and epochal transition rather than how human-activity has polluted or negatively impacted the environmental nature of the place. Her imagination of the structure “slipping into the sea,” therefore, does not stand to argue towards an eco-centric movement in preserving San Francisco coastlines, but speaks towards her fear of epochal transition as represented by the physical manifestations of San Francisco’s geographies. This is what drives Catie’s lived experience in San Francisco geographies and her grief, not a will toward rectifying environmental injustice.

Catie’s intertwining of human tragedy and megafauna illustrates her viewing these geographies as ridden with epochal conflict, when she looks out at the Pacific Ocean beyond the Sutro Baths. She keeps recalling “a drowned boy and his drowned stepfather [...] a mother standing on the shore,” concluding that she “can’t look out at the sea without imagining it filled with the waterlogged corpses of boys and polar bears” (Watkins 267). Similar to how the Sutro Baths evidences avaricious human destruction after or during the transition of the Anthropocene era, San Francisco’s Pacific coast holds possibilities of megafaunal extinction and human tragedy, a perspective Catie dwells on as she intermingles her epochal anxieties with her grief processes. This point further argues against an ecocritical reading of Catie’s anxiety, as she fears a world of human death (as part of Anthropocenic transition and her dormant grief process) alongside her more pressing fear of megafaunal death.

²⁶ Though never formally confirmed, it is widely believed that the Sutro Baths burned down from an intentional act of arson for insurance collecting, further characterizing the geography as one of human-centric activity atop a Pleistocenic locale as opposed to a site of environmental reclamation. For more local color on the Baths, refer to Andrew Chaming’s SF Gate article, “Here’s the fiery, doomed history of San Francisco’s Cliff House.”

These waters which define San Francisco's peninsula affect Catie deeply, as she yearns for coastlines in her grief and thinks about aquatic megafauna often. In particular, Catie thinks about the coastal range by the Sutro Baths and along Ocean Beach, in between San Francisco's west border and the Farallon Islands where the Pleistocene prairie once stood, and the San Francisco Bay, which was once a rich valley providing grasslands for Pleistocenic megafauna. As previously stated, both of these now-aquatic habitats are rich physical geographies because of the processes they underwent during the turn from the Pleistocene to the Holocene, when a combination of flooding, earthquakes, and temperature changes specific to San Francisco created 'perfect storm' conditions. Upon returning home from one of her visits to the Sutro Baths, Catie asks her boyfriend — a marine biologist doing research for the Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) — to explain to her how "the currents in the bay have not significantly changed in the forty-one years since the baths burned" (Watkins 276). Because Catie feels the threat of the Anthropocene, megafaunal death, and human tragedy at the Sutro Baths, she needs to hear the objective truth that the sandbar currents formed 12,000 years ago are the same — the Pleistocene is still hanging on next to the ruins.

The San Francisco Bay is also a strong geographic site of epochal conflict considering its Pleistocenic formation and its personal role in Catie's life. Catie's boyfriend researches wave farms on the floor of the Bay and tracks how PG&E's energy development affects marine life and aquatic megafauna like grey whales and humpbacks, megafauna solely existing off the city's coast because of the sandbar habitats and ocean floors formed from the Pleistocene floods and the San Andreas faultline. Though her boyfriend asks her to let his vocation "be simple and good" and believes the farms have no effect on marine life, Catie argues that he is "being part of

the problem” in an increasingly Anthropocenic world encouraging further megafaunal death and the industrial development of San Francisco’s Pleistocenic geographies.

Catie’s megafaunal anxiety and internalization of San Francisco’s geographies as sites of epochal conflict culminate in her final bike ride to the Sutro Baths. Having still not accepted her mother’s death or faced her grief, she arrives at the baths to new caution signs warning beachgoers of strong currents in reaction to the stepfather and son who have recently drowned, reading them as euphemistically saying “A Boy and His Stepfather Were Dragged Out to Sea Here and Their Bodies Were Never Found (We Suspect Sharks) and It Could Happen to You; It Could Happen to Any of Us” (Watkins 281). This visit to the baths is a turning point for Catie, who has retreated to these sites of megafaunal histories and epochal conflict as a form of escape. Her ‘reading’ of the traditional warning sites give her a framework for her erupting grief, anxieties, and struggles while maintaining a semblance of emotional detachment. While the sign once said “Swim at Your Own Risk,” Catie has imbued the sign’s meaning with the tragedy of familial death, the rough Pleistocenic sea, the deadly conflict between humans and megafauna, and the looming grief that has followed her for the story’s duration.

These meanings are the crux of the San Francisco’s positioning as a city of the epochal conflict haunting Catie during her grief process, a fact she acknowledges by saying, “I think they should be these signs up everywhere, not just at the beaches but throughout the entire city, call this what it is” (Watkins 281). As Catie looks out upon the Pleistocenic ocean, finally willing and able to call human and megafaunal death “what it is”, she becomes capable of accepting her mother’s death, of the world’s descent into the Anthropocene, of humans becoming larger presences in positively affecting environmental change, of humans becoming smaller presences in reducing their earthly impact, of San Francisco being a place of these conflicting and

coexisting histories, goals, and ideals. Furthermore, Catie's acknowledgment that they should "call this what it is" speaks to the necessity of a *geographic epochal* reading over the generalization of ecocriticism. As Catie finally reaches a turning point in her story-long turmoil, anxieties, and obsessions, the call to action is not rectify environmental injustice — a too-generalized and sweeping ecocritical lens that does not address how the progression of a geography informs a lived-experience or creates a place exploring that progression. To "call this what it is" is a call toward the geographic epochal lens and a recognition of San Francisco geographies as places where these epochs coexist and coalesce, thus affecting how individuals like Catie operate within and understand their place in a world undergoing epochal transition.

With this realization, Catie bikes to her sister with "a thousand things" to tell her: "the Sutro boy and the whales [...] turbines turning and turning down in the bay without ever rousing anything, about all the great land mammals" and her fear of being left on land by herself (Watkins 282). Her explorations of Pleistocenic, Holocenic, and Anthropocenic death, transition, and progression coalesce into an acceptance of her current world in which earth has descended into the proceeding epoch, her mother is dead, and the only person who could understand is her sister and her unborn baby who will inherit their Anthropocenic and mother-less world.

Catie expresses this sentiment through the same geographic epochal and megafaunal lenses she has seen San Francisco through. She asks her sister if she has seen the movie *Dumbo* lately, to which they both agree that they should call him by his given name to avoid being "a part of the problem" and Catie notes that her sister's stomach has grown larger, that she can see the ocean from where they stand, and that her sister "just looks so small" (Watkins 282). In realizing the reality of her mother's death and the world's descent in a new epoch distinct from the Pleistocene and Holocene, Catie can release her epochal-anxieties and reframe how she

internalizes manifestations of megafauna, size, and San Francisco's coexisting epochal geographies.

The 'solution' to Catie not being "a part of the problem" lies in realizing that reality and understanding that the mankind's future on earth will have a 'larger' presence requiring new relationships between human and earth, and it is the responsibility of mankind today to become 'smaller' in how they affect and exist on earth so that this future may occur; this transition will happen especially in geographies like San Francisco and by the Pacific Ocean, whose lands have always been especially marked by epochal transition. In this acceptance of an Anthropocenic future informed and existing alongside Pleistocenic and Holocenic pasts, Catie can accept her mother's death with the understanding that, while she is gone, Catie must reimagine her relationship with her mother and enter a new epoch of her life as San Francisco must.

In finding peace with a human-centric future — or, at least a future where humans reconceptualize how they interact the megafauna and the earth as a departure from the flaws of the Holocene-going-Anthropocene — and thereby finding peace with her mother's death, Catie looks out onto the Pacific and 'sees' "the dark shapes of whales." She writes the story's (and the collection's) final words as a hopeful transition from the supposed start of the Anthropocene in the mid 20th century through a reimagined, harmonious epoch:

I see the drowned boy on his stepfather's shoulders in 1951, wading in the freshwater pool at the Sutro Baths, his wide-hipped mother waving from the tiers above. I see tall Jacob spinning the roulette table at the Sands. I see Peter out on the savanna with the African white rhino, rubbing ointment on its stump, encouraging the horn to grow back.

O! You swim like a duck, he says. I see Jumbo Junior and my beautiful long-legged unborn niece swayed to sleep by his mother's great gray trunk. (Watkins 283)

With this final passage, Catie welds the subjects of her former epochal-anxieties with the coalescence of San Francisco's coexisting geographic epochs to form a new, healed version of the impending Anthropocene she refused to accept alongside her mother's death. In this world, urging a new imagined relationship between humans and megafauna, Catie begins by rewriting the family at the Sutro Baths. Instead of drowning in a landscape representing a doomed Anthropocene and avaricious human death in an uncertain Anthropogenic future, the boy remains swimming in pure waters in a still-standing testament to human development in a Pleistocenic geography; in this way, Catie positions the beginning of the supposed Anthropocene (argued to have begun in the 1950s) through a wholesome lens where a calm epochal geography keeps the family together and coexisting themselves.

Catie then pictures her sister's boyfriend Jacob in Las Vegas, her hometown and where her mother died, finding a kind of peace in the Anthropogenic desert casinos, giving new life to her hometown as the father of her unborn niece. Catie pictures her boyfriend physically healing the white rhino megafauna who she previously sobbed over at the San Francisco Zoo, thus ushering in an Anthropocene of mutualism between megafauna and humanity that recognizes the flaws of past human 'largeness' towards megafauna and the planet. In this depiction, Catie sees the solution to Anthropocentric wrongdoings as mutualism, with species of all physical and social sizes working in tandem across geographical boundaries, showing an extension of this logic into Las Vegas (a landscape defined by its distinctly human development and activity) and the savanna (a landscape defined by its distinctly *undeveloped* geography and lack of humanity).

Finally, Catie pictures “Jumbo Junior,” with the name his mother gave him, alongside her unborn niece and Jumbo Junior’s mother, the maternal megafaunal figure having returned to Jumbo Junior just as Catie’s mother has returned through the acceptance of her death. In giving Jumbo Junior his flowers and trusting elephants will exist alongside her future niece, Catie’s reimagined Anthropocene illustrates her commitment to not being “a part of the problem” in her creation of a new relationship between mankind, megafauna, and the physical geography. Furthermore, as Jumbo Junior’s mother sways Jumbo Junior and her unborn niece to sleep, Catie sees a future where her mother has a presence in her niece’s life just as the endangered megafaunal elephant do, having previously compared her and her sister to Jumbo Junior after having lost their father and then mother; but just as Mrs. Jumbo returned to her son in the film, Catie’s mother and her niece’s grandmother sustains her presence through Catie’s reimagination of the peaceful Anthropocenic future.

This concluding passage also reframes how humans’ scalar identities will conceive this Anthropocenic future. Humans will reckon with their largeness by minimizing the presence of their largeness in Pleistocenic or natural geographies — “tall Jacob” spins the roulette tables in Las Vegas, keeping the largeness of his presence contained to a human-centric activity in the human-centric desert. In tandem, Catie’s own boyfriend Peter will reckon with his own largeness by becoming comparatively, physically, and relationally small: while in a Pleistocenic savanna environment, he is physically smaller than the still-existing rhino and relationally subservient in healing the rhino after years of abuse by humans. Catie’s unborn niece, who will enter the newly defined Anthropocene in her birth (according to Catie’s vision), will be born “long-legged” while falling asleep to the largeness of megafauna, making her a large human presence while small in the midst of a motherly megafauna and the prevailing presence of Catie’s mother.

The final passage's argument for how humans must understand their role in the impending or existing Anthropocene epoch, therefore, is to embrace scalar relativity. That is, humans must recognize when they can use their largeness as a force in effecting positive change and presence in the Anthropocene, reversing past human flaws or existing in human-centric spaces. More importantly, humans must recognize the role of their smallness in reducing Anthropogenic activity and maintaining the megafaunal populations that sustain the role of the Pleistocene in our geographies. This recognition of the humanistic role, bestowed on those existing within and informed by these places of epochal conflict, is the solution toward realizing Catie's imagined Anthropocene of coexistence, coalescence, and co-constitution.

Whether humans have yet to enter the Anthropocene or have existed within the epoch since 1950 does not matter as much as our reaction to the current relationship between humans and the environment, Pleistocenic or Holocenic. Eco-anxiety is rooted in the explicit fear of and belief in "environmental doom," in categorizing ecological crises as irreversible and annihilating to the point of paralyzation and depression (Philkala 120–121). This is neither productive towards achieving a healthier relationship between humans and earth nor is it accurate. Mankind and environment are always in "processes of 'becoming', shaping and reshaping each other" into new forms and new relationships (Gaitanidis 24). The Anthropocene epoch is inevitable as time and epochs progress, and humans are still mediating the defining characteristics of the Anthropocene. As we reckon with and reconcile our scalar relativity and our role in environment, we must recognize the coexistence of epochs and of their representative geographies; the 'natural' and 'human' worlds are not separated or fixed entities, but existing within culturally mediated spaces that permeate our perceived borders between wild and developed, Pleistocenic and Holocenic/Anthropocenic geographies (Gaitanidis 24).

The solution to the permeation of epochal-anxiety, the perceived impending doom of the Anthropocene, and the supposed ‘death’ of the Holocene is to embrace Catie’s mission to not be a part of the problem through geographic and scalar mediation. The Anthropocene — in whatever form it takes — demands a new approach to the most epochal conflict-ridden geographies, one based in reframing environments from epochal-conflicted to epochal-coexistent. Basing these reimaginations in hybridity, natureculture,²⁷ scalar relativity, and a recognition of the epochal histories, manifestations, and legacies is the solution towards welcoming in the Anthropocene and positively composing the geographies defining our human experiences.

²⁷ Natureculture is Donna Haraway’s concept dismantling the rigid binaries between environmental nature and humanistic culture as posited by ecocriticism, instead arguing toward the cultural perception that the two entities are intertwined and co-constituted. For more information see her 2003 book *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* and her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of geocriticism is to consider its central tenet across place-centered literature and places at large: geography is text and text is geography. In identifying three geocritical lenses through which we gain a deeper, more contextual understanding of Claire Vaye Watkins's *Battleborn* stories and the lands on which they occur, the spatialities of her chosen locales shine through and create ongoing dialogue between the extra- and intra-literary. While my project specifically argues that the external place-makings of Western American geographies affect and inform how we read relationships occurring on and between these geographies, my expansion of geocritical thought aims to argue for greater scholarship examining the exchange between spatialities and storytelling — which, and I cannot overemphasize this, are fundamentally equivalent.

The three environments I have analyzed in *Geocriticism in Depictions of the American West* — the arid Black Rock Desert, the cyclically storied Sierra Nevada Foothills, and peninsular city of San Francisco — comprise only a small portion of the diverse western landscapes burgeoning with geographic and literary stories. I have no doubt that further exploration of *Battleborn*'s remaining works would yield equally compelling and complex interactions between narrative and landscape across their unique settings of Nevada City, Tahoe, and Las Vegas. Furthermore, there remains a plenitude of western American texts teeming with vivid spatial descriptions and begging for geocritical analysis themselves. These texts can demand the use of the geocritical lenses outlined in this thesis — for example, the religious geocolonial lens would certainly apply to the cyclical, interconnected short stories of John Steinbeck's 1932 collection, *The Pastures of Heaven*, which depicts the effects of one plot of Salinas Valley land on a series of settlers — or demand the use of new, singular lenses specific to

one lived-experience or textual depiction — for example, when Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* roots her personal place-makings of Los Angeles within the city's unstable and transient physical and social geographies (earthquakes and the Santa Ana winds and the deceitful nature of Hollywood and those associated with it, respectively), she delineates a geocritical consideration specific to her lived experience and worthy of geocritical exploration.

The journey toward bridging the gap between environmental studies, social geography, and literary analysis has been the terminal goal of my undergraduate studies, oscillating between remote sensing and satellite imagery courses and close-reading seminars on contemporary poetry and New England romanticism. As I reflect on my analyses of *Battleborn* and its depicted spatialities alongside my personal place-makings and histories within western geographies, I now consider how my literary analyses and internalizations of Watkins's geocritical illustrations of the west will inform how I continue to bridge this gap, how I understand my lived-experience atop and within these landscapes, how I enrich existing and forge new relationships with landforms and their consequential social geographies.

It is this mutualistic cycle that remains uninvestigated in geocriticism. The recently emerged foundational texts of geocriticism, authored by and derived from Bertrand Westphal and Robert T. Tally Jr., explore how textual depiction informs extra-literary place-making and lived-experience; my thesis, echoing the established relationship between space/place and literature as set forth by Westphal and Tally, expands on these foundations of geocriticism and argues toward the extra-literary informing textual interpretation. A cyclical mode of place-making and interdisciplinary exchange, therefore, exists between all relevant forces of physical and social geographies, place-making processes, literary analyses, geographic

depictions, lived-experiences, and spatial dynamism. An investigation of this cycle, dawning with geocriticism's increased examination, is the next step in spatial-literary studies.

Furthermore, the inherent openness and flexibility of geocritical studies — in that everything can be and is geography — allows for and encourages further interdisciplinary crossover between all which governs space and defines place: architecture, art, urban planning, policy, weather, psychology, language, and beyond. As all of these components, and more, comprise a singular place, their geographic contributions call for a litany of geocritical lenses that created coexisting lived-experiences simultaneously. In this way, as a single geographic place fosters dozens of interdisciplinary geocritical lenses from its various landforms (and resultant social geographies) *and* from the individual place-makings dependent on *who* occupies that place, these geocritical lenses can exist as palimpsests. This component to geocritical studies posits that when the objectivity of a *space* becomes a *place* through geocritical evaluation, that place-making process allows that geocritical evaluation to sit atop of, to layer, that space in a way that lets that originality remain visible. That visibility allows for the addition of more geocritical palimpsests, made unique by their interdisciplinary focus or individual interpretation, to layer atop prior palimpsests. There exists conversations and conflicts between these palimpsests that, while not yet examined in geocritical studies, promises compelling analyses.

In having started and finished this thesis in the lands of the American West — seriously, every word — I consider the spatialities of California embedded into the entirety of this text. Writing this thesis has certainly been a place-making process itself, in creating definitive meaning out of these landscapes I describe, the pages I write on, the places I write them from. As I continue to consume the American West alongside what will likely be a lifelong obsession with the evocative — and now nostalgic! — landscapes of *Battleborn*, I have no doubt that my

personhood will become even more inseparable from Californian geography in a manner I consider entirely normal, and not at all insufferable nor crazed. I will be somewhere in between the easterly bristlecone pines, the middle fork of the Tuolumne, and the Santa Cruz Mountains, existing atop of and within a storied geography rich with grief, gold, magnitude, megafauna, Joshua trees, quartzes, sisterly love, faultlines, fossils, and deserved elitism.

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