

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: SITUATING WENDELL BERRY IN A TRADITION OF PLACE	1
CHAPTER 1: THE CARE OF AN IMMEASURABLE GIFT: AGRARIANISM AND PLACE	6
CHAPTER 2: CONSIDERING THE RIVER: HUMILITY, NATURE, AND PLACE	17
CHAPTER 3: EXPLORING THE WOUND: RACE AND PLACE	27
CHAPTER 4: THE OPPOSITE OF BELONGING: DISPLACEMENT AND THE PORT WILLIAM MEMBERSHIP.....	42
CONCLUSION: THE WENDELL BERRY VISION FOR TODAY.....	51
APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW WITH JESSE STRAIGHT	53
ENDNOTES	79
WORKS CITED	80

Introduction: Situating Wendell Berry in a Tradition of Place

It is enjoyable to care about things. The most unhappy life is the life of the most indifference, you know? Everything that Wendell Berry is about is having relationships to places and people such that indifference would be a very hard emotion to have.

—Jesse Straight

Wendell Berry's writing impresses upon his readers a very specific and intimate sense of place. In a tradition of Southern literary agrarianism, Berry's ideology is distinguished by its emphasis on an agrarianism rooted in practice rather than merely policy. The Port William membership exists in a small town threatened by "big ideas" such as war, urbanization, the industrialization of agriculture, and conventional notions of self-improvement. In this thesis I will argue that Berry's sense of place is grounded in care and belonging for people and places. To do so, the following chapters will explore themes of farming philosophies, river symbolism, racial wounds, and displacement in his work. The author's biography helps to explain his interest in such subjects.

Wendell Berry was born in 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, a place his family had inhabited for many generations. His understanding of place begins with that generational legacy; he feels dependent on it, arguing, "There is a sense in which my own life is inseparable from the history and the place" ("Native" 171). Today, Berry's farm is in Port Royal, near where he grew up. "Within about four miles of Port Royal," says Berry, "all my grandparents and great-grandparents lived and left such memories as their descendants have bothered to keep...such

history as my family has is the history of its life here” (170-171). Berry’s sense of place is rooted in a geographic family history that extends back several generations.

In addition to his family legacy in Henry County, Berry recognizes his practical and ideological development to be a product of the time in which he was born. He explains, “I began my life as the old times and the last of the old-time people were dying out. The Depression and World War II delayed the mechanization of the farms here” (171). The type of farming that Berry came to know as a child, focused on geographically specific care for the land and embedded partnerships between neighboring farmers, profoundly shaped his life. According to Berry, the historical school of farming into which he was born was rapidly passing away due to the increased mechanization of farming and the growth of agribusiness. He continues, “If I had been born five years later I would have begun in a different world, and would no doubt have become a different man” (172).

After receiving undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Kentucky, Berry began a seven-year stint outside of the state, including two years at Stanford University on a Wallace Stegner fellowship and a year in France and Italy on a Guggenheim fellowship (“Wendell Berry”). By 1962, at the age of twenty-eight, he had attained a post teaching English at New York University. However, even as he was establishing himself in the literary world of New York, Berry felt that he belonged back in Kentucky. He speaks of his eventual decision two years later to return to Henry County as an inevitability: “I never doubted that the world was more important to me than the literary world; and the world would always be most fully and clearly present to me in the place I was fated by birth to know better than any other” (“Native” 175). Berry accepted a teaching post back at the University of Kentucky, and shortly thereafter bought a small farm in Henry County. He taught at Kentucky for a few different stints over the

next twenty years, but eventually left teaching altogether in 1993 to devote himself entirely to his writing and farming (“Wendell Berry”).

Since 1964, Berry has lived on his farm in Port Royal, Kentucky. He has committed his life to that physical place and the surrounding community, and his fictional community of Port William has its roots in his life in Port Royal. As he puts it in the essay “Imagination in Place,” “I have made the imagined town of Port William, its neighborhood and membership, in an attempt to honor the actual place where I have lived” (15). As a result, just as Berry is undeniably rooted in his place, so is his fiction. His nonfiction and poetry are likewise rooted, speaking in one way or another of his place and of issues that affect it and other places like it.

Berry’s writing comes out of a long tradition of Southern authors who have dealt with the notion of place. Eudora Welty’s classic essay “Place in Fiction” is one of the seminal texts in this tradition. In the essay, Welty argues that a work’s sense of place is its grounding factor: “Carried off we might be in spirit, and should be, when we are reading or writing something good; but it is the sense of place going with us still that is the ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and in every sense of the word to bring us home” (545). For Berry, this “ball of golden thread” is in the membership the residents of Port William possess. Welty believed that “Writers must always write best of what they know, and sometimes they do it by staying where they know it” (546). Berry is an exemplar of Welty’s claim, writing continually of the life he knows and doing so from Port Royal, the place where he has known it.

Berry’s specifically agrarian sense of place is part of a literary tradition that begins with the Southern Agrarians, a group of academics who in 1930 published *I’ll Take My Stand*. As one critic describes Berry’s debt, “the Southern Agrarians...provided Berry with the terms that would frame much of his thinking” (Peters 52). *I’ll Take My Stand* is a collection of essays that

speaks largely to the loss of white male southern identity and the encroachment of industrialism upon Southern lands, rooted in an assertion of a certain type of Southernness. As Paul Conkin puts it in his biography of the group, “All the twelve writers assumed southern distinctiveness ...[and] at least four themes pervaded the essays—family, place, leisure, and religion” (85-86). *I’ll Take My Stand* is also characterized by its emphasis on agrarianism, exemplified in essays like John Crowe Ransom’s introductory “Statement of Principles” and Andrew Lytle’s “The Hind Tit,” essays that Berry quotes from and regards highly.

With that said, Berry recognizes a complicated relationship to the book. He calls the book a “wonder” and says that his “debt to it has increased,” but is cautious in his praise because of his fear that its agrarianism is “abstract, too purely mental” (“Imagination” 6, 8). He criticizes the authors’ distance from practice: “As an agrarian book, it mostly ignores...the difficulty and discipline of farming” (8). In general, *I’ll Take My Stand* has been both admired for its influence and eschewed for its racism and hypocrisy, and Berry is willing to do both selectively, recognizing both its impact on him and its flaws as a book.

More recently, critics such as Michael Kreyling and Martyn Bone have questioned the entire notion of sense of place in Southern writing, paying particular attention to the role the Southern Agrarians played in constructing it as an idea. These two argue that sense of place and the agrarianism it is often connected with are not reflections of any reality, so summarized by Bone: “the standard southern literary-critical conception of ‘place’ derives substantially from the Agrarians’ idealized vision of a rural, agricultural society” (vii). Because Berry’s sense of place is rooted in the same agrarianism and he recognizes the Southern Agrarians as influences on him, he has an uphill battle to exempt his fictional community from the criticisms of figures like Bone and Kreyling. How he does so is a critical piece of the project that follows.

Throughout the following chapters, I will draw upon an interview I conducted recently with Jesse Straight, a farmer in Warrenton, Virginia, which is included as Appendix 1. Straight was first drawn to farming after reading Berry's novel *A World Lost*, and he spoke with me at length about the actualities of being a farmer inspired by Berry and seeking to live according to Berry's vision. Straight provides some insight into the significance of Berry's work today, and how his vision can actually change the lives of his readers. Straight argues that Berry's "vision of the good life...is a life of integration," a contrasting vision to that of "the modern life," which is "about all the parts of your life being pulled in ten different directions." He goes on, "that isn't the way humans flourish and were meant to flourish and have flourished throughout history" (56). Berry provides a contrasting vision of life that has been "continually compelling" to Straight, and this thesis seeks to explore and explicate that vision.

In the following chapters, I will examine Berry's writing through the lens of place, seeking to understand his sense of place and the vision of life that comes from it. To do so, I will explore his agrarianism and the generational continuity and local commitment it requires; his various depictions of rivers and how they symbolize humans' necessary humility towards the natural world; his discussion of race in his personal life and its presence in Port William; and his discussion of the opposite of the good life, what it means to be displaced.

Chapter 1: The Care of an Immeasurable Gift: Agrarianism and Place

What [Agrarians] have undertaken to defend is the complex accomplishment of knowledge, cultural memory, skill, self-mastery, good sense, and fundamental decency—the high and indispensable art—for which we probably can find no better name than ‘good farming.’ I mean farming as defined by agrarianism as opposed to farming as defined by industrialism: farming as the proper use and care of an immeasurable gift.
—from “The Agrarian Standard,” by Wendell Berry

Perhaps more than anything else, Wendell Berry is known for his agrarianism. His agrarianism and his sense of place are inextricably linked by the common necessities of intergenerational knowledge and locality—neither agrarianism nor Berry’s sense of place can exist in a context where those two ideals are not valued.

Berry’s agrarianism is predicated on a connection to and love for the land. Though he celebrates the ability of farmers to achieve that connection, he is quick to point out that he is not calling for all to become farmers. As he puts it, “though agrarianism proposes that everybody has agrarian responsibilities, it does not propose that everybody should be a farmer or that we do not need cities.” He recognizes, for example, the necessity of manufacturing to “any thinkable human economy.” Instead of calling for all to become farmers, Berry argues for an agrarian way of thinking that cares about locality— “any manufacturing enterprise should be formed and scaled to fit the local landscape, the local ecosystem, and the local community, and...should be locally owned and employ local people.” This is because “the deciders should live with the results of their decisions” (“Whole” 244). According to Berry, manufacturing and other enterprises need to exist on a local scale because that ensures a burden of responsibility—nobody

willingly destroys that which is their livelihood, that which is their place. Under an agrarian mentality, the motivation to preserve and care for a place is the same for farmers and non-farmers alike.

In conjunction with the importance Berry places on locality is the importance he places on the intergenerational knowledge of a place. Knowledge of a specific place that continues from generation to generation is of immeasurable value to Berry. He has discussed the value of this knowledge and the damage of its absence throughout his writing career, from the younger Berry reflecting in 1969 in *The Long Legged House* on looking at his place in Port Royal, Kentucky and knowing that his family has done the same for many generations, to the older Berry in the novel *Hannah Coulter*, published in 2004, in which the children leaving Port William and thus ending much of the intergenerational knowledge of the place is presented as a deep tragedy.

This tragedy emerges clearly in Caleb Coulter, the son of Hannah and Nathan Coulter, who goes to college with the intention of studying agriculture and returning home to farm. While at school, however, he comes to a different hope for his future. After graduating from his university, Caleb comes face-to-face with the expectations of his father, who tells Caleb of the different farms available to him in Port William. Sounding “alarmed, as if only then he realized what he had to tell,” Caleb responds by announcing to his parents that he is not planning to move home. He has accepted a scholarship to go to graduate school. Hannah tells in her narration,

There was nothing more to say, Caleb didn’t need a graduate degree to be a farmer, and Nathan didn’t say anything. He went on eating. He had his work to do, and he needed to get back to it. Tears filled his eyes and overflowed and ran down. I don’t think he noticed he was crying. (130)

Nathan’s sorrow is both in the recognition that the intergenerational bond with the place has been broken—Caleb was the last of their children that could have stayed—and in the fresh knowledge that his place will not be cared for by people he loves beyond his lifetime. It is the same sorrow

that Jesse Straight anticipated when I asked about his familiarity with the story of Caleb and whether it would feel like a similar break if none of his children chose to farm after him:

I think if all of my kids were sort of like, “No,” I couldn’t help but think I was a failure in that I didn’t live the life in a way that was compelling enough...It’s a common trope that farm kids can’t get off the farm fast enough. It would be very reasonable for me to think that if none of my kids wanted to farm, that I failed. Because that’s my stated goal. (68)

One difference between Straight and Nathan is that Nathan’s assumption would have been that his children would stay, whereas that is not necessarily the case for Straight. However, his assertion that he would feel like a failure if none of his children wanted to stay gives weight to Nathan’s reaction to Caleb.

In his essay “People, Land, and Community,” Berry speaks specifically to why he sees such value in intergenerational knowledge, at the same time recognizing that this reality has grown increasingly rare:

Our crying need is for an agriculture in which the typical farm would be farmed by the third generation of the same family. It would be wrong to try to say exactly what kind of agriculture that would be, but it may be allowable to suggest that certain good possibilities would be enhanced. (193)

Berry recognizes the value of the multigenerational farm as well as its increasing rarity. In proceeding to discuss one of the “possibilities” he refers to in the previous quote, he explains the impact intergenerational continuity has on a farm:

Having some confidence in family continuity in place, present owners would have future owners not only in supposition but *in sight* and so would take good care of the land, not for the sake of something so abstract as ‘the future’ or ‘posterity,’ but out of particular love for living children and grandchildren. (193)

The recognition that this “particular love” out of which he has farmed his land will not result in a descendant on his place is what breaks the heart of Nathan Coulter.

According to Berry, the ideal community is one that has a sense of place rooted in a deep commitment to locality and a longstanding history in its place. Agrarianism produces a

connection to the land that makes both of those commitments possible, though Berry recognizes that both are less easily attained today than ever.

Challenging the connection to the land at the heart of agrarianism is a significant part of Martyn Bone and Michael Kreyling's critique of sense of place as it emerges in much Southern writing. Bone's argument that the return to a certain type of Southernness advocated for in *I'll Take My Stand* is largely fanciful, an "idealized vision" (vii), implies that if Southern conceptions of place today remain rooted in that tradition, they are largely inventions without substance. Throughout his work, Bone seeks to reveal the discontinuity between that vision and the actualities of the real world in the agrarian South.

Kreyling makes a similar claim, inferring from his criticism that agrarianism is based on a false premise. He writes,

Agrarian images of southern 'place' were conceived primarily as a bulwark against capitalism and the threat it posed to the region's relatively stable, largely rural social geography—or perhaps more pertinently, to the *idea* of such a 'southern' geography. Especially *after* the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, the Agrarians conceived (or invented) their 'South' as a site of resistance to capitalism's destruction of 'place' through land speculation, real-estate development, urbanization, and industrialism. (5)

Kreyling is uncompromising in his claim that the sense of place that emerges in many Southern writers is merely the product of the reactive and created Southernness referred to earlier, and indeed, that it is performative rather than reflective of any concrete reality. Bone and Kreyling, among others, speculate that the Southern sense of place that comes out of much agrarian writing is invented, if not entirely mythical.

Berry is quick to condemn any idealized version of agrarianism. He recognizes its inherent problem, arguing in "The Whole Horse," "Our major difficulty (and danger) will be in attempting to deal with agrarianism as 'an idea'—agrarianism is primarily a practice, a set of

attitudes, a loyalty, and a passion; it is an idea only secondarily and at a remove.” He points out shortly after, “I was raised by agrarians, my bias and point of view from my earliest childhood were agrarian, and yet I never heard agrarianism defined, or even so much as named, until I was a sophomore in college.” According to Berry, agrarianism must first be practiced in communities before it can be defined in universities or written about in impassioned essays. Thus his assertion, “I am well aware of the danger in defining things” (238).

Berry’s criticism of the Southern Agrarians is rooted in this emphasis on the importance of practice over idea, and it is a similar criticism in some respects to those of Bone and Kreyling. He voices it in an interview from 1991, arguing, “I think one difference between the Southern Agrarians and me is that I’m much more local than they were.” He goes on,

They saw [agrarianism] as a system of values, as a system of political choices. But it all has to rest on practice. If you’re going to be an agrarian, you *finally* have to ask how you farm, how you use land, how you maintain a rural community. These are all practical questions, and I really don’t think the Southern Agrarians ever got to such questions. (Grubbs 40-41)

This stance marks the primary divergence between Berry and the Southern Agrarians: the question of agrarianism as practice versus agrarianism as policy. For Berry, agrarianism is not fully realized if it is only policy. It is essentially worthless when it is simply defined.

And yet, Berry goes on to define agrarianism for the sake of argument. The question, of course, is whether Berry the writer presents an agrarianism that reflects the truth of Berry the farmer and others like him, or whether Berry himself is guilty of idealizing the reality of farming communities across the South. After all, Berry would not get a pass from Bone and Kreyling simply for acknowledging the reality that agrarianism can be idealized; what matters is whether his portrayal is true to life.

And indeed, Berry is quick to assert that his writings on agrarianism are rooted in the reality of his daily life as a farmer, and his fiction is modeled after the farming community in which he has spent his life. As he writes in his poem “Below,” “What I stand for / is what I stand on” (*Part 21*). This has always been his commitment: to write of what he knows, and to advocate for what he believes to be good about the life that he has lived.

In interviewing Jesse Straight, I hoped to learn about the real world applicability of Berry’s ideology for farmers—is Berry’s presentation of agrarianism simply a nice ideal for non-farmers to read about that farmers regard with disdain, or do farmers themselves appreciate and value his writings? Straight understood where I was coming from, and immediately reframed my question: “Do farmers laugh at Wendell Berry?” (53).

In speaking to this question, Straight acknowledged that Berry was not his model for specific farming practices, largely because of the time of which Berry writes: “His fiction is mostly about farming that happened in the...60s, 70s, and earlier, so...he’s not *so much* writing stories about the modern day Joel Salatin, or the modern-day big-business thirty-thousand-acre corn farmer...that would be more like my context” (60). It should be noted that Straight acknowledged that his experience with Berry’s essays are limited, so his comments are mostly referring to Berry’s fiction. With that said, Straight’s insight is that the specifics of practice that Berry depicts in his fiction are the product of agrarianism manifested in a particular temporal context. In other words, if Berry were in Straight’s shoes and starting out from his position, he may break from the depictions of farming in Berry’s fiction as Straight does. After all, Berry himself applauded the way Straight farms, encouraging him in an interaction the two had at a reading of Berry’s (54). It is not a question of a different vision of life between Straight and Berry, but different manifestations of that vision for farming specific to times and places.

Indeed, the debt that Straight believes he owes to Berry is primarily in terms of vision. Straight repeatedly acknowledges his appreciation of Berry's "vision of the good life" that I discussed in the introduction, arguing, "in terms of how...the Wendell Berry...vision fits into farming, ...now that I've sort of lived it for a while, I'd say that Wendell Berry is right." Straight sees Wendell Berry as the "poet," and another farmer, Joel Salatin, as the "technician," giving more insight into the specifics today for "doing the kind of farming that was compelling as well as making a living and not being...foolish and sacrificing the well-being of my family on my dreams" (58).

With that said, the way Straight talks about the connection he has to his land resembles Berry. When I asked him what that connection was like, he told me,

You learn about [the land] just as you work in it. And then the more you improve land, the more you have skin in the game, you have more affection, and you think, 'Wow, this pasture is awesome, and it's because we've run thirty-thousand chickens over it and it's so fertile, it greens up in the spring first, it's the first to be ready for the cattle to graze it, it's the last to die out, to brown up in a drought.' So you have pride in what you've done, and therefore affection. (65)

He speaks about his connection to his land like an agrarian, recognizing that knowing and caring for his place changes the way he treats it.

Straight's appreciation of Berry is specified and qualified. He is not a naïve fan with an idealized vision of farming drawn from Berry's writing—a problem I spoke to at length—but is a farmer who recognizes both what Berry has to say of value to farmers like him, and the limits to Berry's contributions. It is a vision of life rather than a specific set of practices that Straight has borrowed from Berry.

In Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, the distinctiveness of his agrarian vision emerges through the contrast of Athey Keith and Troy Chatham. The two are unavoidably tied together by

Athey's daughter and only child, Mattie, whom Troy marries with the begrudging support of Athey and his wife, Della. Though it becomes clear to the reader that Troy is a farmer of a different sort than Athey, he eventually comes to oversee the Keith farm after the aging Athey can do so no longer. Once Troy takes over the farm, the differences between Athey and Troy become stark, representative of the conflict between agrarianism and industrialism, the old versus new ways of farming.

Athey Keith is presented as a simple, unambitious man: "He was a good farmer, a man who liked farming and liked his farm" (137). Not only did Athey love farming, but he loved the land that he farmed, and cared for it well: "[Athey] was doing what a lot of farmers say they want to do: he was improving his land; he was going to leave it better than he had found it" (179). Furthermore, Athey was connected to his farm in the agrarian way that Berry celebrates, a connection that extends beyond mere use: "Athey was not exactly, or not only, what is called a 'landowner.' He was the farm's farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his; he knew that, of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter" (182). In this description of Athey Keith, Berry provides a picture of the old school of farming that he grew up knowing and later came to recognize as agrarianism.

Troy Chatham, on the other hand, represents the new school of farming and more broadly, the transformations industrialism has created in new school farmers. The farming of Troy leads to "a way of dependence, not on land and creatures and neighbors but on machines and fuel and chemicals of all sorts, *bought* things, and on the sellers of bought things" (183). Intrinsic in Troy's way of farming is a shift in focus and a different framing question: "[Troy's] question was what his equipment could do, not what the farm could stand. The farm, in a way, became his mirror. The farm never at any time was his reference point, and this was his

bewilderment and his (and its) ruin” (338). Finally, according to Troy Chatham, the only way to success as a farmer is, “modernize, mechanize, specialize, grow” (278).

Troy is devoted to personal profit and growth according to an industrial model of farming. In pursuit of this growth, he destroys his land, damages his community, and ultimately loses his family. His mind becomes the sort that Berry describes elsewhere as the “industrial mind,” “a mind without compunction; it simply accepts that people, ultimately, will be treated as things and that things, ultimately, will be treated as garbage” (“A Defense” 168). Troy rejects the agrarian obligation to care for his land well, choosing instead to maximize production without regard to the costs of the land. What begins as an arable, healthy piece of land becomes exhausted, ruined for the purposes of Troy.

In *Jayber Crow*'s implicit critique of Troy Chatham and the industrial model of farming, Berry is making a case grounded in the notion of belonging—Athey Keith belongs to his land; Troy Chatham does not. Because he does not belong to his land, Troy has no notion of place. The problem with Troy, as Berry presents it, is that he understands his farm not as a distinctive, living piece of land that requires specified care and knowledge, but as a farm in the abstract: simply land, at his service, to be used for his purposes. He is operating according to the tenets of industrialism that Berry describes elsewhere: “Industrialism prescribes an economy that is placeless and displacing. It does not distinguish one place from another” (“Agrarian” 24). Troy’s mindset toward his land is again contrasted with Athey, who treats his land as if it is living and in need of specific care. He has cared for his farm such that “its patterns and cycles were virtually the farm’s own understanding of what it was doing, of what it could do without diminishment” (*Jayber* 182).

Troy lacks the two essential qualities that undergird healthy agrarianism: a sense of locality and an intergenerational legacy. He has come to a piece of land of which he has no knowledge, and has destroyed the place through his commitment to standards and expectations from an industry centered outside of Port William, not dictated by the necessities of his place. He has come from elsewhere and is committed to elsewhere, representing the “placeless and displacing” effects of industrialism that Berry bemoans.

While the story of Troy Chatham grimly presents the effects of industrialism on Port William and places like it, it does not represent Berry’s primary narrative of farmers in Port William. The Port William community is filled with farmers who care for their land well and do much good in that caring. Nathan Coulter is an apt example, a lifelong farmer who consistently makes his place better. After returning from World War II and reestablishing himself in the Port William membership, Nathan buys a neglected and run-down farm, the “Cuthbert place,” which “had been almost abandoned during the war” (*Hannah* 68). He brings Hannah, whom he hopes to marry, to see the place he has bought, telling her, “It’ll never be what it was. It could be better than it is” (71). Nathan recognizes the damage that has been done to the place, in this case by neglect. However, he also recognizes the possibilities—that by good care and devotion, the place could be made better. Alongside Hannah, he takes that as his vocation, doing his work such that Hannah can remark towards the end of her life, “Our place, I am proud to say, shows everywhere the signs of careful use” (84).

There’s also Jack Beechum, the lifelong farmer known in Berry’s fiction as “Old Jack.” In Berry’s novel *A Place on Earth*, Old Jack has moved away from his farm to a hotel in town because he is no longer able to care for himself and his farm in his old age. Upon returning for a visit to his farm to check on Elton Penn, the tenant now farming his land, Old Jack surveys his

property. The narrator relays, “The place itself comes back into his mind. They come together like the two halves of the same thing” (207). The description here of the unity between Old Jack’s mind and his farm is reminiscent of the description of Athey Keith quoted earlier, who “lived [his farm’s] life, and it lived his” (*Jayber* 182). The unity that these old farmers have with their land is the sort that occurs on a place cared for by an agrarian.

There is something inherently limited about critics like Bone and Kreyling asserting the fictitiousness of literary representations of Southern agrarian sense of place from their university offices. Though their arguments are not without merit and speak to a problematic literary conception of agrarianism and place of which Berry himself is critical, they lose credence when applied to the farmer and writer who writes only from the agrarianism that he himself knows and practices, and from the place that he himself resides. As Berry has experienced it, agrarianism produces a real sense of place that causes the residents of that place to care for it better. While it is true that his agrarianism depends on realities that are increasingly rare and dying (a death he recognizes), that does not make those realities fictitious. As the voice of a dying set of values, Berry continues to argue for a way of life that he believes to be the best, most sustainable way to live.

Chapter 2: Considering the River: Humility, Nature, and Place

There is a startling reversal of our ordinary sense of things in the recognition that we are the belongings of the world, not its owners. The social convention of ownership must be qualified by this stern fact, and by the humility it implies, if we are not to be blinded altogether to where we are.

—from “The Rise,” by Wendell Berry

Both an agrarian’s relationship to their farm and an agrarian’s relationship to the entirety of the natural world are predicated on belonging. Wendell Berry’s understanding of what it means to have a sense of place requires recognizing that one belongs to the world, realizing one’s position as member of a community that extends beyond the human. Throughout his work, Berry uses the symbol of the river to make this belonging clear. In its longevity and power, the river represents the status of the natural world, placing humans as subordinates in a position of belonging and subjection rather than ownership.

In his work *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature*, Christopher Rieger defines ecopastoral literature as works that “bring the natural world from the background to the foreground, making nature a presence in its own right, a force that influences humans rather than simply a passive entity to be acted upon” (5). This is a recurring theme in Berry’s work: he goes to great lengths to show the shaping effect of nature on the lives of his characters. Elsewhere Rieger argues, “ecopastorals counter the prevailing assumption that humans are inherently separate from, over and above, the natural world” (12-13). Rieger is making the same argument Berry makes in this chapter’s epigraph: that humans are parts of the

world, not its owners. Among the different elements of Berry's work, his various representations of the river most clearly solidify it as ecopastoral.

One of Berry's earliest collections of essays, *The Long Legged House*, presents the reader with some of his most autobiographical writing. The three concluding essays in particular tell of Berry's childhood and the history of his family, including much on their interaction with the surrounding natural world. Specifically, the essays deal extensively with the influence of the Kentucky River on Berry in his youth, as Berry grew up near its banks.

In the first of the three concluding essays, titled "The Rise," Berry describes an experience of the Kentucky from early in his childhood that began its influence upon him:

The sense of the power of [the river] came to me one day in my boyhood when I attempted to swim ashore in a swift current, pulling an overturned rowboat...I tried grabbing hold of the partly submerged willows along the shore with my free hand, and was repeatedly pulled under as the willows bent, and then torn loose. My arms stretched between the boat and the willow branch might have been sewing threads for all the holding they could do against that current. It was the first time I realized that there could be circumstances in which my life would count for nothing, absolutely nothing—and I have never needed to learn that again. (111)

This lesson taught the young Berry that, rather than simply being a beautiful part of the landscape, the river is a powerful and dangerous force that has no mercy on those who violate its principles. By association, Berry places all of nature in a similar position. As he argues shortly after, "[the river] is apt to stand for and represent to us all in nature and in the universe that is not subject. That is its horror" (112). The river represents the frightening power of the natural world, a "presence in its own right," to borrow Rieger's phrasing, and a presence not always friendly to humans. The reality of the river's power provides the basis for a key part of Berry's sense of place—the horror of the river that comes from its "not [being] subject," and of nature more broadly, requires a humility from humans in the way they interact with it.

In the same collection's title essay, "The Long Legged House," Berry brings his understanding of the river into closer relationship with his sense of place. He describes the woodland cabin on the banks of the Kentucky that belonged to his uncle, Curran Matthews, and remained in his family after his uncle's death. Affectionately called "the Camp," the cabin became very dear to Berry and his wife, Tanya, and was their home the first few months of their marriage (145). Because of its proximity to the Kentucky River, the cabin had to be moved up-shore multiple times to escape the river in times of flood. Speaking of this forced movement, Berry describes the Camp as a "failed boat," and proceeds, "All houses are not failed boats, but all are the failed, or failing, vehicles of some alien element; of wind, or fire, or time" (165). The river had a determinative power over the Camp, acting as a "force that influences humans" (Reiger 5). Berry thus establishes human homes as subservient to the forces of the natural world, laying more of the groundwork for what it means to have a sense of place—that one's physical place is temporary, dependent on the forces of nature.

In its darkness the river
Has worn the country
Into the form it is.
The land is the water's memory. (*Given* 110)

In flood opaque, it is
The land's shaker, giver,
And taker, maker of this place. (*Given* 111)

Berry's poetry frequently includes discussion of the river. The above passages come from one of Berry's "Sabbath poems," from his collection *Given*. They elucidate some important points in Berry's presentation of the river. In the first passage, the poet discusses the river as the land's formative force. The river has formed the place to which the poet belongs; it has been

around much longer than him. Thus, the river becomes a humbling force, reminding the poet of his smallness and finitude. Berry's character Hannah Coulter expresses this same sentiment in speaking of the way she observes the river: "It needed a long look because you had to think of how old it was, and of how many voices had spoken and hushed again beside it" (*Hannah* 34). Berry's characters, and Berry himself, are humbled by how long the river has been in existence and by the depth of experience its banks have seen.

However, Berry does not deal simply with the river's longevity in time. The second passage deals with the river "In flood opaque," when its power is most immediately evident. While the river is the original formative element of the place, shaping the land and directing human habitation, it also re-forms the land in times of flood, taking from places and making them something different. This passage suggests that having a sense of place in light of the river means having a sense of the temporality of one's habitation. Just as Berry discusses the Camp as a boat, so here he presents the idea that one's place is constantly subject to the possibilities of the flooding river, and if not the river, then any other force of nature local to that place. The river exemplifies the broader idea that nature has powers for which it is not beholden to humanity.

In Berry's fiction, the members of Port William have a love and reverence for the river that is qualified by their fear of it. This is certainly the case for Jayber Crow: the river is a force that he loves his entire life, though his experience of the river includes fear and humility at its power. "I loved it from the days I first laid eyes on it," relays Jayber. "I felt, a long time before I knew, that the river had shaped the land" (*Jayber* 18). Jayber's awareness of the river's shaping power in his childhood foreshadows the shaping force the river will be on his own life.

Additionally, it connects Berry's fiction with the rest of his work, immediately calling attention to the age of the river in time.

Jayber loses his parents early in his life, after which he goes into the care of his Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy. These two care for him well, such that Jayber relays in his narration, "Later I would know how blessed I had been" (15). However, their care is temporary—by the time Jayber is ten years old, they have both passed away: "I was a little past ten years old, and I was the survivor already of two stories completely ended" (28). After Aunt Cordie's death, the last of the two, Jayber has to go to a "church orphanage called The Good Shepherd" (30), in which he comes under the influence of the superintendent, Brother Whitespade. Under his leadership, Jayber becomes convinced that he has "received the call" to be a minister (43). Jayber begins training to fulfill this calling, but after a few years and an intense period of questioning, Jayber abandons his training on account of his questions.

This shift in direction commences a period of wandering for Jayber, taking him to Lexington where he begins to barber and attend classes at the university. However, Jayber becomes dissatisfied here as well, eventually leaving Lexington without telling his employer or his landlord where he is going. As he leaves town, he recounts in his first-person narration, "I knew that along the rivers the waters were rising." He leaves "headed westward, for Louisville," but without any real idea where he hopes to end up (74). The river, as it floods, essentially chooses his direction for him, forcing him back towards Port William. Even as its flooding causes destruction and displacement to many, the river becomes a symbol of home: "As I imagined the water rising in the river valley, I seemed to feel it rising in me. That feeling was my old life coming back to me, though I hadn't the words or even a thought for it" (76-77). Crucially, the power of the river returns to Jayber his knowledge of home.

However, though Jayber feels the rising river as a pull towards home, he is not blind to the fear the flood is inducing and the destruction it is causing. “The air was full of the fear of it...It was exactly what Aunt Cordie could make you imagine when she was in one of her end-of-the-world moods” (77-78). Jayber’s experience of the flooding river reminds him of the tales of his Aunt Cordie from his childhood, imagining the state of the world in apocalyptic times. In this is a clear representation of what the river means to Jayber: it is horrifying in its power as an aunt’s apocalyptic tales would be to a young boy, but it also reminds him of home—the tales, after all, are told by an aunt that he trusts and loves.

Once Jayber is back in Port William and integrated into its membership, the river descends to the story’s background, popping up occasionally but playing no major role in his life for several decades. The river has performed its necessary function, returning Jayber to his home.

Towards the end of his life, after a long career as the barber in Port William and an essential part of the town’s membership, Jayber moves to a little cabin on the banks of the river, resembling the Camp that was an important part of Berry’s life (the narrator even refers to the cabin as “the camp house”) (302). The representation of the river in this period of Jayber’s life is different—it is calmer than anywhere else in the novel, providing the major staple of Jayber’s diet through his fishing and acting as an endless source of interest to the aging Jayber. Though he is cognizant to the possibility of the river’s flooding, he believes that if he acts accordingly, he will not be hurt by it: “When you have made everything as safe as you can and are reasonably assured that you won’t have to load up your stuff and go, flood-time will repay you just to sit and watch” (325). So long as he respects the power of the river, Jayber is not threatened by that power. The actual danger leaves the river. As Jayber relays, “the most worrisome part of my life on the river has been my rental property in town”—not any fear of the river’s power (320). The

novel presents Jayber reaping the benefits of living in right relation to the river, as if Berry is dreaming of and imagining what growing old at the Camp would be like in a world with flooding that can be predicted, and when predicted, simply observed.

The relationship between Jayber and the river at the end of *Jayber Crow* shows Berry at his most imaginatively optimistic; the river in *A Place on Earth* shows Berry at his grimmest. Prior to that, however, *A Place on Earth* presents the timelessness of the river—illustrating the manner in which Berry almost always discusses its timelessness and its power beside each other in the same work. The river’s timelessness emerges through a play on the town’s name, Port William. The narrator relays, “It used to be asked, by strangers who would happen through, why a town named Port William should have been built so far from the river. And the townsmen would answer that when Port William was built they did not know where the river was going to run” (26). Through the townspeople’s tongue-in-cheek response, the river becomes a symbol of timelessness; the fact that the town is jokingly referred to as older than the river signifies the fact that the river has always been there. Nobody knows its beginning.

Berry’s grim presentation of the river’s power culminates in the death of Annie Crop. Annie is the daughter of Gideon and Ida Crop, tenant farmers in a low-lying piece of land on the property of the wealthy Roger Merchant. The Crops are reliable, trustworthy farmers, creating order and productivity on otherwise neglected land. Their life turns upside-down when young Annie is swept away by flood waters. She is standing on a little wooden bridge with her dog when the waters come tearing toward her. Once they hit the bridge, “The cables and footboard tear loose at the near end, flinging the girl and the dog up and outward and then down” (117). Thus commences one of the darkest sections in all of Berry’s writing.

Gideon goes in search of his daughter, but ends up in a “regionless darkness,” stuck in a hellish land that he does not know (123). He becomes lost in woods that, considering they adjoined his property, he would have known in normal conditions. The flooding of the river has created a featureless landscape; the land is “changed beyond recognition” (120). Gideon “walks in a dimensionless landscape of which the only characteristic is that each successive footstep proves it solid—of which the only landmarks are the sounds of water flowing, of rain falling” (122). He becomes completely disoriented.

By nighttime, Gideon is exhausted and scared, yearning to hear the voice of his daughter calling out to him so much so that he cannot separate his imaginings from what he really hears. The narrator speaks movingly of Gideon’s longing to hear the voice of his daughter:

In his abjection and misery his desire still knows the sound of her voice answering him: ‘Here I am!’ To his longing for it, her voice has become stronger, superior to his own, assuring and calm. ‘Here I am!’ As if at those words the flood of darkness and water would be cleft by a light like the sun shining on snow, new heaven and earth. (124)

As in the reference to the apocalyptic tales of Aunt Cordie in *Jayber Crow*, this passage hearkens to the end times; Gideon is in the middle of his personal apocalypse. The call of his daughter would “[make] all things new,” as the book of Revelation prophesies will happen in the new heaven and earth (English Standard Version, Rev. 21:5). Gideon’s yearning is ultimately unfulfilled—he searches the entire night and following day, finding no sign of his daughter. She is drowned, her body never to be recovered. In this scene, Berry presents the power of the river in its unadulterated form. The principle to be pulled from it is simply a chilling acknowledgement of the subservience of humans to nature’s power, the humility that Berry’s sense of place requires.

Considering Berry's work as ecopastoral helps clarify how his representations of the Kentucky River differ from another important river in American letters, that of Mark Twain's Mississippi River in *Old Times on the Mississippi*. Berry and Twain understand the function of their rivers in fundamentally different ways. In *Old Times*, the pilots' view of the Mississippi is essentially that it is an alternative roadway, a more efficient way to get from one place to another. Though the river requires study and attentiveness for safe travel, it can ultimately be understood and managed. The river in Berry's writing is discussed differently, stemming from its relation to a piece of land, a local place. Through its relation to that place and the people in it, the river becomes not a "passive entity to be acted upon" as the pilots regard it in Twain's work, but an active force that shapes the lives of those who live near it (Rieger 5). The fundamental difference in Berry and Twain's representations is between traveling on the river and residing near the river—the first inherently acts upon the river, while the second is acted upon by the river.

Old Times on the Mississippi tells the story of the young Twain learning how to pilot on the river. In training to be a pilot, Twain was required to know the river to an intensely specific degree of detail: "You...learn the shape of the river; and you learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that's *in your head*, and never mind the one that's before your eyes" (84). This degree of detail is such that the actual river beneath and in front of the pilot is not what is most important. There is no learning as the pilot goes; the pilot always approaches new parts of the river with the knowledge needed to traverse it. The river thus becomes a theoretical problem to be solved. Ironically, the depth of knowledge the pilot possesses removes any dynamic element from the river, any ability to inspire wonder. Twain argues that in the type of knowledge he came to possess, "[he] had lost the grace, the beauty, the poetry...of the

majestic river” (92). The local river that Berry presents in his writing is significantly different. Where the pilot’s knowledge of the river in Twain causes the pilot to be essentially unconscious of the river, the knowledge of the river that Berry and his characters possess emerges through a distinct consciousness of it, an awareness of its power that leads more to awe than to any attempt to regulate that power.

In *Clear-Cutting Eden*, Rieger criticizes “pastoral texts that uncritically idealize country life” (3). This criticism is similar to that of Bone and Kreyling discussed in the first chapter and one that is commonly meted out on Southern literature, positing that southern authors present a world with no correlative in reality and depict a relationship to nature that is purely idealized. Berry’s presentation of the river exempts him from that criticism. There is nothing easy or ideal about the relationship of humans to the river in Berry’s work. Rather, he presents the river in a manner that serves to humble. The river in his work shows that nature is anything but subservient to human power, fundamentally changing one’s sense of place.

Chapter 3: Exploring the Wound: Race and Place

“The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters.”
—from *Playing in the Dark*, by Toni Morrison

At first glance, the Port William of Wendell Berry’s fiction seems to be an almost entirely white environment. None of his novels or short stories tell the story of a black protagonist, and none of the major figures in the town are black. Is this a problem? More broadly, how is the work of Wendell Berry to be read in regards to race?

Berry’s 1968 essay *The Hidden Wound* sets out to trace the racism in his family history and its impact upon himself specifically and its perpetrators more broadly. He expresses the goal of the text clearly about midway through:

I am trying to establish the outlines of an understanding of myself in regard to what was fated to be the continuing crisis of my life, the crisis of racial awareness—the sense of being doomed by my history to be, if not always a racist, then a man always limited by the inheritance of racism, condemned to be always conscious of the necessity not to be a racist, to be always dealing deliberately with the reflexes of racism that are embedded in my mind as deeply at least as the language I speak. (63)

These words convey sorrow that racism is his natural instinct—Berry bluntly acknowledges that the choice his history requires of him is that he not be racist. In his natural state, he suggests, he is haunted by that instinct.

The Hidden Wound is centered upon Berry’s personal history. Through that history, the reader comes to understand why his natural instinct is to be racist. It is not that his parents and grandparents pushed him in that direction, instructing him to follow their footsteps into racism;

the reality is much more subtle. Berry begins to build this understanding early in the work: “Stories that have come down to me tell me that on both sides of my family there were slaveholders” (4). The stories of these slaveholders were a natural part of his family’s collective history, and not regarded as shameful or hush-hush. Furthermore, he observes, “What interests me about them now is that they were not forgotten, and that they were remembered and retold *casually*” (5). The casual retelling of the stories of his families’ slaveholding troubles Berry not only because slavery is a horror and he feels sorrow that his ancestors owned people; it also troubles him reflexively, because of the impact of slaveholding upon his ancestors, and by extension, on himself. Of course, Berry’s implicit racism is not exclusively the product of his family’s history; racism is a problem entrenched much more deeply in American society than the story of any single family. In tracing his racism through his family’s history, Berry suggests the manner in which his version of implicit racism is rooted in a deeply personal, familial past.

After telling the story of a slave sold to a harsh slave-owner by his great-grandfather, Berry comments, “I feel in the story as it has been told to me a peculiar muteness, which I now know has followed me through all my life; it is the silence with which white men in this country have surrounded the anguish implicit in their racism” (9). This muteness is part of a theme that Berry returns to frequently, the “native language” that he learned in his youth surrounding race. This was an “inherited language, so protective of a crucial silence at its heart” (25). It depended on silence and a sense of propriety in relating to the black laborers of his region. Berry goes on about the story, “It has been told and retold, surely, because in the depths of our souls we all have recognized in it an evil that is native to us and that we cannot escape” (9).

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison makes similar claims about language, providing some context for Berry’s discussion. Her words ring

true to Berry's analysis of his "native language": "For both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive" (13). Berry's "native language" is an example of the "racially inflected language" Morrison references, and as such, his effort to identify and fight it in *The Hidden Wound* is an effort to do the unhobbling Morrison describes. Morrison speaks to how, during its formation, the nation needed "coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart" (6); Berry speaks to the continuation of that coded language in a specific, Southern, twentieth century context.

The narrative of *The Hidden Wound* becomes more personal once Nick Watkins and Aunt Georgie enter the story. Nick and Georgie were black, and they lived and worked on the farm of Berry's grandfather for several of Berry's formative years. In both of them, he found a companion and teacher, and much of *The Hidden Wound* speaks to their influence on him. The following summarizes well their impact on him and the tensions it produced: "The peculiar dynamism and formative power of my memory of them comes, I think, from the fact that all my association with them occurred within a tension between the candor and openness of a child's view of things, and the racial contrivances of the society we lived in" (64-65). The young Berry loved these two individuals and sought them out as role models, and this resulted in an inevitable tension between Berry and his grandparents, and between Berry and the rural white culture in which a genuine friendship with someone of another color was not approved.

One particular instance of this tension came about when Berry was "nine or ten years old," at a birthday party given by his Grandmother:

She invited all the family and perhaps some of the neighbors. I issued one invitation of my own, to Nick. I believe that in my eagerness to have him come, and assuming that as

my friend he ought to be there, I foresaw none of the social awkwardness that I created. But I had, in fact, surrounded us all with the worst sort of discomfort. Nick, trying to compromise between his wish to be kind to me and his embarrassment at my social misconception, quit work at the time of the party and came and sat on the cellar wall behind the house. (68)

In considering what exactly he did in this act, Berry remarks, “I had done a thing more powerful than I could have imagined at the time; I had scratched the wound of racism, and all of us, our heads beclouded in the social dream that all was well, were feeling the pain” (69). Where an older Berry may have been more self-conscious or wary of causing social discomfort, the young Berry immediately saw the solution to the problem he had created: he had to go and be with Nick. “If Nick had no place at my party,” he goes on, “then I would have no place there either; my place would be where he was” (69). He concludes, “I was full of a sense of loyalty and love that clarified me to myself as nothing ever had before. It was a time I would like to live again” (70).

Berry’s tracing of his personal history is the enactment of another of Toni Morrison’s wishes—that authors, white and black, would examine not only racism’s effect on its victims, but its effect on its perpetrators. This point is what Morrison argues for in this chapter’s epigraph, and what Berry attempts in *The Hidden Wound*. He recognizes that his mind and imagination are lessened by the racism he finds in his nature, and he speaks to the real negative effect that racism has on its perpetrators in his part of the world.

Speaking as a farmer, Berry sees part of the wound coming from the work that whites forced blacks to do—thus not doing the work themselves. He argues that the type of work black laborers were forced into was an essential type of work. As he puts it, “What we should have learned willingly ourselves we *forced* the blacks to learn, and so prevented ourselves from

learning it” (108). The historical roots of this forcing into labor are in slavery, and according to Berry, the forcing has continued in farming communities like his up to the time of his writing.

However, recognizing that he is painting in broad brush strokes, Berry makes one qualification: he argues that throughout the history of his part of the world, there have been some white laborers who have done the work into which blacks have typically been forced. Though it has been predominantly black labor, it is not as simple as the blacks exclusively doing the difficult, gritty work, and the whites doing the less difficult work. Clarifying this point gives even more credence to the argument he makes about how whites understood that kind of labor:

Between whites and blacks even as laborers there has been a radical difference both of attitude toward life in the world and of response to the work they had to do. The operative concept in this difference seems to me to have been the white man’s idea that certain work was ‘nigger work.’” (106)

This is a conception of work that Berry unequivocally condemns. According to Berry, there is a parallel effect on white people in the devaluing of an entire type of work—the whites lost something in forcing black slaves, and later black laborers, into the most difficult work, because there is a knowledge of the land and a connection to the place that can only be gained by doing that kind of work. He goes on, “The work that had been done there on my home ground [was] either by despised men or by men who secretly despised themselves for doing the work of despised men” (117). According to Berry, even the white men who labored at “nigger work” missed its importance because they saw the work as degrading.

Berry believes that white peoples’ despising of an entire category of labor that came from despising those who were forced to do that labor has caused them a great deal of harm. In addition to the practical fact of not being as equipped to do the work that needs to be done, there is psychological damage that comes from it: “The notion that one is too good to do what it is necessary for *somebody* to do is always weakening...in a society that sense of superiority can cut

off a whole class or a whole race from its most necessary experience” (142). While the black laborers themselves were obviously cut off from a great deal, according to Berry, the white landowners were also cut off from something—both are wounded by white racism.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Berry argues that white racism has prevented white people from knowledge and relationship with those it needs to learn from. He speaks of how, after returning to his native Henry County in 1964, he surveyed his land and “thought back to the time before the brief violent spasm of my people’s history there, to the thousands of years when the Shawnees and their forebears lived in the country in its maidenhood, familiar with it as they were with their own bodies” (117). He goes on to say that he, after further reflection, “began to understand how the racism of my people has been a barrier not just between us and our land but between us and our exemplary predecessors” (118). Racism is by nature a lessening of possibilities for racists because it limits their teachers to those who look like them. Berry argues that the racism of his people has led to the loss of valuable and irreplaceable lessons.

Ultimately, according to Berry, slavery and racism have kept white Americans from fully realizing their own humanity. Berry is not blind to their effects on black people, but speaks from the personal perspective of their impact upon him and people like him, and from the realization that the lesser studied narrative is how their own actions have negatively affected white people.

Whereas *The Hidden Wound* shows Berry doing much of what Toni Morrison calls for in *Playing in the Dark*, his fiction can be read according to another of Morrison’s ideas—that of the “Africanist presence.” Morrison defines this term in response to generations of historians and literary critics ignoring the influence of Africans and African-Americans on American literature.

According to Morrison, there is a set of accepted conventional knowledge that holds “traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans, and then African-Americans in the United States” (4-5). She proceeds, “Such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence” (5). Ultimately, she is calling for a reexamination of American literature to see the ways in which this “black presence” has shaped it (5).

While there is a shaping Africanist presence in the background of which Morrison wants to make her readers aware, there is also a specific depiction of characters of African descent in American literature, an Africanist presence that is created rather than authentic—what Morrison terms “American Africanism” (6). In coining this term, Morrison calls for “an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). These two terms provide corollary ideas: American Africanism is the conscious creation by American authors to show a certain type of “Africanlike” character, while the Africanist presence is there typically without the author’s recognition, in the background because of the unacknowledged influence of individuals of African descent upon the author and American society more broadly.

In Berry, both of these ideas are at work. He creates unique American African characters, unified by a common sense of mystery that is the manifestation of the Africanist presence. The American African characters deeply affect the white characters, though that effect seems to differ from Morrison’s construction in that Berry’s narrators seem to be aware of the Africanist presences, and Berry himself recognizes his debt to influences that are black.

Before moving away from *The Hidden Wound*, I need to address the character of Aunt Georgie. There is a real sense of mystery about this character who shaped the young Berry, reinforced by the manner in which he describes her. Though he paints a fairly concrete image of her physical features— “short and squat, bowlegged, bent, her hands crooked with arthritis”—his description of her character has a note of mystery throughout (38). In the same paragraph he speaks to how “her arrival at Nick’s house made that one of the most intriguing places that my brother and I had ever known,” how she had “an almost haughty mannerliness that gave a peculiar sense of *occasion* to [our] visits,” and how “there was something in her presence that kept you always conscious of how you were acting” (39). None of these descriptions are particularly bizarre or striking, but taken together, they create a certain type of fogginess, of imprecision about who or what exactly Aunt Georgie is, that becomes characteristic of Berry’s American African characters.

As he continues speaking of Aunt Georgie, it becomes clear that, of everything about her, Berry remembers her stories most distinctly. There is an exoticness to them that clearly hearkens from a heritage different than his own. She tells of the lion tamer who “used to put his head in a lion’s mouth, and one morning . . . nicked himself shaving and when he put his head into the lion’s mouth that day, the lion tasted his blood and bit his head off” (46); she tells of the “hoop snake,” who “when he found himself on the top of a hill . . . was apt to whip himself up into the shape of a wheel, and go flying off down the slope at a dazzling speed” (47). These stories show her as an American African character with something distinctly other about her, but significantly, she is not a fictional creation. Instead, she is a beloved friend, a shaper of Berry’s younger years. As Berry’s first American African character, because she emerges from his own life, Aunt Georgie gives some credence to future representations of similar characters in his fiction.

Berry's fiction includes a number of American African characters. There is Aunt Fanny, the character modeled after Aunt Georgie, who does something similar for Berry's fiction to what Aunt Georgie does for *The Hidden Wound*. There is Joe Banion, a lifelong black laborer on Mat and Margaret Feltner's farm whose death leads Hannah Coulter to reflect, "Oftentimes I think of him and of his people, never very numerous in Port William, but here with us from the beginning, members of us, though now entirely gone. Their story here is a sorrow. It was always incomplete, and its ending did not complete it" (*Hannah* 94). This excerpt shows the consciousness of Berry's narrators of the Africanist presence at work in Port William—Hannah as narrator, and the majority of Berry's narrators, are aware both of the influence of the black characters and of the limit of their membership. "Joe Banion's people" were members; they belonged, yet their belonging was never complete. There is no naiveté in her discussion of the black laborers in Port William. She recognizes both their belonging and yet their entirely unfulfilled history in the place.

The story of Will Wells from *The Memory of Old Jack* provides the most complex formulation of race in Berry's fiction. Will is a black tenant farmer on "the Farrier place," a farm purchased by Jack that extends the work required of him beyond what he can accomplish on his own (58). He hires Will to help him with the work, providing housing for him and his family on the Farrier place. The two men enter into a partnership.

The entirety of the story of Will is told in five pages, and the tone of the story is foreboding throughout. There is nothing threatening about Will as the narrator describes him, but the reader is struck with the sense that there is a force in him that Jack will have to reckon with. As he is first described, "[Will] was a strongly built dark man, whose eyes had a straight, calm look that Jack liked... He was said to be a good worker, a quiet man, one who could be depended

on” (58). Berry is in danger here of falling into what Morrison calls an “economy of stereotype,” which “allows the writer a quick and easy image without the responsibility of specificity, accuracy, or even narratively useful description” (67). As is the trend with Berry’s black characters, Will Wells is a bit of a mystery. He never speaks in the five pages devoted to the two’s relationship.

The two enter into a partnership in which they cooperate “like the two hands of a single body, anticipating each other’s moves like partners in a dance” (*Memory* 59). They work together so well that others begin to recognize their effectiveness as a pair, such that “when the two of them stepped up, other men stood back” (59). However, their relationship, rooted in the work they do together, does not go beyond that working relationship. It is a “brotherhood...of an intensity that Jack would know only that once,” but a brotherhood restricted to their work (59). There is a strange and mysterious relationship, an unspoken and ambiguous intimacy.

Their conflict begins with the (again unspoken) recognition in both of them (though in Will we see it only through the eyes of Jack) that, though they are equal before their work, they are unequal in their place. The “small domestic order” that Will creates with his family, according to the narrator, “was almost accidental, a passing fact like a day or season, its impermanence full of sorrow that Jack recognized by an impulse of sympathy that was deep, for he liked the man” (61). This impulse seems to be Jack recognizing his common humanity with Will, recognizing that Will is no different than he. However, Jack fails as a character because that recognition comes from an impulse rather than a conscious thought. Just as Berry’s black characters are imprecise and foggy in his descriptions of them, so here is Jack’s feeling towards Will imprecise and foggy. This imprecision hints at the hidden wound; Berry argues, “If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would

receive the mirror image of that wound in himself" (*Hidden* 2). The "mirror image" of the wound is reflected in Jack's feeling towards Will.

Jack's sympathy is ultimately inadequate—the passage from *Old Jack* quoted above continues, "And yet he strove against it because he saw in it the threat of an anguish that would be his own" (61). Though I am wary of making claims for a connection between narrator and author, it seems that Berry may be hearkening back to the mind of his grandfather one generation out from slaveholding, feeling the pull for relation with his black laborers (one of whom was Nick Watkins), yet feeling a certain threat in their presence—an imprecise threat, to be sure, but a felt threat nonetheless.

Though their racial difference is the most obvious difference between Jack and Will, the narrator roots the eventual conflict in their difference in land ownership. According to the narrator, speaking out of insight into the minds of both characters at this point:

There came between them in the third year, not an open break, but a disharmony, a withdrawal from the center of their agreement. . . In Will this was the result of a failure of interest that had been immanent all along in his knowledge that his labor formalized and preserved no bond between him and the place; he was a man laboring for no more than his existence. On Jack's side of the difference there was an increasing resentment of his dependence and a jealous remembering of days before he met Ruth, when in his solitary work he had been so free. (61)

This explanation of Jack's resentment expands on the threat he feels—his partnership with Will decreases his independence. In the context of the novel, this desire for independence is a flaw in Jack, representative of his unwillingness to need and be needed by the Port William community—at the heart of how Berry defines "proper community" elsewhere ("Racism" 63). However, Jack still owns the land, and Will does not; he receives the primary profit from the labor of these two men, because the land is his. In this reality is Will's trouble—because the place does not belong to him and he does not belong to the place, his work is not ultimately his.

In rooting their growing conflict in ownership rather than race, Berry is unifying the two races in a common reality—there is no substitute for owning the place where you live. This fact is especially true of farmers, whose life is lived and whose livelihood is made by and upon their place. In *A Place on Earth*, the narrator describes John Crop, a white tenant farmer living a few decades before Old Jack, with the same sentiment: “[John Crop] spoke out of the silence a man must keep when all abundance and order in his sight are to his credit but not in his possession” (115). John Crop, like Will Wells, is silenced by having to work and cultivate a place that does not belong to him.

All of this conflict between Jack and Will culminates in a brief fight between the two men, wrestling against each other’s wills. The following narration picks up in the midst of the fight:

Jack feels suddenly a change in himself. It is the irresistible change of revelation—unexpected, to the end of his life never quite accountable. Locked in that desperate double embrace, he has come aware as never before of the man he is fighting. He feels in his hands the heat and sweat and anguish of the man, Will Wells. He feels the presence of the man, the desire and energy and frustration never contained in the narrow order of their workdays... Their anger has carried them beyond the prescribed bounds, and for Jack, perhaps because his own grievance is momentary compared with that of the other man, the revelation is quick to come. And it is disarming. Helplessly, he feels his anger leave him. As evenly matched as they are, that makes a critical difference. (63)

The awareness of the other man coming only in the midst of the “double embrace,” Will’s frustration that Jack feels only in his physicality (what he “feels in his hands”), the reality of “prescribed bounds”—all of these facets contribute in making Will something other. In the description of him in *Old Jack*, Will emerges as the most distinct American African character in Berry’s fiction.

After Jack’s realization and subsequent weakening, Will punches him in the face once, and Jack falls to the ground, expecting another blow. The next blow does not come; Will simply

walks away. He remains on the farm a short time longer, but while he remains, there is “between them now...a silence against which they have no speech” (64). This is Will’s last appearance in the novel.

One final note on race in Berry’s fiction: for all his inclusion of black characters in the Port William community, he has never written a story or novel with a black narrator. Is this a problem? His comments on the black writer Ernest Gaines in his essay “American Imagination and the Civil War” provide some insight:

Ernest Gaines has been true to his place, his people, and their story. He has shown that the local, fully imagined, becomes universal. He has brought his place and his people to such a pitch of realization that again and again as I read him he seems to speak also for me and mine. (27)

According to Berry, the thread of humanity that Gaines traces in his work is the same that runs through Berry’s work. But Berry does not claim to be able to speak for the black experience of an individual in Port William. He can speak to how he understands their experience, but chooses to leave the narrating of that and similar experiences to those who have walked in the same shoes—like Ernest Gaines.

I am owned by the blood of all of them
who ever were owned by my blood.
We cannot be free of each other. (*Collected Poems* 57)

These lines, from Berry’s poem “My Great-Grandfather’s Slaves,” reveal further the manner in which he is haunted by the legacies of slavery in his family’s history, and by the racism that has continued in its wake. There is a deeply sorrowful tone about these lines and the rest of the poem from which they come.

However, like much of the rest of Berry's work, these lines are not without hope. They point to a reality critical for healing that Berry speaks of elsewhere: recognizing that slavery and racism have created a deep wound within people both white and black allows hope for healing. If slavery and racism are primarily discussed in terms of the damaging effects they have had on their victims, there is an inevitable power dynamic created on top of the one white people have held through slavery and racism—white people are in a position to point to what needs to be done for black people (or people of any other color) to heal. However, if slavery and racism have created a common wound in people both white and black, healing and reconciliation means coming together to heal that wound. This is Berry's final point in *The Hidden Wound*:

It is not, I think, a question of when and how the white people will 'free' the black and the red people. It is a condescension to believe that we have the power to do that. Until we have recognized in them the full strength and grace of their distinctive humanity we will be able to set no one free, for we will not be free ourselves. When we realize that we have an enormous lot to learn from them, that they possess a knowledge for the lack of which we are incomplete and in pain, then the wound in our history will be healed. Then they will simply *be* free, among us—and so will we, among ourselves for the *first* time, and among them. (145)

Berry ends with hope. Though our racial history as a nation has left all of us wounded, according to Berry, there is hope for healing in reconciliation and mutual belonging.

My next chapter will consider displacement in the writing of Wendell Berry, a theme with some overlap to his presentations of race. I previously mentioned Joe Banion and his "people" belonging to Port William, yet their belonging never being complete. That itself is a sort of displacement, and we see its effects particularly after Joe dies. Joe's wife, Nettie, moves to Cincinnati with Joe's mother, Aunt Fanny, to be with a sister of Nettie's. In discussing their departure, the narrator of *Old Jack* relates that,

[Mat Feltner] wanted her to stay, not just for Margaret's sake, but because he felt that Nettie—and, even more, Aunt Fanny—belonged there. On the other hand, he could not

blame them for leaving. All their kin had gone, and Nettie, who had never learned to drive, felt that she was too old to learn. She wanted to go.

The narrator goes on, “Mat was little enough concerned with ‘the race problem’ in those days, but his bonds with those people went deep” (11). According to *Old Jack’s* unnamed narrator, Mat cares for Nettie and Aunt Fanny simply as friends with whom he is bonded by time and place. This description is certainly an oversimplification, though it is unclear whether Mat or the narrator is doing the oversimplifying; one would think that having deep bonds with them would necessitate concern with the “the race problem.” Yet, the friendship Mat and Margaret share with these women leads to a vastly different presentation of race relations from later in the same book, when the narrator relates the story of Jack and Will Wells.

In the Spring following Nettie and Aunt Fanny’s departure, Mat and Margaret go to visit them in Cincinnati. The visit is brief and uncomfortable; though the narrator tells that Nettie is “glad to see them” and expresses how much she misses Port William, she is “strange to them suddenly, no longer held to them by any common ground” (11). Aunt Fanny is “shrunk and resigned,” leading the narrator to wonder, “Where was her garden, where were her plants and speckled hens, where were the long paths of her rambles in the pastures and the woods?” (12). As is commonplace in Berry, he seems to be reticent to enter the minds of his black characters, leading the reader to speculate on the state of Nettie and Aunt Fanny primarily through the experience and consciousness of Mat and Margaret. That leads the reader to see them as displaced in their change of physical residence, and to see Mat and Margaret as displaced by Nettie and Aunt Fanny’s departure, their place fundamentally changed by the leaving of members.

Chapter 4: The Opposite of Belonging: Displacement and the Port William Membership

*Calling his neighbors together in to the sanctity
Of their lives separate and together
In the one life of the commonwealth and home,
In their own nation small enough for a story
Or song to travel across in an hour, he cries:*

*From the union of self-gratification and self-annihilation,
Secede into the care for one another
And for the good gifts of Heaven and Earth.
—from “The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough
Branch, Secedes from the Union,” by Wendell Berry.*

Though the story of Nettie and Aunt Fanny provides a helpful transition and one picture of what displacement looks like, it differs from the dominant narrative of displacement in Berry’s fiction because of the circumstances of Joe’s death and the nature of how race shapes their experience. The dominant theme of displacement in Berry’s work stems from the inextricable tie between sense of place and agrarianism, and thus the inevitable displacement that comes from an abandonment of agrarian values. Berry speaks at length to this displacement—what happens when people do not belong to a specific place? How are farming communities like Port William affected by the displacement that comes increasingly often in the (post)modern world?

In Berry’s fiction, belonging to the Port William membership comes when his characters belong to their place. This phrase of “membership” is used throughout his fiction to describe the community of the residents of Port William, an imagined community that Berry recognizes as a sort of ideal:

In writing about Port William over the last 50 years, I have more and more consciously asked myself to suppose that a group of people in a little community do consciously understand themselves as a membership. This sort of supposing is as much addressed to imagination as it is to observation. I don't think realism, by its terms, can suppose any such thing. (Grubbs 208)

This is consistent with how Berry has discussed his fiction, as a sort of completion of reality, where “in the effort to tell a whole story, to see it whole and clear, I have had to imagine more than I have known” (“Imagination” 4). It stems from his experience in Port Royal, but ultimately reaches beyond it to explore a fuller kind of membership.

The membership is defined frequently in Berry's fiction, but nowhere more clearly than in *Hannah Coulter*, which includes an entire chapter narrated by Hannah that describes it. One of its most notable features is the economic purpose it serves for the community of farmers around Port William: “Every account was paid in full by the understanding that when we were needed we would go, and when we had need the others, or enough of them, would come” (94). Work is seen here as a communal act in which it is right for the members to depend on one another. This is an aspect of the membership that Jesse Straight recognizes he does not have at his farm in Warrenton, pointing out that his collaboration with other local farmers is “not what it is in the Wendell Berry stories of, ‘Alright, time to get our firewood, let's all get together and cut firewood and we'll do a day at your place, a day at mine.’” Straight proceeds to point out that the distance between him and other like-minded farmers makes that sort of collaboration impossible (75-76). His point highlights an important feature of the membership: their proximity to each other. It is a membership of neighbors helping neighbors.

Additionally, the membership allows for participants to live such that their work is not divorced from their community and family. Rather, each are inextricably tied to the other. Work, community, and family unite in the common rhythms of daily life. Unlike his farming in

comparison to the close collaboration, Straight sees this part of the membership as a possibility. In fact, it is this vision of a unified life that first drew him to Berry. Speaking of his mindset in deciding to farm and his continued perspective on the life he has chosen, he asserts, “I want to have something that is coherent with the rest of my life. I don’t want to go ding the box and the cash comes out, and then I go ding this box and the food comes out, and I go ding this box and the kids come out. I want it to be all mixed in together” (57). Straight is speaking of the unified life that Berry depicts in the Port William membership.

The membership is an expansive community as well, as Hannah explains: “The membership includes the dead. Andy Catlett imagines it going back and back beyond the time when all the names are forgotten. The members...are born into it, they stay in it by choosing to stay, and they die in it. Or they leave it, as my children have done” (94). The nature of the membership is tied to an agrarian sense of place. As Hannah views it, the membership depends upon locality, enduring residence in a specific place, and a distinctive knowledge of and connection to that place.

Later in *Hannah Coulter*, after Hannah has described her children leaving Port William and how that has affected both her children and the Port William community, she speaks of the necessary tethers of membership as compared to the “freedom” of the “life of employment”:

One of the attractions of moving away into the life of employment, I think, is being disconnected and free, unbothered by membership. It is a life of beginnings without memories, but it is a life too that ends without being remembered. The life of membership with all its cumbers is traded away for the life of employment that makes itself free by forgetting you clean as a whistle when you are not of any more use. (133-134)

According to Hannah, one of the most essential elements of the membership is that you are known and valued for the role you play in it, and you will be remembered when you are gone. In the opposition she sets up between the life of membership and the life of employment, Hannah

establishes the difference between the two lives—the life of membership values you as a member, while the life of employment values you as a producer. Much of her argument is based on how the two types of individuals will be remembered: if you are simply a producer, you are easily replaceable. However, if you are a member, your belonging is intrinsic, not tied to what you produce, and thus you are valued much more deeply.

In the context of that formulation of membership, displacement that changes the membership would inevitably be depicted as a loss. In Berry's fiction, displacement occurs from the effects of "big ideas" on the small town of Port William. It is geographically rooted, but also has spiritual and psychological effects. Displacement occurs through war, urbanization, and a disconnect between Port William and conventional notions of self-improvement.

I discussed the departure of Hannah's son Caleb in Chapter 1: he leaves to pursue an education that he initially hopes will equip him for his future as a farmer in Port William, only to decide afterwards that he does not want to come back, though he seems to remain haunted by his departure. He is representative of Hannah's belief that "the way of education leads away from home" (112). Education here functions like the machine in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, where "tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety" (16); education is the "noise crashing through harmony" in Hannah's experience of Port William (17).

The novel suggests that Caleb, in particular, was of the sort that belonged in Port William. Though the departures of Mattie and Margaret, Hannah and Nathan's other two children, are spoken of with sorrow, there is not nearly the same sense of wrongness in Hannah's first-person narration of them. In speaking of Mattie's departure, Hannah says,

When Mattie finally grew all his feathers and flew off to the university, it broke my heart again, but it was a relief. I know it was a relief to him. And in different ways it was a relief to Nathan and me. It was *his* life that Mattie was living in after that, not ours. And once he was out from underfoot, Nathan was proud of him, for he did well. (123)

According to Hannah's two representations, the difference between Mattie and Caleb is that Mattie's life was meant to be different from hers and Nathan's, while Caleb's should have been the same.

It matters that the reader is not given Caleb's perspective on the matter; the degree to which I can say with certainty how his leaving affects him is limited because of that. However, for what it is worth, Hannah speaks to it at length: "He didn't love farming enough to be a farmer...but he loved it too much to be entirely happy doing anything else." She goes on, "He is always trying to make up the difference between the life he has and the life he imagines he might have had" (131). From the picture Hannah provides in her narration, it seems that in breaking his bond with the place, Caleb lost something that was meant to be his. That is not the case with Mattie, and the suggestion seems to be that there is a type that belong to Port William and communities like it, represented by Caleb, and there is a type that do not, represented by Mattie. Perhaps both are displaced by the end of the novel, but Caleb seems to feel it much more distinctly.

The impact of leaving on the next generation is even more poignant. The leaving of Hannah's children breaks the connection between grandparent and grandchild. This severed connection emerges in the way Hannah feels the break with her grandchildren. Her relationship with Mattie's children, significantly unnamed in the novel, is the clearest manifestation. It is spoken of as a greater break even than the break with Mattie:

My love for Mattie's children was made in my love for Mattie, but it was also made in Port William. It doesn't fit the children, who had their making elsewhere, and they don't

fit it. It is a failed love, and hard to bear. For me, it is hard to bear. The children don't notice, of course, and don't mind. (125)

As Hannah understands it, the tragedy is compounded in that it is one-sided. Granted, as with Caleb, the reader is only provided with her perspective, it seems that she is the only one who feels sorrow at the broken relationships with her grandchildren because only she knows what those relationships could be under the context of living in the same place. She proceeds, "When they leave I am sad to see them go, and I am sad that it should seem right that they should be gone" (125). The bond with Port William that only comes from a life there has been broken. In this instance, Hannah is displaced because she is missing a fuller sort of life surrounded by generations of her family; the children are displaced because they have lost the opportunity to be a part of the membership.

In addition to the displacement that comes about from people leaving Port William, Berry vividly depicts the displacing effects of war on the town, and more broadly, the way large-scale actions and actors impact small-scale places that have nothing to do with them. In Berry's fiction, World War II is a seminal event, what one critic calls "the great climacteric" of his fiction (Kauffman 19). It has a profound effect on Port William, rocking the community in a manner in which only an event of that sort could do. Because the Port William membership of the 1930s and into the war years of the early 1940s is focused on locality and communal responsibility, the only real factor with the power to destroy it is that which removes its people from itself. The membership is part of the very lifeblood of the town.

World War I begins the process of displacement, as illustrated in the minor character of Ernest Finley, but World War II represents a more significant turning point in Berry's fiction, making displacement increasingly more likely. Port William is further opened up to loss and

increasingly greater possibilities of loss. In the wake of World War II, in large part through greater urbanization and more industrial modes of farming, people were increasingly taken away from communities like Port William. In his work on the state of small-town America, Richard Davies refers to that trend, arguing that because of it, there was a “period of stagnation and decay that descended upon America’s Main Streets following the Second World War” (2-3).

Ernest Finley’s experience of the First World War and his recognition of the “implausibility” that the war could have picked him out represents more broadly the experience of war for those in the Port William membership: though the war affects them, it is not about them. Ernest returns home permanently crippled, handicapped, and silenced regarding what the war has done to him: “[Ernest] came back with...two things he could neither speak of nor forget: his defeat, and the implausibility of the fact that something so vast as a war had picked out and defeated so small a thing as one man, himself” (*Place* 34). As the narrator points out in *Jayber Crow*, “[Port William] knows always that a decision unfeelingly made in the capitols can be here a blow felt, a wound received” (140).

Indeed, this is the case with the Second World War. Similar to Ernest’s experience of the First World War, members of Port William are brought into a conflict that has nothing to do with them. The large-scale war displaces the town itself. Because the membership is central to the town’s self-identification, the loss of members at an age and a time in which their death is unnatural makes the town something different. It is a reality *Jayber Crow*’s narrator mourns in stating, “A nation is an idea, and Port William is not. Maybe there is no live connection between a little place and a big idea. I think there is not” (143). As a subsidiary to the “big idea,” Port William is inevitably changed against their will by global war. The Second World War has a big impact on Port William: Hannah Coulter loses her first husband, Virgil; Nathan Coulter’s

brother, Tom, is lost in the war; and Nathan himself comes back deeply affected by it, never to speak of it to Hannah, whom he marries after returning from the war.

Where does Berry's discussion of displacement in Port William leave his readers? Is the contemporary world a hopeless (non)place for those who wish to live placed like the members of Port William? Berry argues that it does not have to be. Specifically, his discussion of the hope in both urban and rural places gets to the answer of this question. He argues that there is nothing in cities that makes them inherently displacing:

City people have places—have the earth underfoot—just like country people. In city and country, the most necessary job of work now is to recover the possibility of neighborliness between ourselves and the other people and other creatures who live where we do—both on the earth and in the local neighborhood. (Grubbs 22)

According to Berry, the great task is to recover neighborliness, indicating that its opposite is at the heart of what it is to be displaced—self-mindedness, retreating into one's shell. This is in large part Berry's solution to displacement for both city and country places—the need and task at hand is the same. He proceeds with a necessary qualification: “That work cannot be done by people who move often, just as it cannot be done by absentee owners, officials, and experts” (22). According to Berry, it is possible to have a sense of place in an urban setting, but it requires two realities that he finds to be more difficult in those places: neighborliness and longevity.

In her old age, Hannah Coulter reflects on the transitory nature of cities in trying to understand the lives her children have lived, and the broader cultural abandonment of places like the one to which she has committed her life:

Most people are now looking for ‘a better place,’ which means that a lot of them will end up in a worse one. I think this is what Nathan learned from his time in the army and the war. He saw a lot of places, and he came home. I think he gave up the idea that there is a better place somewhere else. There is no ‘better place’ than this, not in *this* world. (83)

She speaks to both urbanization and war. Though she is not implying that soldiers are traveling with the goal of finding a better place, there is an implication in Hannah's words that warfare is in part this same pursuit of a "better place," simply on a larger scale. In addition to a subtle critique of war, Hannah is critiquing the notion that success inevitably means leaving home; that there is always a place to which one must advance. Her premise fits both for rural people and for urban people, thus coming in line with Berry's belief that it is possible to be placed wherever you are; what it takes is recognizing that reality.

Berry explicitly acknowledges the potentiality of membership in today's world in a more recent interview:

I certainly do think it is possible to live as a member in a city or a suburb or wherever you are...I guess I would say that a better question is whether or not you can know yourself as a member in a city or a suburb or wherever you are. When enough people in a place know themselves as members, then I believe the place will change for the better. (Grubbs 206)

In other words, membership is possible when enough people see that it is necessary and that they belong to it. While Berry would argue that the awareness of membership is more difficult and rare in cities and suburbs because of their transitory nature, he sees it as a possibility. Though displacement abounds, there is hope of membership in the contemporary world.

Conclusion: The Wendell Berry Vision for Today

In writing this thesis, I hoped to explore the “so-what” question: what is the significance of Wendell Berry’s writing today? How does his vision of life affect real people? I pointed to the themes of care and belonging as essential to his work and at the heart of his sense of place. Care and belonging are central to each of the themes I have discussed in the preceding four chapters, and they undergird the application of Berry’s vision to the world today.

Chapter 1 explored the intergenerational knowledge and locality of Berry’s agrarianism; both of these ideas are predicated on care and belonging that lead to building up the community of people they are a part of and the place in which they reside. Chapter 2 discussed approaching the natural world from a position of humility; that humility allows people to care for their place better because they are approaching it considering its needs before their own. Chapter 3 examined the common woundedness of white and black people by racism, exploring how Berry searches for a way for white and black people (and people of all colors) to come together in mutual belonging and reconciliation, pursuing a fuller community in which more people are cared for and more people belong. Finally, Chapter 4 looked at what keeps people from having a sense of place, speaking to the loss of care and belonging as Berry frames it in his work.

According to Berry, the opposite of being placed—the opposite of being a member—is having a self-interest which takes precedence above all else. Explaining why membership is a rarity in the modern world, he points out, “most of us live in places and in neighborhoods dominated by the influence of individualism, by the endlessly justified selfishness of the

consumer economy, and by the principle of competition” (Grubbs 206). In other words, the opposite of Berry’s sense of place and the membership that is essential to it is selfishness and individualism. According to Berry, if we are primarily concerned with our own advancement, we will not be members; if we are primarily concerned with consumption that is centered upon individual consumer satisfaction, we will not care for each other. The turn away from the self is essential to Berry’s sense of place.

Ultimately, Wendell Berry’s vision of life as it has emerged through considering sense of place in his work provides a counter-narrative to a modern American culture that celebrates individualism over community. His vision of life necessitates choosing to care for and belong to others before caring and belonging to oneself; to care for and belong to one’s place before considering someplace else. Under those conditions, it is possible for anyone to be a member, to live the sort of life that Berry believes to be best.

Appendix 1: Interview with Jesse Straight

Joel Pinckney: I think the danger for me is idealizing [Wendell Berry], because I'm not a farmer, I don't come from farmers, [so] there's something weird talking about his ideas of farming.¹ I'm not a farmer, I don't have immediate plans to be a farmer, so one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is you're doing this, and some of the reason for that being reading Wendell Berry. A lot of projects like this are really nice how they talk about the literature, and the theory is really nice, but then they don't really have any, how do people actually—

Jesse Straight: Do farmers laugh at Wendell Berry?

JP: Yeah, exactly.

JS: [laughs] Roll their eyes, "Oh gosh, that starry-eyed poet."

JP: Right. So how does this actually change people's lives? Yeah, so that's... do you have any questions for me about that?

JS: We can just maybe get into it. I was just actually telling, I was picking up some firewood from a customer a couple days ago and we were talking, she's also a fan of Wendell Berry, and so I was just recounting my story, where—

[Intern at farm comes in; Straight speaks to intern; we relocate to new spot for the interview]

Yeah, so I was just saying, I was talking with this lady and recounting sort of my interaction with Wendell Berry, which is along these lines. After college I read some of his work, and I got hooked, so then I eventually wrote him a letter. First I had gone and read all these books about

farming and then visited all these farmers and then I wrote him a letter, and I thought I tried to, in the letter, ward off the perception that I was a starry-eyed naïve, like, [changes voice] “I love Wendell Berry and I want to farm!” You know? So, “I’ve read these books, I’ve visited these farms, I’m considering this and this,” you know, and he wrote me back a short letter just saying, “No, I think it’s a very bad idea, I don’t think you should get into farming, sincerely, Wendell Berry.” [laughs] And then I wrote him a letter back and I was like, “No, you can’t say that, you’re Wendell Berry!” [laughs] So then I wrote him a letter countering that, saying, “I think you’re selling me short here, I’m not naïve about these things, I’ve thought through these points and these points,” you know, and then he wrote me back another short letter that basically said, “Well, you know, if you really want to farm you won’t listen to what I say,” and kinda left it at that. [laughs]. And then he came and spoke at UVA back in 2010 or something, and some friends were helping to organize his trip there.

Joel Pinckney: Were you already gone from UVA—

Jesse Straight: I graduated in 2005, and we moved back to Warrenton in 2009. So we were in Warrenton, had started the farm business, and all that. So it was 2010/2011 he came to UVA, and friends were organizing it so we got an invitation for a private poetry reading for part of his visit, and so went to the poetry reading. There was probably, I don’t know, 75 people there or something, and then afterwards, everyone was going up and waiting in line to have him sign his book and talk to him. So I told him, “Hey, so I was the fellow that wrote these letters, I don’t know if you remember, but in the meantime I’ve started the farm business, I have this home renovation business, I’m building up our customer base, and I’m renting land. I haven’t taken out a big mortgage, I don’t have that monkey on my back.” And he; (you have to understand, this is one of my top three heroes in life, you know?); He goes, “Yes! That’s the way to do it!” It was

such a stirring moment for me, because he basically went on to say so many people have read his books and then they'll go quit their office job, buy a half-million-dollar farm, not be able to pay the mortgage, not know what they're doing, make all kinds of mistakes, have a really hard life, you know, this may or may not be hyperbole: get divorced, go bankrupt, and [paraphrasing Berry] "That's not what I'm here to do. I don't want people to make really bad decisions and ruin all the good parts of their life because they have some idyllic understanding of what I'm trying to say here." And that also reminds me, I remember one time he was on the Diane Rhem show, do you know that NPR show?²

JP: Yeah, I know the show, I didn't know that he had been on that.

JS: Yeah, he was on that show, and a caller called in and much as I probably would and did, was just slobber-fest on Wendell. [changes voice] "Ah, I love you so much and three of my kids are named Jayber, —"

JP: [laughs]

JS: On and on, and it's cringey for me because I'm like, "that's me, that sounds really bad." But then she was like, "Yeah, we moved to rural Vermont on a mountain and don't have electricity and we pump water out of a well, and..." all [this] off-the-grid stuff, and she said something like, "Yeah, and we're just living the good life." And then she gets off the line, and Wendell Berry's like, "That doesn't sound like the good life to me!" [laughs]. And I think he's just being honest that rejecting the modern conveniences and comforts for the sake of rejecting them or to make a point, I think he knows the effect he has on his readers and I think he's wanting to counter that with, [paraphrasing Berry] "I'm not starting some radical movement, I don't want everyone to be off-the-grid." It's funny, a lot of the ways in which Bob Dylan resisted

being held as a cult leader, you know? So maybe he's just sort of, like, "Stop it! Stop fawning over me." Being a little contrarian maybe for that reason.

So that was a little bit rambly, but yeah, I guess maybe to answer the question more pointedly, and the question, I'm just trying to restate it here so I can gather my thoughts. The question being how does the Wendell Berry vision line up with actual farming? Is that the question?

JP: Yeah, absolutely.

JS: Okay. Yeah, so I think you know sort of the rough narrative where I read Wendell Berry and [it] was like, "ah, this vision of a good life"—

JP: Yeah, if you want to tell some of that story.

JS: Okay, so basically the rough outline of it is, [I] read Wendell Berry, and was very compelled by his vision of the good life, that being one that's centered around the home and is a life of integration. The modern life is all about all the parts of your life being pulled in ten different directions, and that isn't the way humans flourish and were meant to flourish and have flourished throughout history. There's discontent in the world because it's a fallen world, but also there is some particularly modern discontent which you can pull out and tease out, and that can in large parts be this idea of disintegration. You know, breakdown of the family, and the breakdown of the extended family, and the breakdown of a hometown where you have basically these concentric circles of quasi-family and acquaintances and places that you have a knowledge of and a love of and affection to and something to root yourself to and something to fight for and something to care for and something that cares for you.

So basically that whole vision, everything I just said, I was like, "That's what I want. That's the kind of life I want." When you graduate from college and you gotta pay the bills, and

you gotta get a job, and you're, you know, I [had just gotten] married, I think it really came down to I just don't...

[Notices the stove was left on; goes to turn it off]

...wanna just have a job. And of course that can sound really petulant and self-indulgent: [changes voice] "I wanna be special!" But for whatever ways in which it's not petulant and self-indulgent, the ways in which it's not is just in that I want to have something that is coherent with the rest of my life. I don't want to go ding the box and the cash comes out, and then I go ding this box and the food comes out, and I go ding this box and the kids come out. I want it to be all mixed in together, and all this soup. It's like, "Oh, my coworker of 30 years, you've never met my child's best friend? That's weird!" Of course, people don't have coworkers of 30 years because it's all transient based around an economy where other things take priority as opposed to stability.

So that's what was compelling to me, and then that, combined with other things I was learning about myself or knew about myself in terms of I like doing physical work, I like being outside, I like working with people, and I wanted work that incorporated the family naturally. And then, I don't know if I thought this through, but there's a lot of work I could have chosen that wouldn't have fit in my hometown. Would've meant I was commuting to DC, or living in DC. Most people who have college educations live near an urban area, and that's where their jobs are. So anyway, that was more fortuitous, but it's really nice that it just so happens I didn't grow up in Northern Virginia, I grew up in Fauquier, and the career I chose is something you can do in Fauquier, and so if I had been more reflective that would have been a good reason.

Yeah, and then also I guess learning more about the situation of food and farming in America and the West, and thinking, "this is something where I could really do a bit of good."

So seeing all those things kind of come together, [the] fittingness with my vision of life and family life and my community and my inclinations in terms of enjoying manual work and then seeing a need that I could fill a bit.

Those are all kind of how the Wendell Berry vision of the good life, which could be taken up by all kinds of occupations, but particularly why that got translated into farming is that. Cause I could've been like, "I'm gonna have a hometown carpentry business, or I'm gonna..." all kinds of different things, you know?

Yeah, and then basically, skipping minor details, Joel Salatin³: if Wendell Berry is the poet, Joel Salatin is sort of the technician, and Joel, for someone who didn't grow up farming, really provides a roadmap for doing the kind of farming that was compelling as well as making a living and not being foolish and sacrificing the well-being of my family on my dreams.

So that is sort of the rough narrative, and then just getting started from Joel's books and examples and kind of putting together an ad-hoc internship, communicating with Joel, getting tips, and then making day trips down there to learn things like processing chickens and things like that, and just starting bit by bit while doing the home renovation stuff to pay the bills. That was a nice fit, and then I could arrange my schedule to fit the farming.

Then I guess from there, in terms of how the Wendell Berry vision fits into farming, now that I've sort of lived it for a while, I'd say that Wendell Berry is right. One, I'd just say I've found his vision to be continually compelling. I've not been like, "It's a bunch of crap." You know? No, I've found that to the degree that I can approximate that life of coherence that I'm talking about, I'm happy. That I, the relationships I have with my family... you know, I was just joking with Adrian [Straight's intern] earlier in the day, in the farm store [I] had a friend come in who I've known since I was four or five, so I've known him for 30 years, and then a family

friend who's like my second mother, our next door neighbor, came in, and she's known me probably since I was a baby. I was just joking, "this is like homecoming weekend or something, all my old people are coming in." [checks phone call] Yeah, so those things are enriching and satisfying. All those things that make those Wendell Berry stories enchanting and alluring, these embedded relationships for better or worse with people that are a pleasure or are a tragedy, are all still compelling and to the degree that I experience that, I'm happier for it.

You know, the places; I just wrote a letter to the editor at our local paper on issues about food in the schools, and I really care about this place, and it's my intention and my hope to care for the place and have whatever part I can in making it and keeping it a place that my children and grandchildren would be proud of, because my dream is tied into the idea of some level of family stability here, and that won't happen if my children aren't proud of their home, and that won't happen if we don't do a good job of taking care of our home. It is enjoyable to care about things. The most unhappy life is the life of the most indifference, you know? Everything that Wendell Berry is about is having relationships to places and people such that indifference would be a very hard emotion to have. It engages your whole person when you care about things. That's maybe one of the most dehumanizing experiences is to be indifferent, and you actually use your mind and are actually stirred by emotions direct attention and so your emotions are actually stirred towards maybe something good. And of course, good intentions do wrong things, but at least your emotions are saying, "Hey, wait a second, what are you doing in town? You're building what building? Where?" You know? "What are you feeding the kids at school?" That engages the whole person in hopefully good work. So all those ways in which Wendell Berry tells those stories, and, you know, of course a lot of those stories are derivations from his own

experience in Port Royal and his family there and all that. I can certainly sympathize, and say yeah, he's right.

When it comes to what he says about farming, that's probably the more qualified in that most of his talk about farming that I'm most familiar with is in his fiction, so when it comes to his nonfiction maybe there's things he's saying in there that I don't know or don't remember, but his fiction is mostly about farming that happened in the 60s, 70s, and earlier, so, you know, he's not writing stories about the modern day, or he's not *so much* writing stories about the modern day Joel Salatin's, or the modern day big business thirty-thousand-acre corn farmer. That would be more like my context. So I guess I didn't really look so much to him on, say, if I tried to anticipate, "what's this farming life gonna be like?", I didn't so much look at his... I mean, I certainly thought, "Wouldn't that be nice if we had a community of local like-minded sustainable farmers where we could swap work and share equipment?" Kinda like in his stories where you're harvesting tobacco together, but I knew I wasn't gonna pick that up. I guess I more just looked to other people like Joel to understand what it would be like.

In terms of not what [Berry] wrote but what he was telling me in terms of, "It's very difficult for someone who didn't grow up farming to get into farming." I think he's right, I think it is very difficult. There's so many mistakes that I've made that my children won't have to make that are costly and frustrating and set you back. But that's also because I realized I was getting into this when I was married and had a baby, and if I had been able to do a proper internship at Polyface [Joel Salatin's farm], I would have still made those same mistakes and would have been intimidated by a lot of things that were really unfamiliar, and "oh, I've never done that before, I've never used that before," but a good internship would've probably familiarized me with a lot of those things that were scary or were future mistakes. So I think he's right and I think it's very

difficult if you haven't grown up in it, obviously not impossible cause we're doing it, and especially not if you do a proper internship, but I think probably unadvisable for someone who hasn't grown up and doesn't have a lot of money and has a bunch of kids or something like that, you know? [laughs] Whereas that person could go start a car wash business or something. So yeah, I don't know if there's anything else you want to dig in that.

JP: Yeah, well, you've touched on a lot of my questions there actually. So the question of people idealizing Wendell Berry: I wonder if that's connected in some way to the fact that he's talking about farming communities from the 60s or 70s or earlier, and so [his readers] want to achieve this today, but it's not really necessarily a possibility today. Do you think the idealization is at all a fault in Berry, or is that in how people read him? Cause I agree with you, I find that so often it really is just this grand, "Oh, I wanna go do this, I wanna sell everything," and it's almost gospel-like in a strange way. Why do you think people have that response to him?

JS: Yeah, I mean, he's not writing Thomas Kincaid novels in that it's not... some people might say that his fiction is sentimental, but I think there would be a good argument, at least a good argument, that it's not sentimental in that he has characters who seem to not be straw men characters that are real live people, that are tragic people. He doesn't paint this idyllic picture. In *A World Lost*, [there's] the uncle who's so lovable, but also basically the story is about the uncle's self-destruction and how it brings on life-changing misery for the rest of the family that's left behind. The reason there's life-changing misery is because they care. If it was a more modern family, they would be like, "well, that uncle lives in California, and we saw him twice a year anyway, and sure we're sad, cause maybe we have these memories of childhood or something, but our day-to-day existence is not affected. We only saw him twice a year anyway, so we just won't see him at Christmas now." And maybe that's being too harsh of me and

making too little of what vestiges of family relationships are today, but with that aside, that's why it is so tragic in the stories, is because people do care so much.

And, you know, his characters aren't all virtue. I'm forgetting the real sort of like, playful, lovable, jokey guy who has the child out of wedlock—

JP: Burley.

JS: Yeah, Burley. Burley has a kid out of wedlock, doesn't marry the woman; why doesn't he marry the woman, he should've married the woman, sure, he kind of becomes a decent father figure to the son, but why didn't you just marry the woman and really become a father, you know? So anyway, these aren't Sunday school stories. For whatever someone might say against them, they're not those.

I guess I'm kind of thinking out loud here: could they still be accused of being idyllic? I don't know, I feel like he's being honest with what he knows and has been told about his and his family's experiences in Port Royal. I think that's why he's writing. I remember him saying about how when he moved, I think it was from New York back to Port Royal, he quickly realized that part of the sadness and the benefit of moving back to Port Royal was that he was going to bury a lot of the people that were dearest to him in his family. He elects to talk about that a lot too, how when people die so much mythology and stories die, and so that has to be on his mind in the sense that there's a whole way of living that was insulated from mass media, and the sort of culture of looking at the urban areas of America as the place where life was happening as opposed to in your hometown. There's places that held on longer to a vision of looking at their own community as opposed to what's going on in L.A. or New York or whatever as the most important thing in the world. The most important thing in the world is what's going on in Port Royal, and that stayed that way probably longer in Port Royal than it did, say, in Richmond or

Durham or wherever, you know? So he's probably just saying, "hey, look, there's something good about this." So I think he's being honest, I think he purposely isn't telling Sunday school stories that are all great about how farmers are just the salt of the earth, and he definitely has a bone to pick with, I don't know if you'd say Protestantism or just Christianity or religious-ism. You know, he has some issues there, so he's not just one of these people talking about how great the rural Christian south is.

So yeah, so why is it that people idealize it? You know, I wonder if maybe what you could accuse Wendell Berry of is he doesn't really give a lot of, "So what do we do now?" answers. If he's ever speaking and people are like, [changes voice] "This is so great, I love what you're saying. So Wendell Berry, when we go home from this, what can we do to fight the disintegration of embedded communities?", or whatever they want to say. You'd probably have to torture him to get an answer, he's so reticent to give any prescriptions, I think that's his whole bit on how he hates to give advice for communities beyond his own.

So maybe that's part of why people can take his writing the wrong idealized way, is because he's never then saying, "Okay, here's this great story about this community and how it's really an admirable community and it's really unique and a lot of people that are reading this book don't have communities like this, and of course, the natural inclination is, 'I don't have this and I want this, so what do you do?'" And he never really answers the "What do you do?" I think that's because he has this... you know, I don't know exactly why, but I think he has this real suspicion of experts and of outsiders giving input, you know? I think he really wants the reader to come up with their own solutions for their own contexts. I think he really believes in this idea of context and what's appropriate to a place and to a community—

JP: Well, it's like the way he talks about farming, with the reason that these massive large scale farms don't actually treat the land well and don't actually work in the long run is because to farm a place well, you have to know the intricacies of that place, and if you're farming 3000 acres, there's no way you can know 3000 acres. So it's the same idea of—

JS: Yeah, human scale—

JP: A small town, one small town of 5000 people is very different from another small town of 5000 people.

JS: Yeah. So I think that all makes sense, but maybe you could say it's not right of him to be a national or international author and then leave a national or international audience hanging. You know what I mean? So, you're not writing stories for Port Royal, you're writing stories for all of the English reading west. So then you just kinda leave that hanging. So maybe he should say more, or say what he can say. You know, say, "I'll say this and I won't say this for these reasons." That could be one reason why people get all sort of starry-eyed. But I think the fundamental reason is they recognize something in these stories is, like, "that's compelling. I want that. I want to have that." And then they say, "Okay. Well, how do I get it?" And then they make their own plan, cause basically Wendell hasn't given them his plan. And so they're left to their own devices to make out how to get from A to B, and he doesn't leave them any roadmap.

JP: He'll just say, "go home."

JS: Yeah. At least Joel will say, people will be like, [changes voice] "Joel, love your farming, we really want to stop supporting this horrible degradation of land and animals and people and air and water. What do we do?" And Joel will at least say, "Go use your kitchen. Start in your kitchen. Cook." You know, why can't Wendell Berry say some basic prescriptions like, "Have your neighbor for dinner"? Like, "Throw your TV away"? Like, "Start a local theater"?

Then of course people are like [how do I get from] A to B, he doesn't tell them how, and then his stories just so happen to be in a farming community. So if his stories were based in a medieval guild of stone masons, would everyone be clamoring to be like, [changes voice] "Ahh, so into stone walls, this is so cool! I wanna make these awesome stone walls, you know, dry set." [laughs] And then no one has real exposure and experience with farming, [and] the less experience you have with something, the more you can idealize it. That kinda leaves people in a bad spot where their imagination can run wild about the breeze and the hair and the beautiful eggs and the... [laughs] I'm being probably too snooty and dismissive, but you know what I mean.

JP: Yeah, that's fair. So this could be another thing that's distinctive to the type of farming communities he's talking about, but lots of his fiction is based on, and his farming is based on, sort of having this connection to the land. Do you feel like you have a connection to your land? What does that mean for you as a farmer in 2017?

JS: Yeah, I do have a connection to our land, and you learn things by going, by working in the land and seeing it in different seasons. Sometimes you might have like a really wet spring and you see, "Oh, I didn't realize it could be that boggy down there," or, "I won't bring the chicks down there cause I see a flood, I'm not gonna have chickens down there," or "that's really nice in the heat of the summer, there's still some fresh grass growing down there, I'll bring the cattle down there," you know? So you learn about it just as you work in it. And then the more you improve land, the more you have skin in the game, you have more affection, and you think, "Wow, this pasture is awesome, and it's because we've run thirty thousand chickens over it and it's so fertile, it greens up in the spring first, it's the first to be ready for the cattle to graze it, it's

the last to die out, to brown up in a drought.” So you have pride in what you’ve done, and therefore affection.

I will say, the tricky thing is ownership. Around here the value of land is based off of what high-paying job you can drive to from this land, and you want to drive to from this land because the land is pretty and you want maybe privacy. So the value of this property is what it is because someone can drive to Fairfax or North Virginia or whatever, a high-paying job, and come back to a really pretty view, have a private area, impressive land. So it’s not based off of how much beef you can produce off of the land. Which means the price of the land is too high for just being paid for by farming.

My relationship with the land ownership-wise is tenuous in that we are in the process of owning and buying the house we live in. My family owns the property, and then we rent the farmland from my family. We’re in the process also of writing a long-term lease that would be a 40-year lease, so no matter what happened to the property, if it got sold or whatever, I would be assured to be able to farm it until that forty years is over. But that’s a whole different thing: sure, it’s definitely nice to know that all the work I’ve put into this I’m not gonna get kicked off and have to set up shop somewhere else, but that’s not as good as knowing that I’m preparing this for my children and grandchildren. That provides a deeper level of affection and commitment. It’s one thing to be committed to something that’s just for your life. It’s another thing to be committed to something that will live beyond yourself to others that you know and love. We’ll have to do a very good job and really run a tight operation if I’m to earn enough money to pay off maybe half the farm by the time I have to retire. And then at that point hopefully I have children and grandchildren that want to pick up the baton and keep going, but that’s not the same as, “Hey, here’s a farm that’s half paid off and you can spend the next forty years of your life

paying the rest of it off.” That’s a different sort of legacy to pass on than “I’ve provided for my family, we own the farm, it’s yours if you want to take it up and keep running with it.” It’s a totally different offer to a child. I’m perfectly happy to be farming under a leasing arrangement. That’s what I’m doing, obviously I’m happy with it. But it’s not the same as outright ownership, and that multi-generational commitment and connection provide a new level of affection and care and connection.

JP: Yeah. I’m glad you brought that up. In the agrarianism chapter, that’s one of the things that I talk about as essential to [Berry’s] agrarianism. Obviously you have to have a sense of locality, but it changes the way you understand your place if you know that what you’re doing impacts people beyond you. I was going to ask you what your long term vision is for this land and if the ideal scenario is your kids taking up the baton after you, but it sounds like that’s definitely the case.

JS: Yeah, that would be my hope, and it’s part of my goal to try and raise our kids such that I can make this life as attractive to them as possible. Obviously, it will hopefully catch with some, and probably won’t catch with all. But that would be my hope.

And then now with Jonathan [Straight’s partner], we’re having conversations...., it’s one level of complication to think about succession within a family with a farm that’s partially owned, it’s another thing to think about succession within two families, so that’s something we’re talking through and figuring out. But I mean, that’s a large attraction for anyone who owns a business. Probably a lot of times when someone owns a business they put so much of themselves into it that they think it’s a good thing, and they think, “Well, I think this is a good thing and a good way to make a living and do good in the world. So maybe some of my children do, and that’s something I can give to them.” And then I think farming even more so because of

how it so much incorporates the family such that it's not like "I was going off to work all the time and now that you've graduated from college let me introduce you to my business." This is embedded. And then, yeah, so much of the work is a long term situated input in that, sure, businesses will develop their customer base and they will develop their infrastructure, but our infrastructure is soil and microorganisms and a variety of plants, and so it's more than a fleet of delivery vehicles and a warehouse. It's something that is alive, it's biological, so it's maybe more compelling as a partner in your work as opposed to an asset or just a disembodied thing. So for those reasons, you have more attachment.

JP: Yeah. Have you read *Hannah Coulter*?

JS: Yeah.

JP: So the end of *Hannah Coulter* is her children leaving—

JS: I know.

JP: And then Caleb is the one that grows up, loves to farm, and goes to school with the idea of coming back and farming, goes to school thinking he's gonna study agriculture and come back and be a farmer, but then ends up never coming back. Do you think it would be really hard for you if your kids didn't come back? Do you think that would feel like sort of a break?

JS: Yeah, I think if all of my kids were sort of like, "No," I couldn't help but think I was a failure in that I didn't live the life in a way that was compelling enough. If I'm so busy texting chefs to make sales that they are resentful of the farm as opposed to something they enjoy, so I could see lots of ways. It's a common trope that farm kids can't get off the farm fast enough. It would be very reasonable for me to think that if none of my kids wanted to farm, that I failed. Because that's my stated goal.

But I guess the only way I could see I wouldn't fail is if they all become monks and nuns and priests, then I'd be like, "Alright, fine! Okay God, take me, jerk." [laughs] But yeah, that would be the hope. It's gonna be interesting to see. And I hope that I will do a good job and that's a daily moment-to-moment challenge.

JP: I want to shift gears a little bit. Could you talk some about what the values and commitments are that you have that shape your farming practices, the way that you raise your animals, that sort of thing?

JS: The fundamental one is with a presupposition that God made the world in a particular way, and that it's our job to figure out how that works, and to basically recognize that there are biological systems and patterns that we don't get to decide how they work; they just work that way cause that's how they are made. We can't bulldoze or tape over those systems, we have to work within those limitations. With that being said, basically then just imitate how nature works. And of course, we're not here to be a wildlife preserve, we're here to produce food, but you can approximate nature in good ways in the effort of producing food. Once you start with that framework you look at nature and you see, alright, do animals hang out in tight quarters and never move around? No. They're constantly moving to fresh ground. Well, why is that? Because fresh forages are healthier for them, and because the pathogens have a hard time having an easy host, and because the less they muck around in their own manure, the less stress it will be on their immune system, and the more beneficial to the pasture in that arrangement, and therefore the healthier the pasture, then the healthier the animals. So basically just again looking at how nature works, and approximating that as much as possible in the effort of producing food.

JP: Do you feel the temptation to farm on a much larger scale, more mechanized? It doesn't seem to fit with sort of how you have shaped your farming, but that must feel like a temptation.

JS: Yeah, you know it's funny, I've never thought about that, but it's probably only not a temptation because conventional farming is in general such a bad business. If the farmer who's growing the corn in the field over was driving around in a Mercedes then I'd be like, "you know, what am I doing here, making pennies and pulling chicken shelters. I should be growing some GMO corn and pulling it in!" [laughs] But they're not. I hadn't thought about that, but that's not a temptation.

I guess what is a temptation and is related is to cut corners. You know, like "Ohh, we really need to slaughter 120 pigs, but those woods really should only sustain 80 pigs. Should we just throw another 40 on there and it'll be a little bit too much manure, a little bit too rooted up, but, you know..." So those are the temptations of cutting corners, doing things that aren't appropriate to the land. Or, "I'm really busy and I should've moved the hens like a week ago and I haven't moved them yet, and their area's getting all denuded and over-grazed..." I think that's [a] pretty common temptation to any work you're in, to get overwhelmed and have to make the right priority of task. Do I spend time trying to get more sales, or do I go move the hens? And decide that in the right sort of way.

JP: Do you feel like there's a distinction between having a sense of place and having a connection to your land, or are those [the same thing]; does sense of place, does that idea mean anything to you?

JS: By sense of place would you mean like, I grew up here in Warrenton, and you know, there's like the home where I grew up until I was 5, and then my parents moved from there to the

home where I grew up until they moved just last year, and then there's I went to Fauquier high school, and there's this, and there's the old town Warrenton, I spent time there, and we would go swimming in this place over here. That sense of place in terms of just a place being where you generally go and be and hang out when you're a kid and older?

JP: Yeah, I think that's generally what I mean. I think it can kind of mean whatever you want it to mean, or that term can kind of mean whatever anybody wants it to mean, but yeah, I think in this context, that's—

JS: Yeah, so I guess my work here on this farm, my hopeful long term connection here on this farm, all make me love and appreciate all those other things that make me love and appreciate Fauquier and Warrenton. My siblings who don't live here anymore, I'm sure they have things that they have affection for, and if they heard, [they'd be] like, "They're tearing down that building? Ah, that's a shame." You know? Because they have affection and experience, but I'm sure mine would be more because I have these desires to make my life here and I have made some life here. Sorry, what was the question again?

JP: If there's a distinction between that and sort of the connection you feel to your land, but another question going off what you just said: do you feel like your sense of place as a farmer is distinctive from non-farmers? So the fact that you farm, that you sort of have this connection to your land, does that make it different from maybe someone else that's lived in this area for their entire life and owns a car wash?

JS: Yeah. I think yes, I think farming would, but I think you could just as easily meet a farmer here whose like, "Can't wait until I turn 55, I am moving to the Florida Keys, and I could care less what the local school students are eating; I'm out of here." And you could probably have a car wash owner who's like, "I'm born and raised here, I love Warrenton, and I wanna

make this place a better place.” So I think it’s mostly how you understand what is the good life, and how that is and should be tied into that stabilized, coherent life of care for ideally one’s home town, one’s home people. But I think all that being said, I think yes, in the ways which I was saying before, farming really does I think more than other businesses lend itself to the dream of succession. In that it lends itself to the dream of succession, you’re thinking beyond your life, you’re thinking, “I really don’t want this ugly development to go into Fauquier county because I don’t want my kids to live with that, and I don’t want my Grandkids to wake up in 2050 and be like ‘we’re getting the heck out of here, this is an armpit.’” Yeah, so I think to an extent, yes.

JP. Could you talk a little bit more about some of the difficulties of being a small farmer today, and making a living doing that? How hard is that?

JS: Yeah, I think it’s pretty hard, and again, would be less so if you grew up, if you’re Daniel Salatin, less so. Yeah, I think the difficulties are the price of food is so artificially cheapened by the particularities of the food industry, [which] are so different than, say, plumbing, or carpentry, things like that. The margins are so small because the industry has been so thoroughly industrialized, and some of its costs so significantly externalized, that when I set my whole chicken price at \$3.75, I can’t help but have that partially be in reference to what a whole chicken raised in a warehouse on GMO feed and antibiotics, processed and slaughtered by illegal aliens who are being taken advantage of, with the pollutants of the manure going into the Chesapeake Bay for future generations to clean up, with taxpayer subsidies on those corn and soybeans in mind, so that, “Well, they’re \$1.75 for whole chickens, and yes, what I’m offering people is totally different, but the average family is gonna be like, ‘Alright, here’s my food budget. Okay, well, \$3.75, okay, fine. But if that was \$5.75, hell no.’” But you know, I kind of feel like I’m doing a good job and I’m a smart guy and I work really hard, and can’t help but

think sometimes, “Some people out there who I don’t think are working as hard or as smart or whatever are getting paid a lot more for what they’re doing, and in that idea of justice or equality or whatever should be charging \$5.75 for that chicken, but I’m not, cause no one would buy it.” So that’s one thing, just that drag down on pricing because the food is so poorly and viciously raised. I mean vicious in terms of I guess harmful to the land, harmful to the animals, harmful to the people, harmful to farmers, harmful to the future generations. So that’s one thing I guess is that drag down on pricing and therefore on margins and profit. There’s the same old axes of regulations and industry being the one that sets the regulations, so you have one-size-fits-all regulations that really oughtn’t to be placed on smaller operations that are a lot safer than larger operations but you all have to follow the same rules, so there’s that whole angle. But I guess I don’t like to talk about this stuff so much cause I quickly feel like I’m just whining and complaining, but yeah, those are probably the things.

JP: Berry more than anything else self-identifies as an agrarian, but he also talks about how he had never heard that word until he got to college. What does agrarianism mean to you, if anything?

JS: Yeah, I guess I’ve thought of that as a life centered around the production of food and essential goods, whether that’s commercial farmers who are raising food or essential goods to sell or provide for themselves, but I guess it’s a combination of both those lives that are centered around the production of essential goods in such a way that is humane. I don’t think anyone would say conventional corn farming is the epitome of agrarianism.

[Brief pause as intern comes in to discuss question with Straight]

Yeah, so I feel like when most people use that term they're thinking about raising in a way that is kind to humans and is oriented towards not just sort of extracting from the land but has a longer vision in mind that would be sustainable.

JP: Thinking about the connection to your land, is there a difference in the fact that you raise livestock rather than produce?

JS: Yeah, I guess I probably watch the grass the way vegetable farmers watch their vegetables, and that's Joel's thing: "I'm a grass farmer, I just happen to run it through animals." But yeah, with a vegetable farmer I guess they're watching plants that are a lot more sensitive than grasses are, and they're touching and feeling them a lot more than I'm touching and feeling the grass. So I am looking at two things, I'm looking at grass and I'm also looking at animals, and so of course the animals' health is based off the land. I could see the argument being made that a cropper, or maybe more so a vegetable than a crop farmer, would have more of an undistracted focus on the soil, and you know, those plants are more temperamental; the pasture can get along without rain a lot longer than vegetables, which is probably another reason why I think it's so great. A vegetable gardener might pay a lot more attention to the land on a moment-to-moment basis, and usually a vegetable farmer is kind of covering less ground, so you can make a living farming an acre of vegetables, and so the kind of intimacy with an acre is a lot different than the intimacy with 82 acres. But there's also different virtues in the variety of land, you know, we have stream and wooded hillside and different kinds of pasture, bottomland and upper land, and I'm thinking about shade, and animals... yeah.

JP: You have a tractor: do you think that changes the way you farm? Changes your relationship to the land? Can you imagine farming without a tractor?

JS: I did farm for a while without a tractor. I guess we got that tractor about two years ago, and yeah, the tractor changes the scale of things: we can haul a bigger egg-mobile around the field, so we can have a larger flock of hens; we can move a lot more bedding or feed at a time, therefore we can have more laying hens. Yeah, basically in that it allows you to handle more animals and do more work, you probably lose intimacy. But I guess the upside is that the cost per dozen is less to a customer, and the food costs are less because it's less expensive to raise, and it takes less labor. I know Joel talks about, like, "Oh yeah, I'll get..."

[Notices and points out hang gliders through the window]

So Joel's like, "I'll be the first to buy a horse, a workhorse when you can put a front-end loader on it." [laughs] Cause he farmed for a while without a tractor. Especially compost for one thing, a manure spreader and a front-end loader are really awesome when it comes to spreading compost on a pasture. But I know that's where Wendell and Joel really part ways, because Wendell loves the horses and mules and I don't doubt that there's a loss there. I guess there is a case in point of where I didn't look to Wendell on farming stuff. You know? I looked to Joel. If Wendell has been saying, like, "Well, here's a business plan where you can keep that \$30,000 expense out of your ledger and have these mules that don't eat gasoline and you can make a business work with it," maybe I would've tried it and I'd be here saying Wendell's full of crap or he's right, you know?

JP: That's interesting. So I know that you're not surrounded by neighbors that are doing the same sort of farming that you're doing, is that right?

JS: Uh-uh.

JP: Do you feel like you have a sense of membership with other farmers in the area, or is that not really the case where you are?

JS: No, there are, we have farmer friends in our sort of ilk around, and we help each other out. You know, if I'm running low on eggs and they have too many, we'll get eggs, or we sell out of turkeys and they have too many we'll get turkeys, you know, so we collaborate. I buy piglets from one farmer friend, and people buy our old laying hens. But it's not what it is in the Wendell Berry stories of, "Alright, time to get our firewood, let's all get together and cut firewood and we'll do a day at your place, a day at mine," you know? Probably because it's just geography. The farms I'm talking about, some might be as close as 20 minutes and some I'm talking about are an hour, but I'm not gonna drive an hour to go cut wood. If it's two farms down the road than more possibilities open up about how to collaborate.

JP: Are there particular works or passages or characters or ideas of Berry's that you enjoy the most, that you find particularly instructive?

JS: Yeah, you know it's been a while since I've read some, though I did re-read *The Memory of Old Jack* and *A World Lost*. Did you see that review I wrote of *A World Lost*?⁴

JP: Yeah, I did see that.

JS: Okay, so I re-read that to write that review. So the things that come to mind, I mean, probably if we got talking I'd remember more things, but the things that come to mind: I think about Hannah Coulter, I think about how she raised her kids to basically be good in school and then she realized at the end of her life that was a mistake, and she did what the world told her to do, which took her children from her, basically. So, you know, I think about that.

I think about a lot of those quotes in *A World Lost* that I like so much are about how Henry..., I guess Wheeler is the father, right?

JP: Yeah.

JS: Yeah, so Wheeler really is—

JP: And the brother of the uncle that—

JS: Yeah. So Wheeler holds the dream of the family and the place close and dear, and how noble his dream is and how compelling it is and despite and how even in the face of tragedy it's admirable. It is tragic because of how admirable the dream is and how admirably he holds to the dream, in sickness and health. I think about that in that that's what I want to be, that's what I want to do.

I guess I think about, with family issues and problems, I think about how that's also a part of the good life as we know it in this world: long-suffering. You don't get to curate your family, you just get them, and so how to not be surprised, I guess.

[pause]

Yeah, and I guess I think about Andy Catlett, and not wanting myself or I guess not so much me anymore but my former self could've been Andy Catlett in pursuing things held up by the world, and I want to be careful. I want my kids to, if they want to become poets and professors and all that, great, those are all noble things to do, but I want them to be careful not to be allured by things that won't deliver.

JP: You talked about how Wendell Berry responded to you after you read Wendell Berry, and, you know, you weren't naïve like you said, but... how would you respond to someone who read Wendell Berry and thought, "I want to do this; I want to become a farmer"?

JS: Yeah, I guess it depends on what their stage in life is. Like I said, if they were forty and had five kids and weren't extremely wealthy, I would say, "I think you should just start with a backyard garden and some hens and take care of your family." You know? But there's a lot you can do: get in your kitchen, get in your backyard, support your local farmers, do a working CSA, but don't do anything foolish. But yeah, if it was someone who was young and single I

would say, “Yeah, go for it,” but probably I would recommend an internship. And of course, it really depends on the conversation, cause some people might say things that are immediate red flags, like, “I don’t really think this is for you.” If they’re saying things that give an idea they don’t have a good sense of what they’re talking about and they don’t realize they don’t have a good sense of what they’re talking about... but yeah, you’ll figure that out in an internship too. Yeah, so I guess mostly encouraging in some form that’s appropriate to the risk and stage of life.

JP: Well, this is great. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time.

JS: Yeah, it was fun thinking through so much of this stuff.

ENDNOTES

¹ This transcript has been edited to remove insignificant/unnecessary phrases. Additionally, most 'likes', 'ums,' etc., have been omitted from the transcript for clarity.

² Wendell Berry's conversation with Diane Rhem can be accessed at the following link:
<https://dianerehm.org/shows/2009-11-30/wendell-berry-conversation>

³ Joel Salatin is the owner of Polyface Farm near Staunton, Virginia. He is also the author of nine books about farming. His biography can be accessed at the following link:
<http://www.polyfacefarms.com/speaking-protocol/joels-bio/>

⁴ Straight's review of *A World Lost* can be accessed at the following link:
<http://humanumreview.com/articles/firmly-rooted-in-ones-place-sustainably>

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