From the Page to the Heart: Cycles of Destruction and Healing In Three Contemporary Environmental Fictions

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From the Page to the Heart: Cycles of Destruction and Healing
In Three Contemporary Environmental Fictions

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Abstract

This thesis will attempt to explore the relationship between nature and the contemporary western world as portrayed in three contemporary ecofiction novels: Solar Storms by Linda Hogan, The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver, and The Road by Cormac McCarthy. The complex relationship between nature and technology in all three fictions is highly problematic with technology and nature rarely being shown as “getting along.” Technology and nature most often portray the problematic binaries typical to patriarchal thinking throughout the novels. Technology is most often presented as a culturally domineering and intrusive weapon yielded by man, whereas feminized nature relates to women in its similar ill-treatment by the western world as well as its shared human characteristics. Another related theme is morality, and its evolutionary background—a topic mainly discussed and associated with McCarthy’s novel. These natural, cultural, and gendered binaries are built up and torn down throughout the length of the thesis. In the end, this paper will argue for the positive influence ecofictions create on the general readers’ perception of and relationship with nature, no matter the gender or scope of environmental knowledge. It will argue that ecofictions are important today more than ever for it gives the general public a story of people and nature; it reveals the emotions, moral conflicts, successes and failures not only between characters, but between characters and their surroundings. Ecofictions offer lessons, warnings, and examples of why the natural world is so important, and why technology is a double-edged sword that should be handled with care.
Introduction

Throughout much of his history, man has used the earth for his own needs and desires without irreparably damaging it. But with today’s new and accumulating needs society continues to create newer, higher forms of technologies that destroy nature at an ever-increasing rate. Due to society’s increased consumption and thus increased use of technology, the gap between modern western people, specifically Americans, and nature is widening more than ever before. Never has there been a time where man’s supposed “needs” have meant the exploitation and destruction of the earth at such a massive scale as it does today. This destruction not only harms the natural world, but can harm indigenous cultures and women as well. Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms (1995), Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible (1998), and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) center their overarching themes on these interconnected issues. In this respect, all three novels share a “single story” regarding the white, patriarchal western world. They show how it exploits land and technology like it exploits indigenous communities and women in general. This exploitation climaxes in McCarthy’s apocalyptic endgame, The Road.

This thesis is divided into five sections, each with a specific focus. Section I of the thesis explores the concept of ecofiction and how it creates a natural world that instead of acting as just the background setting plays a complex, active role in all three novels -- therefore qualifying nature itself as a character. The character of nature is represented in drastically different ways in each novel, but still shares the similarity of being a character. The main goal of the section is to show how all three fictions, despite their differences, work to elevate nature out of any stagnant simplistic binary conceptions and reveal the diversity and complexity of an ever-changing natural world. Section II compares and contrasts the different qualities of nature examined in Section I. This section looks more closely at these differences and explores the contradictory
issues that these differences bring to the novels’ surface, especially in Solar Storms. Section III looks at technology’s relationship with all the characters, nature included. This section qualifies technology as not evil in and of itself. It is made evil when the western world chooses to overuse it and forsake everything and everyone else. In Solar Storms, technology is mostly made to be an antagonist, in The Poisonwood Bible, it is seen as both positive and highly negative, and finally, in The Road, technology is seen as good – but only because nature is dead. Section IV analyzes the role of gender in all three novels, showing how the male and female genders represent opposing binaries. Then, the thesis explores if and how these two genders break out of these problematic binaries in order to grow into full, complex characters that can come together and form a humanity that is intermingled, not divided. Finally, there is an epilogue that reflects on the images and roles that construct the western world portrayed in these three novels.

The topics of nature, technology, culture, and gender within ecocritical literature and as represented by these three specific novels are heavily analyzed throughout the thesis. However, these topics are not the only topics of ecocritical literature. In fact, the ecofiction genre is very expansive, as critics Harrington and Tallmadge explain: “Ecocriticism as a field is loose and open to new ideas, themes, and styles of writing” (xv). The possibility of relating the environment to many themes is “loose and open,” but unfortunately, this thesis must limit its topics for the sake of length. This is why the topics of religion and politics, though they saturate all three of the novels, go relatively untouched, except in specific scenes where analysis of these topics is absolutely necessary. Overall, this thesis explores the gradual progression of nature, indigenous culture, and women toward annihilation which all three ecofictions depict. Conversely the simple fact that these three ecofictions exist in literature suggests as well the possibility of healing and salvation.
I. Nature as a Character

The settings of all three ecotopias discussed in my thesis are grounded in nature. Though the environments change from novel to novel, with *Solar Storms* taking place in the lush lands of North America (Hogan 21), *The Poisonwood Bible* located in the dense and buzzing Congolese jungle of Africa, and *The Road* set in the barren terrain of a post-apocalyptic world, nature, for all three novels, is the characters’ constant companion – for better or for worse. This direct relationship between the characters and nature makes nature a character itself, and because of this, these fictions have the right to be called “eco.” The natural world vividly discussed in all three novels is a key component that all literature requires if it is to be termed “environmental,” according to Lawrence Buell, a pioneer of “environmental discourses” (Buell). Ann Milne, a literary critic also states that a novel cannot just “acknowledge or document environmental crises” (2) while simultaneously delegating nature to that of only the setting because this puts “human activity” on a higher level than “non-human activity” (2) – natural activity. What is needed for a text to be considered “ecocentric” is that the “nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence” (Buell qtd. in Milne 2). Not only do the three ecotopias bring nature to the forefront of the plot, but they do exactly as Buell requires: they give nature a central role to play. It reacts to and causes reactions in other characters, affecting their lives, and overall plays a main role in shaping the novels’ meanings and messages, as any influential and important character does. The reader relates to and cares about nature not only in the fiction, but in reality. This care and relationship, as ecotopia authors hope, will create an environmental consciousness that actively supports the prevention of the natural world’s destruction in today’s 2013 world. With this goal, the authors’ novels fulfill the definition of ecotopia.
In Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*, nature is viewed from the Native American perspective as a benevolent character because the Native Americans live in harmony with nature. This harmonious relationship, as portrayed by Hogan, is not shared, however, by the mainstream American world represented in the novel. To this western world, nature is the antagonist because it is a character that they are continually in competition with. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear which perspective of nature is desirable – the Native American view – and with this perspective established, nature is revealed as a mortal spirit that needs protecting because it is essential to life.

The conflicting perspective of nature between the Native Americans and the western world is a main topic in Hogan’s ecofiction, and is the reason why nature is not described as just a setting, but as an active character with emotions. As Laura Virginia Castor reveals, Hogan is very aware of the western view of nature as “dangerous” (Hogan 180), as a place that needs to be contained, controlled, and even destroyed: “They destroyed all that could save them, the plants, the water” (86). Hogan understands this western view and simultaneously rejects it by giving “elements in the natural world . . . consciousness and spirit” (Tarter qtd. in Castor 161-2). The plants and water that the immigrants destroy are described as beings capable of salvation. Even places are “infused” with emotion, forcing the reader, as well as the characters, to feel gratitude for the setting: “I sensed already that the land on Fur Island, the water, would pull a person in . . . that it would spit them up transformed” (Hogan 68). Angel visibly sees this transformation once she arrives to the island after a long and painful absence where she grew up as an orphan disconnected from her culture. The novel begins with Angel’s return to the town Adam Rib where she was born to a woman who abused her. Angel carries the pain from this early childhood abuse emotionally as well as physically, represented by the scars her mother gave her.
that mar half her face. Angel returns to this town to find closure with her past. Angel lives with a woman named Bush who knew her as a baby, and through the relationships she creates with Bush and two other local women, Agnes and Agnes’s mother Dora-Rouge, Angel does not just find the past, but her future as well. These women teach her the healing ways of nature, and ultimately Angel finds solace from her past by adopting the Native American way of life – a life centered in nature, which is quite different from her life in the western world. Angel experiences this “transformation” of self through nature and is “spit up” from this experience with the new knowledge that nature is good. Its goodness is shown in all the female character’s relationships with nature and is demonstrated in many scenes, but one in particular shows its positive power clearly, leaving no room for doubt: Angel observes Agnes often walking to the water near her house to clear her mind, and “always she returned, refreshed and clear-eyed, as if the place where two waters met was a juncture where fatigue yielded to comfort, where a woman renewed herself” (44). This quote clearly reveals that natural places, like “the place where two waters met” have healing powers visible to the eye.

Nature is shown as a maternal character always offering comfort for those, like Agnes and Angel, who seek it. Nature is renewal itself. Nothing in nature ever truly dies, for its death is renewed in another creature’s life. Nature knows life well, and loves it: “The world, as described by Dora-Rouge, was a dense soup of love, creation all around us, full and intelligent” (81). Dora Rouge is a woman of earthly wisdom, and she knows that nature is not just a place, but an intelligent and loving spirit. This term “intelligent” cements even further the claim that nature is a character because it is capable of knowledge and thought, not just maternal healing, as shown in its awareness of the Indian man, La Rue’s, wrongdoings committed against nature, and its coincided revenge on LaRue.
The concept of a loving, motherly nature is expressed throughout the novel in explicit terms; however, nature takes on many forms, with some being the opposite of what the term “mother” suggests, revealing that nature is not a binary of feminine and passive; she is also highly aware and even revengeful toward patriarchal, western world behavior. Most of the novel revels in the beauty and goodness of a caring, life giving nature. This view is never more intimately or more particularly expressed than near the novel’s end, when Angel looks to the sky: “The aurora borealis moves across night, strands of light that . . . reminds me of the lines across a pregnant woman’s belly” (349). This image of pregnancy is powerful and suggests that nature’s main role is to give birth to life and nurture it – thus ensuring that the natural world never dies. Nature is indeed a mother, who knows and sees all, and reacts kindly to those who treat it well, like Agnes. But for those that do it harm, nature is neither benevolent nor passive, shown when Angel and the Native American man named LaRue go fishing. Instead of respectfully killing the fish after being caught, he drags them around alive, claiming it keeps them fresher longer. And at the end of the trip, LaRue proceeds to skin them without first killing them. Angel herself knows that what is being done is wrong, and that LaRue was a “poor excuse for an Indian” (83) because he knew nothing of respecting the spirit of the fish, or of honoring its life by giving it thanks. So, even though LaRue is an Indian, his actions make him more akin to the white man, who also does not show respect for the earth and its creatures. Nature, benevolent as it can be, does not ignore his sin, because soon after the fish are killed, a menacing storm gathers, with lightning, wind and ice. Angel knows that this storm and its lightning “sought him out” (84). This storm is an example of what happens “when humans forget to respect the bond” (82) between nature and themselves – nature strikes back with literal bolts of electricity. This is just one example of how nature reacts to mistreatment, and again, shows the complex personality of
the natural world, revealing that just because nature is feminine does not mean it is fragile or passive. In fact, nature shows femininity as meaning strength and power.

Hogan does not make nature a mere victim of human disrespect nor does she only describe its maternal side; however, the one scene in the novel where nature seems undeniably cruel is revealed to be the western world’s fault, suggesting that the actions done by the western world make nature appear more cruel than it is. This cruel scene revolves around a moose stuck in the mud (211) because the western world diverted a river up north, causing unnatural flooding that traps the moose. The more the moose struggles, the more stuck he becomes, until finally the earth devours him whole. Though the earth is the one slowly and torturously killing this moose, it is ultimately not the one striking a discord with harmony – the western world is. It is this world that creates imbalance, for it destroys nature without thinking of the consequences. Angel explains that if the white man had not dammed up the river, water would not be pooled in once dry areas, and that moose would not have gotten stuck. Nature however is unsympathetic to the moose and contradicts Hogan’s creation of a benevolent natural world. Even though man caused the formation of mud, the natural world does not save or rejuvenate the moose like it often does for Bush. Hogan creates this contradiction in order to escape the other limiting binary of nature as female and therefore only capable of good. As already expressed, Nature is much more complex than this. It is also a neutral space of predator prey relationships, of the strong dominating the weak.

Though much of Hogan’s novel shows nature as a character offering solace, its wild side cannot be forgotten without risking misrepresentation of who and what nature is. The earth does not show the moose compassion, even though the muddy environment in which it is trapped is unnatural for that area: the moose is stuck “in earth hunger the great maws and teeth of land that
swallow all things” (211). Ultimately, the moose is unable to escape such a monstrous appetite and “finally, it [is] embraced and held by a hungry earth with no compassion for it” (211). This description does not resonate with the claim that nature is good and full of love. It seems to disprove the theory of a harmonious existence, and what some critics may claim is Hogan’s primary perspective in this novel. However, harmony does not mean all things are treated fairly. Not all creatures can live full lives without fear of death. Harmony only means that life and death are evenly balanced. With this example, Hogan implies that this same idea of balance should be reiterated in regards to man and nature, or more specifically, technology and nature. Both should progress steadily, but in harmony to each other, in order to ensure one’s success does not mean the destruction of the other’s. However, such a balance is often unachievable in the way the Native Americans, other cultures or even, “animals who have a historical and holistic relationship to specific bioregions” (Milne 1) see fit. According to Hogan, their views and direct reliance on nature be it physically and/or spiritually, are not held nor understood by many people in the western world. For the western world, the progress of technology is more important than the assurance of nature’s longevity. This stubborn view is termed as “environmental racism” by ecocritics like Milne (3). This form of “racism” not only negatively impacts the non-human environment, but the specific environments of specific cultures that live life directly tied up with the land.

The union shared between Native Americans and nature means that if the environment is disrespected, hurt, even destroyed, people like Angel, Bush, and Agnes will share a similar fate. This fate is shown to come true with the descriptions of the “Fat Eater’s” town to which the three women journey. This town is made up of “resettled people [who] lived in little, fast-made shacks, with candy and Coca-Cola machines . . . between them, and in Quonset huts left behind
White culture invaded territory long lived on by the Fat-Eaters, an Indian tribe where Dora-Rouge once lived, though the external surroundings are hardly recognizable to her anymore. The once nature-filled area has been logged and jammed and bombed away and the people resettled in “fast-made shacks” made in a rush, with no care or love built into their flimsy, trashy walls. Though the western people are gone, they left their mark, materialized in the form of Coca Cola and candy machines stocked full of artificial sugar and high fructose corn syrup. These products are the western world’s icons, standing as glaring symbols of the unnatural and unhealthy ways of life that western culture not only partakes of, but forces on this community who is in pain from the “murder of the soul that was taking place there” (226) – a conscious and pre-mediated murder of nature and their culture – genocide.

The fictitious western world’s actions against characters and places in Solar Storms echo reality by showing what the western world can and has already done to indigenous people and nature. This image created by Hogan is there for a reason. Her novel, like many ecofictions, has an environmental justice component to it, and through her stories she is able to partake in “environmental activism” which is something “central to ecocriticism” (Milne 1). Her novel depicts the western world as elitists who disregard the Native American way of life by “uprooting and marginalizing” (1) whole Native American communities. Hogan’s eloquent language and descriptive imagery illuminate the poverty as well as aesthetic and moral ugliness imposed on the Native American’s who once lived in the richness of an aesthetically pleasing as well as benevolent natural world. Because of these descriptions, the call for justice and action is felt by the readers, who cannot help but see the destruction such marginalization creates, at least for Hogan’s characters. Like a game of dominoes, critic Castor sees and reiterates Hogan’s
message for the reader: if the land is ruined, the Native Americans, as well as everyone else, will be in ruins too.

*The Poisonwood Bible*, like *Solar Storms*, depicts a people surrounded by and dependent on their natural setting, though the message is less straight-forward than Hogan’s, for nature as a character is stripped of benevolence: this nature is raw, untamed, and aggressive. And yet it too fits the definition for ecofiction. Though life is constantly being reproduced, nature is not the motherly figure that tends to her creatures, like Hogan’s nature. The characters in this novel (African and white alike) are not refreshed and rejuvenated after spending time in the elements: nature wears a person down in Kingsolver’s novel because it provides no helping hand; characters either learn what is food and what is not, or how to get and clean water, or die. Nature just exists, and it is up to the characters to fend and care for themselves.

Along with depicting this view of nature, Kingsolver’s novel follows the events that occur when a family from Georgia — made up of a wife, Orleanna, four daughters, Rachel, Adah, Leah, Ruth May, and a bible-preaching father, Nathaniel Price — uproot themselves from the western world and land unprepared in the Congolese wilderness. Though great efforts are made throughout the novel, the family cannot keep the Congo from creeping through their yard and making its way into their house and lives. The Congo is as real and transformative as the female narrators of the novel, (this transformation of the women will be depicted in this thesis later on,) but is viewed as an antagonist by the western family for much of the novel because it is unlike anything they have ever experienced. Instead of a land easily malleable, this land fights change at every turn, forcing this missionary family to either convert themselves to the ways of the African jungle or pay a heavy price.
Even though the nature found in the Congo is depicted so differently than in the other two novels, it still fulfills the definition of ecocentricity by interacting with and affecting the lives of the human characters. The Congolese jungle is clearly personified at every turn in the novel. It is a huge, panting, broiling being that reacts of its own accord. Throughout the novel, the Congo is constantly changing – it is in a drought, then an impenetrable downpour where “the parched road through our village had become a gushing stream of mud, blood-red, throbbing like an artery” (Kingsolver 389). At other times, the land is alive with ants: “We were walking on, surrounded, enclosed, enveloped, being eaten by ants. Every surface was covered and boiling” (299). This nature is unlike any found in Solar Storms, where even the bitter winter is described having healing powers: “winter fills in the world, like a scar. At first the ice could be broken easily, then only with an axe, then it could not be broken at all” (Hogan 118). Scars, though imperfect, are a sign of healing in Solar Storms, and ice is symbolic of that power. The nature in Kingsolver’s novel is described very differently. It is not healing, but instead disgusting, unforgiving, and relentless. Like the ants, it would eat you alive if given a chance. Nature is a “throbbing” force of wildness in The Poisonwood Bible, and though poetically described, it is not maternally portrayed like the nature in Solar Storms, as a being full of truth, love, and healing. Instead, we are introduced to a natural world whose beauty is often deceiving, with its poisonwood plants that cause swollen, pus filled wounds when touched (Kingsolver 40-41) and its seemingly peaceful forests that in reality teem with predators that - like the green mamba –are always ready to strike (139). Rachel, the most stubbornly westernized daughter, recognizes the deceptive character of nature when they have a picnic by the river:

The riverbank, though it looks attractive from a distance, is not so lovely once you get there: slick, smelly mudbanks framed by a tangle of bushes with gaudy orange flowers . .
It is a lazy, rolling river as warm as bathwater, where crocodiles are said to roll around like logs. . . just stinking jungle laying low in the haze (48).

As a critic of Kingsolver’s novel, Anne Austenfeld explains, even though “Rachel sees the world through the eyes of a literal-minded, materialistic teenager . . . she renders . . . material details . . . and emotions with great accuracy” (295). Her accuracy in detailing the “materials” that make up the natural world in front of her as well as her vivid description of its “lazy” emotion and her own emotional disgust at it exposes the raw indifference of a nature that at times is “lazy” and does indeed “stink.” Rachel represents the superiority of the western world, but she also renders nature in a blunt, realistic portrayal. Rachel does not see nature as a beautiful escape. Even its flowers are described as “gaudy” – Rachel does not fall for any of its seeming illusions of beauty and luxury. *The Poisonwood Bible* characters, especially Rachel, do not mourn nature like the Native American characters in *Solar Storm* because nature is everywhere and makes life difficult. It plagues the family with trials of hunger, heat, and clouds of mosquitoes that fill their blood with a poison like “thick, tainted honey” that leaves them fevered and delirious for months (Kingsolver 394). It suffocates the family with its fertility, growing so thick that the characters feel overwhelmed by its power and their fragility: “the Congo breathed behind the curtain of forest, preparing to roll over us like a river” (98). Western world nature, the nature the characters have left in coming to Africa, takes on a nurturing identity for them. This personification of nature greatly contrasts the equally alive, “breathing,” but more threatening nature that exists in the Congo. However, the two novels do share a similar and important theme: both perspectives of nature transform the main women in the novels, and lead them, ultimately, to their true selves.

The Congo changes the Price family forever, though its impact on the family is not so permanent, for the Congo, though it changes others for the better, resists change itself, most
often because change comes in negative forms. These facts are learned by the Price women, who muse that Africa “will surely take back everything once we are gone” (82) because, as Orleanna deduces later on, Africa has its own will and throughout history, has always “swallowed the conqueror’s music and sang a new song of her own” (385). The feminized (indicated by the pronoun “her”) natural world of Africa does not benevolently yield to the family, but forces the women to develop independent ways of survival, as Orleanna states: “Look at your sisters now. Lock, stock, and barrel, they’ve got their own three ways to live with our history now” (385). Nature thickened their skin and taught them how to survive in Africa and with the losses they suffered there (like losing their baby sister, Ruth May). It was not a friend, nor was it a foe. It was simply a companion, living its life and forcing the women to fight for their own. Kingsolver reveals, in this characterization of nature, that nature is not simply a static entity comprised of good versus bad, helpful versus harmful elements. It is just as complex as any of the female human characters within the novel.

From an African world over-run with nature we turn to a post-apocalyptic world over-run with death in McCarthy’s The Road. Though McCarthy’s vision of a lifeless natural world seems completely opposite from the other novels, the portrayal here of nature still fits with ecofiction, because nature is seen as a character with reactions and mortality, just like its human counterparts. This nature plays the role of antagonist because it offers no chance for sustenance or overwhelming fertility; all this nature has to offer is a wasteland framed by a cold ashy sky. Nature, or the lack of nature, is the man and his young son’s constant companion. The man and his son are “each the other’s world entire” (McCarthy 6) and each world is made up of ash and “gunmetal light” (6). At every turn of the page ash and the hostile grey surroundings, implied by the term “gunmetal,” are present and play a significant role in the characters’ lives. Lifeless
nature follows the pair throughout the novel: “They were crossing the broad coastal plain where the secular winds drove them in howling clouds of ash . . . the noon sky black as the cellars of hell” (177). This harsh description of the natural world is one of many throughout the novel. Constantly the reader is reminded of the “howling” hellish setting that “drives” the two down an endless road, and constantly nature is described until the reader feels the coldness too, and see with the characters the stretches of barren road and blackened noons.

McCarthy creates a version of nature that is as necessary to _The Road_ as the man and his son are because it gives the most insight into the conditions the man and son must face. When it snows, the event is described, and details about how many inches of built-up drift are offered, revealing what kind of hardship or trouble the man and boy are to face that day (98). Nature also forces the man to disclose information about his past, building his identity and story so that the reader feels familiar with him as well as gains a sense of what he especially has lost. Nature reveals this because it constantly surrounds and plays a negative role in the character’s lives, (causing them to freeze, go hungry, offering no shelter) which constantly reminds the man of the time when nature was not so inhospitable. This antagonistic nature reminds the man of that time full of falcons, blue walls of mountains, rivers, and seasons like autumn with its yellow leaves (20) – not its gray ash.

In this novel alone, not the other two novels discussed in this thesis, nature has a split personality that mentally pulls the man in opposite directions, one toward death and release, the other towards a death-like life. There are two characters that share the name “nature” in this novel, though one exists in reality and the other in the man’s dreams. This concept of two different natures existing dependent on what time and place the social world is at is a concept that critic David Kidner explores. Kidner explains that “nature becomes an offshoot of a social
reality” (340); it is not just a scientific construction because its meanings and representations change with the changing perspectives of society. These changing perspectives occur in *The Road*. From the world of the past where both society and nature are still present, we turn to the dead, immoral world of the now. With this apocalyptic landscape, “it follows that each of these social worlds will construct a somewhat different version of nature, and there is, therefore, no single “nature,” but rather a diversity of “natures” constituted by our various fantasies and languages” (Kidner 340). In no other novel is this “diversity of ‘natures’” more apparent than in *The Road*.

The man experienced firsthand how nature changes in response to society; the nature of his present situation is completely opposite to the nature of his memories that come to him in his dreams. This nature of his dream world is a harmonious character, similar to the nature found in *Solar Storms*. It is where “flowering woods” and “birds” exist. It is where the sky is “achingly blue . . . but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds” (McCarthy18). It is in this unconscious realm where the lost nature acts as a “siren” calling him to death. The term “siren” implies a woman with bewitching beauty who uses her looks to lure men to their untimely end. This implies that the nature from “the long ago” (84) was female, and represents what his now dead wife, before committing suicide recognized: “My only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (57). Both his wife and this siren world suggest that death is the right choice compared to a doomed life, what the man and his son live now in the present world. The traditional connotation of siren as a sinister woman changes in this novel into a sort-of savior, attempting, through his dreams, to save him from a life worse than death. This shift in identity of nature is one way that McCarthy avoids that overly simplistic binary perspective of nature. Though this dream-nature is a temptress the man yearns to give in to, his
life is bound up with his son, and therefore, every morning, he must leave “the softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun” and “wake in the black and freezing waste” (272) of the post apocalyptic world. And it is this world, this bare-bones reality of a once living landscape that has a clear story to tell of the future– without regenerative nature, there is very little hope:

. . . he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it (130)

This quote reveals that nature is a prominent character with its own story to tell. He saw that Nature is now comprised of an “intestate earth” (130) – a dead earth that did not leave a will behind telling survivors how to cope with their new surroundings. Because of this, the last remaining survivors are left to “relentless[ly] circl[e]” (130) the wasteland with no guidance. This earth, with its “darkness implacable” (130) has left the survivors blinded. None can see the light at the end of the road. Not even the man, who compares himself and his son to hunted, trembling animals living on “borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes” (130). The term “borrowed” suggests that mankind, represented by this father, finally figured out that the earth and nature are neither immortal nor immune to damage. According to McCarthy, it takes an apocalypse to make this sentiment understood, but this knowledge was gained too late because man has “borrowed” too much, and can now only sorrow over the earth’s irreversible death.
II. Comparison of all three novels

The order of the three novels discussed in this thesis reveals a steady increase in natural and cultural destruction caused by the patriarchal, white western world. Moving from a beautiful, loving nature depicted in *Solar Storms* that not only produces what all creatures need to survive, but cares about life, and heals those people who seek it out, we turn to an uncaring, choking kind of natural plentitude that gives as much as it takes, represented in *The Poisonwood Bible*; finally, we reach the desolate landscape of *The Road*, where all nature is dead and people seem to have lost all that separates them from the animal world, dignity, morality and love. Instead of mankind holding on to these characteristics, some might argue that man reverts back to nature and the eye for an eye philosophy that in this dismal world expands because of cannibalism to an arm, and then an entire body. However, I argue that because of the order in which I discuss the novels, which follows the date of publication, these three ecofictions all suggest that nature is essential and good for society, and therefore, the fact that man becomes cannibalistic in *The Road* is not because he is becoming more natural, it is because all nature is gone and therefore man mimics the unnatural—nature-less—state he is in. The idea that love and human decency is “natural” is suggested in the dream the man often has of his former life that he just as often must harshly wake from: “In the nights sometimes now he’d wake in the black and freezing waste out of softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun” (272). When there was nature, symbolized by the “birds” and the “sun,” there was also “human love.” This concept of human love is universal. It is not just between the narrow love of, for example, the man and his wife but the love shared between majorities of people. Cannibalism did not exist because such an act would be unnatural; it would go against the human constructs of morality established within communities and societies.
Though the settings of each novel are depicted in startlingly different ways, the overall message they each give is that without nature, the earth as well as everything that man is, will be doomed. This message is not only expressed in these three fictions, but in other ecologically conscious literature as well. In fact, many environmentally-focused writers share the same belief that nature is a very essential part of humanity and society. Many ecocritics write about the need for an interlacing of society and nature. For example, in her most recent work, the poet Rachel Stein “presents a way of relating to nature that is deeply entwined with social patterns and attuned to matters of justice and equity” (Tallmadge and Harrington xiii). Stein is not alone in her way of writing about nature and society. *Solar Storms* shares Stein’s desire for environmental justice – justice for the harm and destruction of nature as well as justice for the harm and destruction of Native American communities and lifestyles caused by the construction of a hydro-electric dam.

Tallmadge and Harrington point to a widely shared view that humankind needs a reconnection with nature. However, they are careful not to suggest that the man-made world should be abandoned. They strive to “resist the idea of themselves as solitary, made closer to nature by opposition to human society; instead, their humanity comes to reside in wedding the human world to the larger biotic community” (xiii). Ecocriticism is not meant to ruthlessly attack technology or the western world; it is meant to reunite the human and nonhuman worlds. This reconciliation is initiated through “radical attempts” in their work that invite (sometimes forcefully) the reader to see nature’s importance. This idea of a “radical theme” is defined as the “transgression of boundaries that frame conventional thought and experience of a world shared with the Other” (x). This technique is found in all three of my ecofictions and is what finally avoids the binary thinking of a patriarchal world. In *Solar Storms*, its radical theme (from the
perspective of the western world) is its portrayal of nature as a living entity made up of spirits, like Beaver and Wolverine, who embody human-like characteristics such as love, caring, as well as anger and revenge. Because of this portrayal, nature becomes an interactive space of multiple characters. This humanized nature is unconventional for many people, especially the western world, who stereotypically sees nature as no more than a place outside society that provides raw materials for society. This idea of a “humanized nature carries both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, the term “humanized” suggests intelligence and capacity for emotion, which society views as being positive characteristics that therefore encourages humanity to interact with and develop a relationship with human-like nature. On the other hand, the attribution of human qualities to the natural world extends the human domination over nature. Not only do humans overuse nature, but the term “humanized” suggests that we have even assimilated it into becoming one of us. Hogan avoids this problem by linking nature with the female side of the human world. Females take after nature, not the other way around, and also, females, like the main protagonists in Solar Storms, are not seeking more domination, but integration with nature.

An opposing representation of nature from the character in Solar Storms is found in The Poisonwood Bible. The ugliness and danger of nature is detailed and described throughout this novel. This is a radical move because showing such negative qualities could assumedly turn the audience against nature. Kingsolver details a natural world that many have never experienced, where it can quite literally get under your skin and cause terrible sicknesses like malaria. The grossness, pain, and fear that make up the Congolese jungle in the novel, though radical, is what also makes the novel realistic, for it successfully creates a complex, sublime natural world that is simultaneously beautiful, dangerous, and disgusting. The best ecofictions create that complexity.
Nature is not good or bad, black or white. It is fluid, with change occurring at every second.

Yes, you can bet on it getting under your skin, but you can also bet on it producing fruit in the spring, or providing a forest full of animals that can be hunted. Nature gives and takes away and, as Kingsolver’s novel reveals, is the only reliable source of truth and light for the western female protagonists.

Nature gives and takes away, but without it, there is no true hope, only the “radical” conception of “borrowed time” as the father in *The Road* mournfully realizes, even though he hopes with all his heart that something will change or that his son will carry the fire into a better tomorrow. The apocalyptic world is intentionally the last version of nature given in the thesis. McCarthy’s novel was written after both Hogan’s and Kingsolver’s, and is also the most nature and human-deprived world out of all three novels. Even the people left to wander the waste (except the man and his son) have become more animal than human, scavengers of any and all things edible. Though this turn towards a more animalistic lifestyle seems contradictory to the above argument that says that the human survivors in *The Road* are not becoming more natural, the statement still stands because humankind is changing for the worse – it is causing its own extinction. The natural world is intended to change but not always in a forward motion. Change can take many forms and go in many directions, but humankind chooses to equate change with progress. *The Road* reveals the danger in this human-constructed assumption. Humanity’s obsession with progress caused the apocalypse and therefore caused the natural world and humanity to change for the worst and endanger itself; an act evolution is designed to prevent more than anything else. The ability to adapt to surroundings and therefore avoid extinction is a basic and essential requirement of nature. Evolution catalyzes this adaptation. However, the man and his son are distinct because they do not respond to environmental pressures and adapt to the
act of cannibalism — an act that, in their new surroundings, sees almost essential to survival. They remain the “good guys” as the two often remind each other. The reason for this refusal to adapt is because, in the time before, a man could say he was on a higher level than other animals because in the most general and biased sense, he was (I say biased because it could be argued that other animals are just as evolved, just not in the ways man easily recognizes). Morality and human love were essential signs of this evolutionary prowess. The implications of this concept are explored by sociologist Jonathan Turner who states: the “paradox of hominid evolution is this: How could an animal with propensities for low sociality, weak ties, autonomy, loose social structures and all the other characteristics still evident in our closest ape cousins become better organized?” Fellow critic De Waal answers this conundrum by explaining that because of this organization into groups, hominids had to fight the “primal and primary centers of the brain” that “push” for “weak and loose ties, mobility and individual autonomy” by expanding hominids “emotional capacities, which, in turn, led over the last three million years, to the development of morality” (Turner 218). In The Road, this push for groups, for community, is gone. Human-created communities have undone themselves, and cannibalism has consumed society except in the man and his son, who retain the evolved behavior that existed in the before living version of the world.

With morality for the most part gone, the majority of mankind is backtracking into past behaviors of “weak and loose ties,” and “individual autonomy.” Mankind is not following the natural, progressive course, and therefore, is becoming unnatural. The Road ends the trio, and because all three novels can be so closely compared and contrasted, it can be seen as what inevitably will happen if the messages and warnings of the first two novels are ignored.
The “radical” themes given for all three novels all branch from the same ideal—nature is a living, breathing, reactive being. All three perspectives and ways that the character of nature is represented both contradict and support each other. All three forms of nature are referred to with female pronouns and are discussed as not just the setting, but as something that has or had (in the case of *The Road*) its own presence, mind, and life. Though representing nature as a character makes the reader more intimately care about its fate, this representation is also problematic, for it takes a force much bigger and more complex than humans and reduces it to our own small level.

When nature stops being an unknowable and awe-inspiring force, and becomes a character, it allows other characters in the book to relate to it, befriend it, or choose to hate it. Such a range of emotions that this character can inspire is dangerous for it and humanity because familiarity removes mystery as well as threat. When these elements are gone, mankind stops fearing it and feels comfortable with exploiting it without worrying about danger. The lack of worry not only can harm nature, but mankind as well. Comfort signals for the abandonment of defenses, leaving mankind vulnerable for attack or disaster. This comfort with the natural world is felt in Hogan’s novel; nature is loved and in essence befriended by the women characters in the novel. Nature takes on the role of nurturer, and the characters believe that nature is benevolent and will heal, protect, and love them back. For the most part, this is exactly what happens. Nature, depicted from a Native American perspective, is never ugly like in *The Poisonwood Bible* nor cruel and uncaring like in *The Road*. However, this representation is wherein the problem lies.

Hogan’s overtly feminized nature seems, from a western perspective, almost sentimental at times, as if she is trying too hard to make the reader see nature as a mother, and choose to love
it, not become its enemy. Solar Storms does not appear to paint a balanced image of nature. Nature’s benefits are expressed in detail, but its downfalls, or more accurately, its neutrality and dangers are hardly described except in the scene with the moose, which is later shown as the western world’s fault. In order to force the reader to let go of the western fears that are at times rightly associated with the natural world, Hogan presents nature as a maternal figure no one can resist or criticize. Hogan seemingly skews reality to make it fit her message. However, Hogan is not trying to manipulate the reader into relating to or caring about nature that would not normally or naturally have occurred. All Hogan does is give a Native American perspective of what nature essentially is and could be like if allowed wholeness and harmonious balance. The feeling of manipulation does not come off from the page. Though the reader may be frustrated, even angered with Hogan’s portrayal of nature, it is the words on the page the reader should respond to, not their created emotions that Hogan’s words may inspire in them. No matter how hard some people may work to achieve cultural assimilation and embrace the spirits “Beaver” and “Wolverine” as real, they will never be open minded enough to succeed. Some perspectives take up too much mental space, leaving no room for doubt, questions, or a new perspective. These are the people who will always just be tourists in the Native American religion and culture, unable to truly believe because no part of their experience can link up with the ones presented in the novel. Hogan’s novel demands nothing but gives everything. It gives knowledge and love and simply a beautiful story that the reader can choose to really digest, or simply read and walk away from. No matter the choice, no judgment will be passed, for at least a new story, a new perspective was examined. If anything, the images and tone of nature may inspire the readers to look around on the next walk and appreciate the land, even if they still return to the western comfort of the home, with its running water and electricity, and feel happy to have shelter from the elements
because nature for them is still just a place to visit, not to live. This is one story and one way of life. Hogan’s is simply just another version, to have and to hold, or to set down.

III. Technology: A Complicated Relationship within all three Ecofictions

The three ecofictions discussed in my thesis are saturated with depictions of the natural world, revealing its necessary role in all lives, human included. However, this message would not be as powerful without an antagonist, and this antagonist comes in the form of the western world and its overuse of technology. The destruction of nature and human lives due to technology is apparent in all three novels, but it would be unrealistic to claim that technology, compared to the natural world, is something evil or undesirable. Humanity has progressed to its current level through the use of technology. Humanity is at the top of the food chain not because of a physical superiority, but because of the human mind that created products and machines, elevating the human race over all other life forms and making the abilities of other life forms less consequential. However, the western world’s pure dependency, when it is pure, on technology is negative, as all three ecofictions depict.

In Solar Storms, highly developed technology is seldom used by the Native Americans, and only when no other options are available. The novel’s main characters choose to live life guided by the natural percussions of the earth, not the heavy handed ways of western technology that often must destroy nature in order to become established and usable. Because of these realities, technology is shown as largely negative throughout the novel, whereas nature is exalted as highly benevolent. This imbalance in representation can partially be explained by taking a look at the novel’s author, Linda Hogan: “As a novelist Hogan has a Chickasaw perspective” (Tallmadge 131). This perspective is derived from Linda Hogan’s personal life. Linda Hogan
represents herself as a Native American woman and writer with deep Chickasaw “roots” (McNally) who writes successful ecofictions, including Solar Storms, a novel with dominant female voices and major themes concerning the environment and human impact viewed from a Native American perspective, showing that even in writing, Hogan retains her roots.

Her major theory, apparent in Solar Storms, is that earth and its inhabitants carry equal weight and therefore equal importance, and that mankind has a responsibility to not only understand and accept this, but to defend it. This theme is personally important as well. As a mother of two adopted Native American children, Hogan carries this message throughout her life, in the hopes that through it, there will be natural environments left for her own children to love and protect (McNally). Her literary voice is different than that of Barbara Kingsolver and Cormac McCarthy, whose novels also fall under the ecofiction category among others. Poetically written, Solar Storms is dense with Native American philosophy. Nature is conceptualized through a female Native American woman, Angel, who returns to her homeland, to the earth, in order to heal and discover her true self.

Hogan reveals her cultural identity on and off the page; however, her personal identity does not constrict the universality of her message – that nature, more than technology, is needed by all, no matter the culture. Though Solar Storms is filled with Native American cultural ideologies, they are not based solely on Hogan’s Chickasaw background. Instead, the novel is full of people and communities that are “both culturally mixed and ‘totally fictional’” (Tallmadge 131). This fictionalization of culture and peoples allows for the vagueness and therefore the open-endedness which critic Tallmadge and Harrington and others think is necessary. As Silvia Schultermandl elaborates in her essay, Hogan’s “creation of an alternative Native American, largely mixed-ethnic society in Solar Storms, and . . . her engaging of this
society in a communal fight for the conservation of the nonhuman biosphere” (69) allows Hogan to express how the love and need to save the environment is not just a Native American fight. The characters in the novel come together and fight the hydroelectric construction. The battle for the earth is shared by all, as it should be in real life. Once more we see how Hogan avoids the oversimplicity of binary thinking.

Though many different people come together at the end of the novel, the enemy is still the western world, which having not been converted by loving nature, stands by its intentions for the dam’s construction. Similarly, though Hogan’s novel attempts to only loosely allude to certain beliefs and cultures, it overall tells the perspective, faith, and ways of life believed in and followed by mostly Native Americans. This single story by a Native American writer with its many ties to Native American culture, beliefs, and perspective regarding the western world is what Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, warns of in her speech as being dangerous. The danger Adichie refers to is that the single story or single perspective given in literature limits the reader’s understanding of that particular culture or way of life. Not only does Solar Storms “limit” in a sense the understanding of Native American’s as all being believers in natural spirits as well as people who are against technology, but Solar Storms for the most part shows that the western world with its technological progress is negative – it does the opposite in progressing life, it destroys it. However, with a different perspective, the fact that Hogan represents the views of Native Americans makes it clear that Hogan is adding to the voices of western literature, for she is both an American and a minority living in America. Hogan requires a flexible and open-minded perspective from the non-indigenous reader in order for her novel to not come across as a single, biased representation of the non-indigenous western world.
Although Solar Storm’s is not meant to only be read by a Native American audience, the reader is meant to learn about and hopefully see the benefits of an indigenous world-view where nature is described in Native American terms, and because of this, plays major roles in the plot and lives of the characters. Nature helps, heals, and is highly respected and valued by the Native American characters. This devotion to and relationship with nature can be summed up in the words of Tulik, an older, wise man Angel grows to love and admire: “Here a person is only strong when they feel the land. Until then a person is not a human being” (Hogan 235). In this quote, Tulik is speaking to Angel while they gaze out across a land threatened by the western world’s desire for a hydro-electric dam. This dam promises and has already caused devastation to land and communities downstream from the project, like Adam’s Rib. Tulik’s quote gets to the heart of the novel’s entire message: without nature, you are not alive, and without tuning in to the natural world, understanding it, respecting it and living with, not against it, then you are not human. Solar Storms draws attention to other similarities different people have, like the “languages of other living things” (Tallmadge 130). However, the emphasis is always on “the land or biotic community of their place” (130). This emphasis on the land is because nature plays a main role in the Native American characters’ lives, and is under great threat in certain parts of the world because of technology.

The recognition of Linda Hogan as Native American is not the only real-life fact that helps situate the novel: the novel is also deeply wrapped up with an environmental issue involving, as already mentioned, the construction of a dam. Castor points to the historical basis for Hogan’s narrative, the controversial Hydro-Quebec Project that took place in the 1970s which negatively impacted the way of life led by the native Cree people living near the James Bay area (158). Both dams, historical and fictional, reveal issues the desire for technological
progress raise: “The people were in pain . . . It was murder of the soul that was taking place there . . . how conquered people get back their lives?” (Hogan 226). This question, pondered silently by Dora Rouge, has been positively answered, in some ways, by Angel. Angel is a “conquered” person in pain at the beginning of the novel, but near the end, she becomes a complete individual who lives life fully. Angel takes hold of her life the day she decides to write a letter to Dora-Rouge, and that letter reconnects her with a life that she needs in order to truly live. The letter is the thing that allows her to cross the threshold between the western life she has only been bearing into a life that removes burden and introduces pleasure, contentment, and strength.

Though a letter is just a small item, it, as well as another item, Bush’s generator, represents the few western made objects positively represented. Regarding the generator, it also brings comfort to Angel and even nature loving Bush: “when it began to get dark, Bush would go outside and fill the generator with gas and create warm light and a room full of intimacy” (77). When properly used, technology is a great benefit to humanity; it can replace cold dark nights with the soft, intimate glow of electrical illumination most people cannot help but enjoy. However, when exploited, technology becomes a glaring source of destruction for both the Native American culture and nature. This small image of Bush and Angel viewing the generator as a piece of enjoyable technology succeeds in revealing technology’s complexity. It is not simply hated by the women because the fact is that most human beings, regardless of culture, belief, or way of life rely to some degree on technology. Hogan represents this reality but seldom because her main goal is to paint nature as superior to technology, a belief she knows is not held by many in the western world. Therefore, the wonders of technology are described at a minimum because it is nature’s time to shine. Hogan, as Castor explains, succeeds in this endeavor because of her “narrative power” (159), a power that creates empathy for her fictitious characters (including
nature) and their circumstances. And it is this empathy that allows readers to obtain new understandings of the world, naturally and culturally. *Solar Storms* succeeds, as Castor argues, in not only “challeng[ing] the dualism characteristic of Western thinking” (161), but in familiarizing non-Native American readers to a foreign way of looking at life: as a web of interconnecting and interdependent parts and places.

This concept of empathy is utilized throughout Hogan’s novel to invite the reader to care about people and places that have for many, gone unnoticed. Castor examines the fact that Hogan focuses on the concept of “elements in the natural world . . . [having] consciousness and spirit” (Tarter qtd. in Castor 161-2) in order to combat the non-indigenous western views that see places as empty and unimportant before mankind comes and settles them. The idea that places are conscious spirits encourages the reader to feel empathy for whatever place the story leads to. This idea of place is also transferred onto the human body, not only physically connecting humans and nature together, but making the human characters in the novel another place of importance that needs empathy just like the land does.

Hogan’s main protagonist, Angel, is a product of western society; though born of Native American heritage, she was assimilated into western behaviors and beliefs that, as the novel reveals, are a poison stunting her overall growth. Angel suffers from and is restricted by her broken identity, an identity that broke when she was taken from her Native American roots and forced into a foster home where her heritage became unfamiliar, lost: “I wanted not to be fragments and pieces left behind by fur traders, soldiers, priests, and schools” (Hogan 77). This imagery of internal fragmentation also reflects outwards, onto her face that is on one half clear and beautiful, but on the other side, afflicted with scars that break up her smooth complexion. These scars shame Angel, and she constantly parts her hair so that a “curtain of dark red hair
fall[s] straight down over the right side of [her] dark face” (25) --covering her perceived imperfections.

This shame and anger that Angel has in regards to her scars, which were caused by her mother, is shown in her negative obsession with mirrors. There is a mirror, a seemingly unimportant product of technology that Angel covets when she arrives at Adam’s Rib and begins living with Bush. It is the only mirror in the house, and therefore is the only tool allowing her to see her reflection – her scarred and (at this early point in the novel) hated face. Though this mirror is not in itself physically destroying something, like a highway built upon torn up field or a factory that pumps noxious gas into the atmosphere, it is proven emotionally toxic to Angel herself. The mirror does not reflect back the true Angel, someone everyone can see but herself -- a soulful woman with a deep, loving heart – it reflects only her imperfections and ugly past. This small piece of technology is a metaphor for technology at large in *Solar Storms*: technology gives off ugliness; it creates destruction where there should be life. Ultimately, Angel breaks this mirror, and only until this act can she slowly start piecing together her shattered self and finally see her internal reflection – an image of healing, not fragmentation.

Reverting back to her natural life is not an easy process for Angel, and in the beginning, it is obvious that western society raised Angel, because Angel sees nature as separate from her life – something to keep at a distance. As Patrick Murphy in his essay states, “Angel's character development is, in many ways, a story of recovering—both in the sense of that term in a phrase such as "recovering alcoholic," and in the sense of retrieving that which has been lost, obscured, or denied”(79). A vivid instance demonstrating how the Native American culture and its connection to nature “has been lost, obscured, or denied” is when she sees nature as an invasion, shown when she sees that a vine has crossed the threshold into her room in Bush’s house “like a
dark green hand . . . I put it out and close[d] the uncurtained window. I did not want the world to sneak in on me. Like the missionaries, I was threatened by its life and the way it resisted human efforts to control it’ (Hogan 71). This scene reveals how Angel became like the missionaries who took her away. She grew up thinking of the natural world and the human world as separate places where boundaries needed maintaining. The fact that the window is “uncurtained” is mentioned to represent that boundary that Bush’s island takes away. A curtain would have enabled her to block out the sight of intruding nature and its many “dark green hand[s],” but here nature is never blocked out. Even Bush’s house is made of natural parts, like “dark gray stones and covered with vines . . . the soot –colored stones . . . smelled of earth” (68-69). This observation tells both Angel and the reader that in this new world, where Angel arrives as, “a rootless teenager in a jeans jacket and tight pants” (25) the man-made world and the natural one have been wed together. At the start, Angel is “rootless” and unsure, dressed in the constricting “tight” ways of western society that formed her into a restricted, shielded person herself. But Bush’s house suggests that everything is about to change for Angel because here, even technology, in the form of the house, comes in natural forms. Angel fights this change for a time but eventually sees the beauty and desirability which exists in nature: “I had given up closing the window and one of the vine’s leaves had turned red. Green dragonflies floated in . . . and drifted around the room” (78). This quote shows Angel’s newly formed consciousness regarding nature as now beautiful. Nature drifts and floats in colorful and vibrant forms in and out of Angel’s room – it is an inviting image, more so than any curtained window or darkened room.

Angel makes whole the pact that had, since her removal from her culture, been broken: she remembers and reaffirms the truth that she is a natural piece of the world, no different or more entitled than “rain” or “birds” – her counterparts. Angel returns home to a community that
includes the land and its creatures, all of which are equal to humans and have voices and intentions of their own” (Tallmadge 132). However, the rest of the “people,” especially the western people, have broken the pact made at the beginning of time – they no longer care for the natural world or accommodate the other forms of life and their needs. Because of this lack of care or act of sharing the earth with all creation, things came into existence, and outshone the “lights” in the eyes of animals” (Hogan 239). These high forms of technology caused noise, clamor, panic, and blinding light.

High, so called “progressive” forms of technology in Solar Storms are more often than not negatively portrayed, whose progress and good intentions, when actualized, make the world dirtier, cluttered, and damaged. For example, technology and its mechanisms are described in full detail, but this detail does not make their presence positive; it reveals how technology ruins nature, aesthetically as well as fundamentally. No more clearly is this shown then when the town of Holy String that Angel visits agrees to the establishment of electricity: “Little did anyone know that this light would connect them with the world and in what ways” (267). This connection to the “world,” or more specifically, the new western world, does not connect them to luxury or a more progressive life; it connects them to the dirty corners of their kitchen that before, were hidden. Electricity makes the people of Holy String self-conscious: “With the coming of light, dark windowless corners inside human dwellings now showed a need for cleaning or paint” (267). The light casts a negative illumination on the unappealing aspects of life that were better left in the dark.

Not only does technology create a less aesthetically pleasing version of reality, but it makes a mockery of itself when compared with the natural world that its presence is destroying. With the acceptance of technology, Holy String Town relents to its invasion. As an observer,
Angel sees the new dismal ways of life and connections to nature that have been brought to “light.” Electricity needs a source of power, and thus the river’s mighty energy was redirected and harnessed for the so called “progress” of humanity. The river travelled “out of its raging, swift power and life into such humdrum places as kitchens with stoves and refrigerators. The river became lamps. False gods said, “Let there be light,” and there was alchemy in reverse” (268). The power and awe of technology, especially the power of electricity, enabled people to have “stoves” and “refrigerators,” freeing them from the open flame of a cooking fire and the waste of spoilt food. However, these positive roles become negative because they can only exist when nature is compromised. Technology is shown in Hogan’s novel as “humdrum” and shameful because it minimizes and destroys nature, like the river, whose purpose is to be a river, not a used and abused source of mechanical power for human consumption only. It is this human consumption and greed for continued exploitation that worries Angel the most, for this greed causes man to think himself a god, with the power and right to create “light.” However, this light is not the light of life like it was in the making of the world; it is a “false” light, a light that imprisons. The people of Holy String Town are indeed imprisoned by their new reliance on technology because now that electricity is there, they “would believe we needed it. We would turn buttons on and off, flip switches” (268). With every flip of a switch or push of a button, the people unwittingly support the destruction of something they not only depend on, but love – nature. This desire for electricity causes massive flooding downstream from the town. These floods kill many, many animals, like “the yellow-eyed lynx, the swift dark marten” (335). The western man does not foresee or does not care about the amount of death a simple act like damming a river causes. Though man acts like a god, he does not think like one, nor does he have the power to protect or save the innocent from the flood his technology creates. Perhaps
what is more unsettling than the flood is the western world’s apparent indifference because no attempts are made to fix what has been broken.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, high and low forms of technology are highly valued because in Africa, they are not easily available or accessible; however, technology eventually loses its value and is seen as a poisonous trap quite similar to the one discussed in *Solar Storms*. Upon arrival in the Congo, the Price women — Ruth May, Leah, Adah, and Rachel, and their mother, Orleanna — realize how dependent they are on technology and cling tightly to the few small pieces of technology they have with them. Though the family has more than most of their neighbors have ever owned in a lifetime, like pots, pans, an outdoor lavatory and an actual stove, they still struggle in the beginning when learning how to cope without washers and dryers, cars, indoor plumbing, treated water, and so much more. In the Congo, even mundane necessities like a cup of water or a bath take hours of preparation and physical labor: “Every small effort at hygiene was magnified by hours of labor spent procuring the simplest elements: water, heat, anything that might pass for disinfectant” (Kingsolver 92). This observation reveals the simple reality that life without technology is much harder than life with technology. Because of this, the few items they do possess are treasured: “[Mother] procured a good supply of antibiotic drugs . . . a cast-iron frying pan . . . baker’s yeast . . . the head of a hatchet, a fold-up army latrine spade, and all told a good deal more. This was the full measure of civilization’s evils we felt obliged to carry with us” (14). Leah makes this last statement, referring to the “evil” of civilization, without truly meaning it. However, its meaning gains more truth as her story unfolds.

As time goes by in the African wilderness, some of the women in the family begin to change more radically than others, and these changes are narrated by the women themselves. This female-based narration is a “narrative tool,” as critic Anne Austenfeld describes, that
enables a “revelatory narrative circle of five character-narrators, who speak by turns in an orderly way, each filtering events, themes, and dialogue throughout the novel” (294). This “tool” of having “The five female, American narrative voices offer[s] a feminist alternative . . . to male-written and narrated European fiction about Africa, typified by Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (294) and reveals the communal way of life the women eventually lead in their new African village. The five-sectioned narration also allows each woman to individually express and describe her complex relationship with both technology and the natural world.

Leah, who eventually adopts the life of a married African woman, begins to view the western lifestyle as undesirable. Instead of pining after America, she falls in love with an African man, the local schoolteacher, Anatole. Before they are lovers, they are intimate friends, and Leah often finds herself with him in the schoolyard, daydreaming about how different America and its natural world is from the one she finds herself surrounded by now: “I could explain to Anatole about soybean fields where men sat in huge tractors like kings on thrones, taming the soil from one horizon to the other? It seemed like a memory trick or a bluegreen dream: impossible” (Kingsolver 283). Americans dominate the earth, like “kings on thrones,” because the wilderness there can be successfully cleared, cut, divided and replanted with crops that grow in rows. For Africa and particularly the Congo where the Price women live, this is “a bluegreen dream” because nature here is too interconnected. If you were to clear away forests, the soil that the roots once clutched would drain away, and all life would be lost. To try to form massive agriculture plots like those in America is counter-productive, and even cruel: “Clearing a rain forest to plant annuals is like stripping an animal first of its fur, then its skin. The land howls” (524-5). In the Congo, people learn to stake out individual gardens themselves, and all people learn the ways to successfully grow a seed into a plant that bears fruit, like Leah has:
“Here you know what a seed is for, or you starve. A jungle yields no abundance to feed the multitudes, and supports no leisure class” (524). America’s abundance in food that can “feed the multitudes,” is seen, from Leah’s new perspective, as often shameful. As an outsider, Leah reminisces on the American way of life, remembering how America grows heavy with its food, so much so that it is shipped in huge quantities to sterilized stores where people are free to sample and binge on food that does not resemble the creature it came from. This luxury makes America not just spoiled, but blind: “people can afford to spend their lives hardly noticing, or caring, that a seed produces a plant” (524). Perhaps it is this small statement that explains why the western world tears up its section of the earth and replaces it with factories, shopping malls and movie theaters. The people have become so separate from the earth, that they no longer know its simple truth: life depends on the earth, not malls, for sustenance and longevity.

Leah’s new perspective reveals how in the end, technology is often a hindrance preventing life. For example, roads in Africa are constantly built and constantly washed away, and Leah again learns that “a road in the jungle is a sweet, flat, impossible dream. The soil falls apart. The earth melts into red gashes like the mouths of whales” (525). Again, African nature refuses to be unnaturally molded. When technology is forced upon the land, at least in Africa, it not only is rejected, but reacted to with angry pain, described previously by the land howling and again, the image of quick, harsh “red gashes” like those found in “the mouths of whales.” Leah and Anatole spend their lives together watching these technological attempts continually fail. While no one seems to learn this lesson, because roads are continually built, Anatole often speaks in “what if” terms and creates fairytales where nature is let alone, and because of this, the world is a better, simpler place. Anatole tells Leah a story at night, about a couple walking through a forest untouched by technology, and at a certain point, the couple reaches an un-
crossable river. Leah realizes that technology could have helped surmount this obstacle, but Anatole reminds her that in the Congo, technology is often not the solution, and says, “In the Kingdom of Kongo, Beene, (his nickname for Leah) no batteries. No trucks, no roads. They declined to invent the wheel because it looked like nothing but trouble in this mud” (521). This quote takes away the western presumption that Africa is full of “primitive” people, and instead shows that they are fully capable people with the foresight to realize that the wheel may not work in Africa’s “mud.”

Anatole’s lesson is straightforward; people should not force things that are not meant to be forced. They should not alter the landscape to fit their needs, but instead find a more symbiotic way or choose a different path. Leah learns lessons like these throughout her life, and because of them, she embraces an African lifestyle that uses minimal technology. Although Leah spends the rest of her life in Africa; “Kingsolver is careful never to define her as having "gone native" and become an inhabitant” (Murphy). The reality is that she is a white American woman living in Africa. Her saving grace in Africa is Anatole, her husband, and with this connection, Leah “can at best perform solidarity (with the African people) rather than experience identity—a distinction of which she remains fully aware” (Murphy). Though Leah is and may forever be a fundamental outsider in Africa, she sees the wrongs of America that spread further than the grocery store and accepts a life of African solidarity above a life of American excess. However, though Leah primarily lives in Africa, she does not nor could ever forgo her American connections completely, because for all America’s wrongs, it has luxuries Leah cannot deny her children, like vaccines (Kingsolver 455). Although Leah returns to America for periods of time, she never stays there long and always misses her more basic African life, a life she must
continually work at integrating herself in (Murphy), but a life that Leah feels is well worth the struggle.

Following a different path, Leah’s twin sister Adah eventually escapes Africa with her mother, Orleanna, but takes back with her a deep awe for the natural world. The reason why Leah can stay and Adah must go is because Adah is crippled, and Africa cannot provide the technological benefits like therapy and accessible transportation that the western world can. Though Adah must physically leave, Africa remains on her mind, and eventually, she pursues a career in science where she uses advanced technology to study disease. Rachel, however, is the daughter who changes the least. Rachel, as already mentioned, is a sixteen-year-old girl from Georgia who daydreams about fashion and wants nothing more than a fabulous sweet sixteen party. Rachel is also the most vocal about her hatred for Africa, especially the Congo; she sees it as primitive and backward, and sees herself as “an innocent teenager in the middle of God’s green hell with no telephone” (Kingsolver 270). Rachel’s distortion of a familiar biblical saying like “God’s green earth” into a “hell” helps cement her as a figure who finds the wilds of the Congolese jungle deplorable. Rachel wants nothing more than to return to the technologies and comforts of the western world.

Ultimately, Rachel regains her western comforts and escapes Africa by bringing the western world to Africa with her hotel, “The Equatorial.” She describes herself happily there: “I stroll through the restaurant in my bikini with my platinum-blonde hair piled high, jingling my big bunch of keys, cheerfully encouraging my guests to drink their martinis . . . And I think: Finally, Rachel, this is your own little world” (462). This private world that Rachel rules share no similarities to the bare-minimum Congolese lifestyle she once knew. Though she convinces herself that her new materialistic world makes her happy, most of the later chapters in the novel
involve Rachel alone at her bar at night, with no family or even strangers for company (465). In the novel, Rachel is generally depicted as a superficial woman, most obviously shown when years ago the sole item she takes with her while running out of the ant-infested house is a mirror. Still, these later scenes suggest that she feels a hollowness that her many possessions cannot conceal.

All Orleanna’s daughters have made lives for themselves that are either planted in or influenced by Africa, and all have changed because of it; however, it is Orleanna whose transformation is the most noticeable and difficult. This difficulty lies in escaping her husband Nathan. Nathan attempts to dominate the African wilderness in the same way he has dominated Orleanna their whole marriage – by breaking it and forcing it to fit inside his needs and ideals. This “connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature” (Milne 4) is a theme found within “eco feminism” making *The Poisonwood Bible* not merely eco “fictional,” but eco “feminist” as well.

Orleanna arrived in Africa fully grown, as the wife of a minister whose overbearing beliefs formed her into a woman who let life happen to her. When speaking to her dead daughter, Ruth May, whom she refers to as “little beast,” Orleanna explains the reasons for the passivity that consumed most of her life:

It took me a long time to understand the awful price I’d paid, and that even God has to admit the worth of freedom . . . Like Methusaleh [the parrot] I cowered beside my cage, and though my soul hankered after the mountain, I found, like Methusaleh, I had no wings. (Kingsolver 201)
Orleanna speaks of Methusaleh, a caged parrot who resides in their African home. Methusaleh is also a reference to a biblical character, the oldest man ever to live. Both the parrot and Orleanna relate to this character because both are old, be it in different ways. Orleanna is the oldest women out of the five and unlike her children, whose young age made it easier to conform to this new foreign life, Orleanna arrived already “bent to the shape of marriage” (201) – a marriage with a domineering, egotistical man. Like Methusaleh, she lived a caged, passive life until the natural world forces her to both gain the courage to break free and strength to fly away or die.

Orleanna was conditioned all her life to endure and remain passive; therefore, the journey to regain her “wings” goes un-attempted until she has no other choice but to do it or die. Here is where she and Methusaleh part ways. Methusaleh faces this ultimatum, but finds that long imprisonment has atrophied his wing muscles, preventing him from escaping death by a civet cat (186). Where Methuselah’s muscles deteriorated, Orleanna’s grew stronger because of Africa. Leah describes her mother’s returning strength the day of her little sister’s death, when she sees Orleanna dragging all the heavy furniture into the yard; “These heavy things she dragged by herself, even though I know for a fact that two months ago she couldn’t have moved them” (371). The Congolese jungle of Africa forces these women, especially Orleanna, to regain their wings, though, as Orleanna forewarns, the story of how she herself gets them back and flies away is “unbearable.” (201)

The Congo transforms Orleanna’s body as well as her mind and forces her to realize that what is important is not technology, but life in the form of her daughter, Ruth May. The Congo took the most out of Orleanna, as well as put the most life back in. This painful transformation of gaining her wings is a story that begins on the day her youngest daughter, Ruth May, is bitten by a snake and dies. When told, Orleanna gives all her material possessions to her African
neighbors who will pass them “through the great digestive tract of Kilanga and turn into sights unseen” like “empty food tins into palm oil lamps” (382). Western-made products are prized in the Congo and presumably throughout Africa, but the African natives use them in ways the western world never intended. This image of the people of Kilanga, as a “digestive tract” not only describes the Congo’s transformation of technology, but its transformation of the Price women as well. The Congo digests these women and spits them out changed (except perhaps Rachel). This experience is not painless or easy, but it is good; even the trees with their “tongues” blazingly approve (382) because finally, truth is gained.

Orleanna’s painful awakening brings the realization that technology cannot help her in Africa or even in America anymore: she comes to see its uselessness and her own folly in putting love into such replaceable things. This new perspective is completely different from the one she once possessed, where a Maytag Dryer meant she could have “rested in this peace and called it happiness” (201). Now, with this final deathblow, no Maytag Dryers can soothe the pain and disappointment that is her life. In fact, all technology is viewed as worthless: “Such a bewildering excess of things we had . . . and how useless it all seemed now . . . I needed truth and light, to remember my baby’s laughter. This stuff cluttered my way” (382). Orleanna is unapproachable on the morning of her daughter’s death, but her grief is not selfish. She knows that this terrible day in her life is a blessing for her Congolese neighbors because they will take, change, and use her unwanted things to buffer the hardships and needs in their own lives: “Their industrious needs made me light-headed . . . I gave it all up” (382).

The truths learned from the Congo and other parts of Africa vary for each Price woman, but the one most enlightened is Orleanna, for it forces her to abandon the illusions of her old life and strike out alone toward a future that, while not bright, is at least her own. It took the death of
a child to straighten Orleanna’s crooked spine and leave her husband, the man who has
dominated her identity and brought her to the jungle. With her daughters in tow, Orleanna
walked away and “never once turned around to look over her shoulder” (389). Orleanna does
not hesitate, and no stray memory of love or commitment to her husband can bring her back. The
jungle of Congo is a wild place that struck out with its fangs, killing one daughter, claiming three
others (though in three very different ways), and forever leaving an impact on their lives. The
snake that kills her daughter can be seen as nature’s messenger, and its message had to be
forceful in order to trigger Orleanna into standing up and taking a hold of her situation. The bite
of the natural world revolutionizes Orleanna’s life – not technology. However, with revolution
comes pain. The natural world is not benevolent toward Orleanna; it does not offer promises of
care and security like technology once did. Nature is harsh. It forces Orleanna out of the luxury
of illusion to see that it is not the pots, not the pans, not the “bone-china platter with the forget-
me-nots that she was so proud of” (128) that are important. It is life, in the form of her daughter,
her possession born of her womb which, unlike her once coveted china plate, is irreplaceable.

Though Orleanna is back in America, her mind and heart still remain in the Congo, in
that jungle where her daughter’s body remains, buried under dirt, leaf litter and canopy, and the
habits she continues in America reveal this split identity. Orleanna does not seek out technology
to relieve her loneliness and grief; it is ironically the natural world in the form of her own garden
that sustains her in the end. Though Orleanna physically exists in America, her mind remains in
the Congolese Jungle. This split identity is shown when Orleanna creates her own private Congo
in her American garden: “She did not hook up the telephone. She took up a hoe instead and
creates her own small, thriving jungle of “foxclove and the bachelor’s buttons” (408). Orleanna
creates this mini-jungle by mimicking the ways of the African women she lived next to and
learned from. Every morning, Orleanna toted over manure for her plants “like a good African” (408) in her goal of creating life not by her womb this time, but by her hands. Orleanna’s story does not get better in the sense that she finds happiness or even peace. No, she carries the dead weight of her mistakes, her weaknesses, and her daughter’s death for the rest of the novel. The path the natural world forced her to take was not easier than the one she had been on – it was much harder, and much lonelier; however, it belonged to her alone, to cultivate as she saw fit.

Though each of the Price women changes in different ways, all find their own paths through their experiences gained in the Congolese wilderness. Each learns that the western ideals brought with them to that place, especially the ones regarding technology, are not the only ideals that bring fulfillment to life. Leah and Adah find passion and direction in a world deprived of modern comforts. Rachel, on the other hand, rejects these lessons but her ultimate un-fulfillment is a commentary on the allure and disappointments that make-up the west’s consumer mentality. And finally, Orleanna abandons the façade of an idealized western lifestyle and retreats into nature, embracing its neutral but transparent, and therefore more honest (as Orleanna perceives it), ways – ways that can bring truth and light.

Turning from a highly complex relationship regarding the positive and negative role of technology in Kingsolver’s novel, The Road and its technological representation is more direct – technology is mostly responsible for keeping the main characters in McCarthy’s novel alive; however, the novel also suggests that it is what put them in their current dire situation. The Road falls under critic Cynthia Deitering’s term “toxic consciousness” (Milne 2) which as Milne describes is a “late twentieth-century proliferation of postnatural novels dealing with apocalyptic themes” (2). This “toxic consciousness” refers to the recent trend in novels sharing similar “toxic” settings, revealing that late twentieth century writers are more conscious of what the
world without nature will look like than past writers have been. However, these writers, according to another critic, Don Scheese, must do more than just document and describe environmental injustices and destruction if they want their work considered ecocritical. They should do this by taking the next step and forcing society under the microscope so to speak, to dissect its actions and/or inactions with a critical eye. Social critique is more important than creating a traumatized natural setting in ecofictions because society is the root cause for mass unnatural destruction. All three ecofictions promote social critique, but only McCarthy’s falls under the title of “toxic consciousness” because its natural landscape has been obliterated. McCarthy’s novel not only succeeds in making the absence of nature a major force throughout the novel, but he succeeds in making his unnamed characters like the man and his son perform the role of both critic and dreamer.

The reader learns only of the old world, with its nature and society, through the dreams and memories of the man. These reflections reveal how important both nature and society were, as well as how deeply the man misses them now. This tie between humanity and nature is not only found in McCarthy’s novel. It is an important relationship in all three novels and is best explained in reference to Solar Storms, for “If anything is most vital, essential, and absolutely important in Native cultural philosophy, it is this concept of interdependence . . . without land there is no life, and without a responsible social and cultural outlook by humans, no life sustaining land is possible” (Ortiz qtd. in Castor 160). This interdependence between society and nature is not just a Native American ideal, for society in the Congolese jungle of The Poisonwood Bible also depends both on technology and nature, and even the westerners realize the need, wanted or not, of nature in their own lives.
The result of what happens when the tie between nature and society unravels is dramatized in *The Road*. The man’s ability to remember, if only in his dreams, the once interconnected life he has now lost fills him with rage. The man is often cursing the sky above, in the vain hope that God is there to hear his pain: “Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God” (McCarthy 12). The man aims his anger and pain and questions to “God” because he dares not talk to anyone left on earth. Social communication is dead. Not many have time to waste on conversation, have answers, or can simply be trusted to just talk. It is the man’s job to be highly suspicious of every stranger that passes them on the road, for the assumed truth is that he already knows the cause of his pain—humanity. Though the cause of the apocalypse is ambiguous, and could have either been human-caused or asteroid-caused for all the detail the reader is given, memories retained by the man, especially one in particular, suggest a human—caused explanation for the present destruction.

Through McCarthy’s utilization of memory, the reader gets a glimpse at man’s destructive ways that if continued on a larger scale, would explain the world he and his son have to endure now. The man remembers watching a crowd of older men light a pit full of snakes on fire: “The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be” (McCarthy 188). The snakes are the men’s conceived image of evil. The language used in this passage is important, because it distinguishes reality from mankind’s imagination. In reality, snakes are no more “evil” than they are “good.” Such qualifiers do not exist in the natural world. They are only created by humankind for well-being and reassurance. Something needs to be evil in the collective mind of humanity, and this need gets projected onto the mass of snakes. Distinguishing men as good and snakes as evil is the first step. This evil must then be eradicated, and by playing the role of God, the men choose who
is deemed good and fit to live, and who is evil, and therefore fit to die. This negative conception of nature reveals that when man fears or does not understand the natural world, he destroys it. Castor explores this insight regarding the “western views of ‘wilderness’” as well, where “wilderness” is only understood as separate, dangerous, and in need of civilizing (164), or if and when that fails, in need of destroying. Such a narrow-minded belief keeps man from foreseeing the truth, and it is this truth De Bruyn brings to light in his essay by inverting the biblical story of the evil snake ruining man’s world into evil man ruining it on his own. In the act of burning the snakes, the men unwittingly are “burning themselves” (781). Destruction of nature will not just end with snakes, as the story of *The Road* suggests, but with the death of everything, man and his civilization included.

The son, on the other hand, only remembers life as it is now, and cannot know as personally as his father the extent of humanity’s self-affliction; however, he is fully aware of the evils people are doing to each other in the now, but surprisingly, his heart is not hardened by this knowledge or his surroundings. The innate goodness living inside this child propels him to want to help all he sees, unlike his father, who instinctually wants to run and evade humanity. On the road, the man and son pass a “burntlooking” (McCarthy 50) man just sitting in the road. The son turns to his father and asks, “Can’t we help him? Papa? Stop it. Can’t we help him, Papa? No. We can’t help him” (50). Though his words are unmarked, the father too is speaking, with quick, negative responses after every repeated plea. The reader can tell who is speaking what because it is quite clear who yearns for human connection, and who remains harshly realistic. The unmarked, entwined dialogue also reveals just how close the man and his son are — to the point that their individual words amass into one dialogue. Though the two go about mentally surviving in very different ways throughout the novel, they do share one thing in common. They both
“carry the fire” (70) – they are both “the good guys” carrying hope that one day, the world can be
made new again, through the goodness of the small boy.

Though the man and son are the main characters in the novel, there is another presence
that they interact with constantly – the road. The road in McCarthy’s novel is a central presence
and also title to the novel; its meaning must be explored in order to understand the full scope of
the change that the characters must cope with. The road’s meaning changed both literally and
metaphorically because of the apocalypse. This literal transformation is revealed when the son
asks why roads like the one on which they walk are called “state roads” (43). The father explains
the notion of states existed in the before, not anymore, even though their physical demarcation,
the road, still remains. For how much longer is left unanswered, because a road has no known
lifespan or requirements for continued existence, like a tree, a field, or a human being does. This
distinction regarding living versus non-living things brings up a complex issue concerning roads,
as well as all other forms of technology. It is suggested in the snake-burning scene, though is
never stated, that the reason for this fictional apocalypse is because of a nuclear war: “The clocks
stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52). Such a setting
forces the reader to think of reality’s history, and the scenes of devastation caused in parts of our
own world.

Though The Road is a fictional story, the setting alludes to past realities. In 1945, the
first atomic bombs were dropped in Japan. The land McCarthy evokes recalls the devastated
cityscapes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A more recent event reflecting the novel’s setting is 9/11.
The attack on the Twin Towers occurred in 2001, revealing to the American public that anything
is destructible, even buildings representing immense strength and human power. This
destruction of parts of our own man-made world is magnified in The Road to encompass all
buildings, all cities, everywhere. However, the distinction that seemingly puts this novel outside the realm of reality is that nature too, has been utterly destroyed. As Ben De Bruyn in his essay helps clarify, though it is hard to imagine the total destruction of the “human world . . . it is even more difficult to imagine the annihilation of the earth itself” (778). Unlike other post-apocalyptic novels that share “nature’s ‘reclamation project’ [as] a staple feature” allowing characters a retreat back to their roots where, like nature, they too can regain strength and renew themselves (779) McCarthy’s “denatured world” (777) shares no such natural retreat. This unreal world the reader traverses alongside the man and his son is inhospitable and yet, there are people living on it; there are survivors that owe thanks not to nature, but to the few man-made possessions they find along the way.

The road, a preserved piece of the man-made world acts simultaneously as a hopeful “way out” from their present situation and as a marker for the end of the line – death. For the man and his son, it represents direction and offers a sense of purpose and hope, at least in the beginning. However, as they travel the road, the road reveals its many new connotations gained from the apocalypse. There is a section of road the two travelers come across where dead bodies have become a part of its cement: “Figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling” (McCarthy 191). The man and his son are forced to journey on past these victims, perhaps on to similar fates; “Passing them in silence down that silent corridor through the drifting ash where they struggled forever in the road’s cold coagulate” (191). The description of the road as “cold coagulate” makes it seem meaningless; that it is nothing more than hardened or “coagulated” cement promising nothing as just a piece of technology, it is unable to hold any meanings or promises. Though rationally this description is completely correct, technology has come to mean much more than a certain sum of parts. The reality that technology should not be
entrusted with emotion nor should be expected to reciprocate said emotion was learned too late for the “mired figures” found along McCarthy’s stretch of road. The image of these people is horrific. They are frozen in positions of anguish and struggle, “clutching themselves” with “mouths howling” until the end of the world, which in this novel, is already here. And just as these people did in the “before,” the man and his son attach all their trust, hope and expectations onto the same road – this construction of cement and now bodies that make up this “silent corridor.” Though the road is burdened with human signs that it no longer can provide safe travel, the old concept of what a road should be is not abandoned by the man and his son because it is the only other presence in their life, besides each other, that forces them to keep going. Therefore, they will continue to stay close to the road, though the bodies at their feet act as grim reality checks that the road no longer has turn off points; it is both journey and destination now.

The nearly unlivable setting in *The Road* forces the man to invest too much emotion into things, like the road, rather than people as he might have done in the “before.” Technology becomes one of the sole sources of comfort and if broken or lost, inescapable doom and crisis is felt that much closer. An example of this is crisis is shown when the man discovers that their small burner is out of gas. With this discovery, the man squats in the road, cradling his head. Later, he lifts his head “and just sat there staring out at the cold and darkening woods” (176). The scene’s simple imagery and sentence structures symbolize how sparse and short their lives will be if gas is not found. When the father stops moving, stops problem-solving and becomes still, it signals that this lack of gas is a major issue. The treasured burner and oil meant heat and the prolonging of life, the nature of the post-apocalyptic world that the man hopelessly stares out at means only death. The man’s overwhelming attachment and concern over his possessions is just another example of how unnatural the world has become (although, the unsettling reality for
the reader is that often, we feel as great amount of emotion for our things as the man does, but we have far less reason to).

Being surrounded by this version of nature gives no comfort to the characters unlike in the other two fictions, and therefore, the role of nature and technology is reversed. What the two are in need of now are not cold forests, but houses with stoves, fireplaces and pantries packed with food. The natural world has little or nothing to offer – not even solace for the soul of the man that stares out at it. The only non-human “survivor’s” are in a sense, things that provide help to remaining mankind. These things are often found along the road: “Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths” (McCarthy 199-200). These forcibly abandoned things help the man and his son survive. An example of this man-made help is the underground bunker that held the “richness of a vanished world” (139): cans of food, water, and a toilet. The discovery of this haven is what keeps the man and son from completely giving up – it rejuvenates them with its shelter and abundance of food and water. Other, less exceptional technologies that aid the two are their grocery cart, tarp, and canned foods. Without their grocery cart, they would be unable to carry large amounts of provisions: they carry “their entire world in [that] grocery cart” (De Bruyn 780). Without their tarp, and because of the “lack of a living tree” (778), they would have no shelter when outdoors. And without canned foods they would starve. There is one exception to the survival of only man-made things, and that is fire. This natural tool is thriving and consistently being used. All these tools, many man-made with one exception, the fire, indicate that “there is no escaping certain uses of technology and nature” (781) implying that McCarthy does not “reject the machine altogether” (781). How could he? “The Machine” in its many
forms is what prevents the man and his son from becoming just two more bodies absorbed into
the road’s cement.

Technology, unlike in *Solar Storms*, is aiding humanity the most, as well as outliving it
and nature; however, it is not doing what it was meant to do – it is not progressing humanity.
Neither boy nor man is growing strong and healthy by technology; it is just sustaining them;
keeping physical death at bay while being a constant reminder of the progress it used to
represent. Although pieces of technology technically have never “lived,” they in a way had a
marked existence with a role to play and a job to do, all of which have “died” with the
occurrence of the apocalypse. A scene revealing this technological death is when the man and
his son stop at an abandoned train: “Rust and scaling paint . . . If they saw different worlds what
they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and
that no train would ever run again” (180). This scene echoes a scene in *The Poisonwood Bible*,
where the carcasses of automobiles are often stumbled upon by the Price family: “they resemble
the signs of life you would dig up in a graveyard . . . not for transportation but for anything but . .
. a carburetor air-filter lid boiling a family’s dinner over a cookfire (Kingsolver 33). Western
technology “dies” in the Congo like it “dies” in McCarthy’s world. But unlike the resurrected
car parts that are now used for “boiling a family’s dinner over a cookfire,” the loss of the train as
a functioning example of progressive society can only be mourned. The man and his son do not
take it apart and breathe new purpose into its parts because nothing new can be created in this
world. Unlike the thriving Congolese jungle where the Price family found the rusty cars, the train
is just another ruin amidst a whole ruined world. And though the man and son come from two
different worlds, they both know the reality now, “that no train would ever run again” (McCarthy
180) because just like the earth, technology cannot be reclaimed. Its progressive “nature,” a
concept Leo Marx’s explains in his work, *Machine in the Garden* (1964) “as an inherent good – especially in its attachment to technology” (Milne 3) has been lost because the desire for progress, when taken too far, began to do the opposite of its intention. Instead of elevating humankind, technology brought about it and nature’s downfall. The beginning of the road and the end of the road, as the man and his son despairingly realize once they reach the ocean, are no different; both ends lead to graves, be them land or ocean bound. The hope that the coast would be different ended upon arrival. They saw that it too was “Cold. Desolate. Birdless” (McCarthy 215) and not blue at all. Not only is the world at an end, but their road and journey are as well. At this point, the man’s strength drastically deteriorates, and he sees that this whole time, they have been “Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. The nights dead still and deader black. So cold” (273). Soon, the sick and dying man will be like the dead world on which he “treads” – cold and still and un-reclaimed by any cycle of decomposition or renewal. The man has no hope in the earth’s life or his own. However, he does remain hopeful in the boy: “... he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (273). This glowing mirage envisioned by the father relates to the conception of fire that is literally and metaphorically carried throughout the novel. As already mentioned again and again, the man and his son “carry the fire” (McCarthy 70, 109, 182, 234, 238): it is what they build to keep warm at night as well as what they keep kindling in their hearts, a fire of morality, of goodness.

The image of fire stands as something bright against the grim gloom that makes up the majority of the novel’s tone. The fact that fire is contained within the man and son suggests that perhaps, against all the odds and amidst all the destruction, life can be rekindled out of the ashes.
Fire is important not only because it is one of the only natural resources left, but because it connotes power, and, if allowed, will burn for long periods of time. Fire also prepares the earth for regeneration. Out of the ashes, little green life emerges, and phoenixes spread their wings. These characteristics of fire are necessary for an apocalyptic world because the spark of life would need to burn powerful and long in order to clear away the death and make room for the sprouting of new life. Finally, De Bruyn suggests one last symbolic element to the fire the two carry. He implies that it is the “ancestral fire, the fire of lexification and human world-building” (784). Although the son has never lived in the old world where language still had cultural associations (for example, the state roads and their counterpart, the states) he can still spread the fire because it is “ancestral” and remembers life and culture as they once were. The natural power of fire, the “world-building” knowledge of the ancestors, and the natural-born goodness of a small boy all offer the hope of new life in an otherwise desolate landscape with its rotting humanity. The complex criticism of technology and the goodness and hope that survive inside the man and grows naturally within the son makes this novel not just universally relevant, but a universal warning all should heed.

IV. Gender implications in all three eco fictions:

The main issues in this thesis revolve around the environment and the effects western technology has on it. However, the issues of gender must also be discussed for the concept of gender and gender roles are tied up with the ecocritical aspects of all three novels. The male and female roles in each novel share similar themes; often, it is the woman who seeks out a relationship with nature, though in some novels, the men share this role as well. However, a universal statement about all three novels is that nature relates to women no matter their origins, whereas for western man, such a relationship does not come naturally, or at all. All three authors
show this contrasting nature not to support the continued separation of men and women, but to reveal how necessary it is for the men to relate more with women in order to better understand and therefore save the natural world and themselves from destruction.

The female gender makes up the heart and narrative of both Solar Storms and The Poisonwood Bible. The main protagonists in Solar Storms are Angel, Dora-Rouge, and Agnes, but the story is told from the perspective of Angel, and the wisdom she learns and experiences she shares with these women fill up the bulk of the novel. These shared stories and experiences are transparently gendered, showing above all else, the power and benevolence of the female sex, with again, even nature anthropomorphized as a woman. An example of this powerful female narrative is Agnes’ story regarding a polar bear she rescues at a young age. Like the parrot Methuselah of The Poisonwood Bible that for a time is kept caged in the Price Family’s home, Agnes knew a captured polar bear. Its’ owner was a Frenchmen and “used it to fight dogs” (Hogan 47) but when the bear began deteriorating, he turned it into a one bear petting zoo, where cruel crowds antagonized it with sticks. One day, after witnessing this brutality yet again, Agnes approaches the caged bear with the intent of saving it; she “lifted her shirt and showed the bear her round, full breasts” (47). This physical action of revealing her own womanhood by exposing her “round, full breasts” -- a classic symbol of femininity-- signals to the bear that she not only comes in peace, but comes as its salvation. Agnes fulfills her intention of salvation by killing the bear and therefore releasing it from its pain. The fact that Agnes’s breasts are the symbol that tells the bear she will release it from its misery is ironic. Full breasts suggest sustenance and nurturing, and yet in this scene, Agnes kills. This story of release is similar to that of Methuselah’s in action, but not intention. Nathan, a western man, un-caged Methusaleh, but into an even more brutal world out of revenge for nature’s refusal to conform to his western
standards, knowing full well that the bird could no longer survive in the wild. These two parallel images of the caged technically being freed reveals the oppositional roles man and woman have in Hogan and Kingsolver’s novels. Such opposition reinforces yet again the message that womanhood and the natural world are tied together. Men, or more specifically western men, represented by Nathan, act in destructive ways, whereas women, especially Native American women like Agnes, act in compassionate ways, for she knows that the natural world (symbolized here by a polar bear) was in pain, just as the natural world knew because of her gender, that she was its savior: “Oh, it understood already. It knew she was a woman. It knew she had compassion” (47). And sometimes, compassion can mean killing too.

This relationship between nature and women though portrayed overall as a highly positive association in Solar Storms does have negative connotations. Critic Sherry Ortner asks, “What could there be in the generalized structure and conditions of existence, common to every culture, that would lead every culture to devalue women?” And then she gives the answer: “‘nature’ in the most generalized sense” (10). As said, the natural world is “common to every culture” and is an essential “structure” throughout all existence. Because of this universality of nature, it is the perfect symbol for women, because like nature, women are a part of every culture, and exist as a symbol and “structure” for the creation and continuance of life. And just as nature is repeatedly devalued, harmed, destroyed, and put into one category – mother nature—so too have women in every culture been devalued as complex humans, been physically and/or emotionally harmed, and put into one limiting category and role-- mother. Not only do women get associated with nature, but they are viewed in the same way – as resources that can be owned, taken advantage of, and harmed. The female body is often compared to the land, and like the land, the female body is often ravaged, abused, and made to bend to the domineering ways of
patriarchal society. This association is historical, and not only resonates with the shameful raping of Native American women’s bodies by non-Native American men who conquered and ransacked the women, but reflects how in the same destructive ways, they also conquered and ransacked the land. This rough history is still repeated today, with a recent article in the Huffington Post stating that “According to the Department of Justice, 86 percent of rapes and sexual assaults against Native American women are committed by non-Native American men” (Chekuru). This historical and current theme of Native American abuse done by non-native American men is overtly alluded to in Solar Storms with the character of Hannah.

Though Solar Storms links women with life and compassion, there is a female character, Hannah, who embodies the negative aspects of being linked with nature. Eco feminists, as Schultermandl explains, believe in “is a connection between the domination of sexual, ethnic and social minorities, and the domination of nonhuman nature” (68). This connection is proven true again and again in reference to even the life of Angel’s abusive mother, Hannah. Solar Storms is a book of connections, requiring the reader to look at all the memories and descriptions that make up Hannah: a “multi-layered identity . . . a place” (Castor 163). This cruel woman is, as Castor argues, a character deserving of empathy too, as Bush’s memories of her show. Bush cared for Hannah after she arrived in Adam’s Rib when she was young. After Hannah strips for a bath and Bush sees her naked, Bush assumes men had used and abused her because “her skin was a garment of scars. There were burns and incisions . . . The signatures of torturers” (Hogan 100). Angel also sees the destruction done to her mother’s body, a body that reflects the land she lives on: “just as the land looks to Angel like a cigarette burn . . . so Hannah’s feet have burn scars on them” (Castor 167). Hannah is not simply the villain. She is a victim and, as Castor points out, the site where Angel learns empathy herself, when she sees Hannah for what she is, a
form similar to her own, but broken and made mean by the places she has been (167). The environment does not only affect humanity— as Hogan and now Castor insists— it shapes humanity: nature and culture are not opposing “places” in life, they fit together. Hannah’s stories are lessons as well as proof that women’s issues are innately tied with environmental issues, as eco feminists argue.

Like women, men have their own associations with nature and culture; however, unlike women, the connotations revolving around these associations, especially in Solar Storms, are only negative. Besides being the women’s love interests, the main male role examined in this thesis is man’s dependent relationship on western world culture and their destructive relationship with nature. Even the Native American men, like La Rue, represent western ways of life, exhibited by his livelihood, where he spends his time stuffing and putting back together dead animals for money, instead of letting them continue the natural cycle of decomposition. La Rue also kills animals, like the fish, unceremoniously. These actions done by a man, especially a Native American man, suggest that men, more so than women, have a destructive character, viewing the world and nature as unfeeling and therefore okay to exploit. However, La Rue’s behavior can also be explained by his complex situation. As Amanda Linsenmeyer, the director of the Women’s Resource Center of CU Boulder and a Native American herself explains, it must be noted that La Rue is both a Native American and a man living in the western world’s patriarchal society. His business involves the support of western customers. He is the connection between the western world and the indigenous world. The reason the women do not often interact with the white, patriarchal society is because, traditionally speaking, the western society does not view women as leaders, even though Native American culture is based, among other things, on a matriarchy. Therefore, LaRue becomes the mediator between worlds. His
constant contact with the western world means influences are naturally bound to occur. These influences are revealed in La Rue’s behavior and interaction with the natural world (Linsenmeyer). Though at times La Rue’s cultural identity seems contradictory, his saving grace lays in his love for Bush, and it is this love that makes him a better, more harmonious person at the novel’s end.

Unlike La Rue and his suggested transformation at the end of Hogan’s novel, there is no saving grace that sways the destructive path Nathan forges from beginning to end in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Although the male characters in the novel are not given a narrative voice, they still hold power over the narration because of the power they hold over the women, especially Nathan. The role men play in the lives of Kingsolver’s women is not small like in *Solar Storms*. In fact, their role greatly influences the lives of the women, for better or, in the case of Nathan, for the worse.

The male characters who bring positive influence to the women in *The Poisonwood Bible* mirror characters like Bush through their understanding and harmonious lifestyle with their surroundings. One of these characters is Anatole, a native Congolese schoolteacher who (as described in section I) opens Leah’s mind to other perspectives regarding technology, nature, and even the western world. And then there is Brother Fowles, an ex-missionary who now preaches the wisdom of the natural world to the Price women, and in doing so, affects the women deeply, especially Orleanna, long after he is gone, just like Agnes’s innate knowledge stays with Angel even after Agnes’ death.

Just as Agnes’s story regarding the polar bear reflects the struggle Angel faces in saving herself from a life of self-imprisonment, Brother Fowles’ metaphor of a grated tree represents
what the Price women must do in order to save themselves. Brother Fowles asks Nathan a question when he encounters him and sees how dead set Nathan is on westernizing the African people, their land, and their gods. Fowles asks, “Do you get the notion we are the branch that’s grafted on here, sharing in the richness of these African roots?” (Kingsolver 252). This metaphorical question exposes how Brother Fowles was converted by Africa -- not the other way around. This concept of grafting comes from the western world, and is a technique where one species of tree is made to grow with another species. This scene represents one of the few times where technology causes an intermingling of species. Brother Fowles symbolizes a successful grafting – he was a western “alien” species who chose to share “in the richness of these African roots” (252) and because of this, he has thrived. Fowles sets an example for what the Price women must do in order to not only survive nature, but Nathan as well.

Like a grafted tree, the Price women form new connections with ideals regarding mankind’s relationship to nature that were once believed primitive: once connected, they disconnect from the poisonous foundation that is Nathan, and become strong and independent. The Price women have always been typical westerners with the same beliefs held by men like Nathan and La Rue – that nature is something technology can and should control. As Susan Strehle describes in her essay on Kingsolver’s novel, “The goal of their American home (in the beginning) is self-propagation: to replicate Georgia in the jungle, to convert Africans to Western worship, to transmogrify Congolese earth into Kansas fields” (420). The Price women’s story is not one of displacement and later of homecoming. It is of partial assimilation into a foreign culture dictated not by “western worship” or technology, but by nature. And it is this nature and its many different roles that cannot be forgotten as one of the most influential female characters of all in these three ecofictions. It not only influences the Price women to transform themselves
physically and emotionally, but makes them realize that the at-first foreign lifestyle they now
lead fits more naturally in their hearts and minds than their original one.

The Price women’s need in separating from Nathan relates to the eco feminist critique
that all women, not just minorities like Native Americans, but white, Christian women like
Orleanna, are symbolically attached to nature and therefore experience similar traumas wrought
by their own patriarchal, western society. In order to escape the pain and control Nathan has over
the Price women, they need to connect even more closely to nature and learn to depend on it –
not Nathan. Though literary critic Ortner in her essay discusses the dangers of linking women
with nature, it is this link, ironically, that saves the women, especially Orleanna, from being
devalued even more. As Orleanna shows, the connection between women and nature is not
always dangerous. However, the key to her success is that she lives life purposefully cut off
from culture, signaled by her lack of a telephone. Her life and the nature she surrounds herself
with are unexploited by man and his culture. Therefore, it is only by becoming an outcast from
western society that she can gain power – an option, yes, for all women, but a lonely one at that.

The lonely transformation of Orleanna is not shared by the western world, represented
mainly by Nathan, and can be attributed to his ability to remain blind to the fact that his western
ideals are not transferrable in this Congolese life. Nathan never stops “preach[ing] the salvation
of Christianity and the damnation awaiting those who refuse it, the superiority of American
farming methods and technology, and the exceptional qualities of American civilization (Strehle
415) . He never stops, not even after his Christian God fails to save any person from flood or
animal attack, like his own daughter, Ruth May, or after his small vegetable crop, created by
“American farming methods” bears no fruit, or even after the symbols of “American
civilization” like cars and roads become worthless in the African mud. Although the village
men, like the women, try in their own ways to open Nathan’s mind to their ways of life and culture, through sermons and long debates, Nathan chooses to remain blind. He can do this because the women take up his slack. If they had not learned the ways and safe practices of an African lifestyle, Nathan would have starved to death and gone thirsty many times over throughout the novel. Nathan’s reliance on the women in his family becomes starkly apparent when the women leave. Many years later, Leah hears rumors about her father. Apparently after the women left, Nathan became an outcast from all society, with the African people referring to him as a haunting, a crazed spirit assumedly sick with malaria and hunger who viciously preaches the Christian Bible until the very end, when he is burned alive (Kingsolver 485-7).

Once again, it is the women, not the men, who open up to their natural surroundings and attempt to understand it, in order to coexist within it, no matter how lonely this coexistence makes them.

Finally, we reach McCarthy’s *The Road*. This novel is the only ecofiction I discuss that is written by a male author in which the male central character adopts a motherly role. In both Hogan and Kingsolver’s novels, the men are neither nurturing nor transformative (except, perhaps, LaRue in *Solar Storms*.) This contrast from the other novels brings up two interesting implications. One implication McCarthy could be revealing is how men are capable of being a good parent as well as skilled interpreters of the natural world. The man is adeptly skilled at finding small amounts of natural sustenance in the wasteland that once was nature. For example, utterly exhausted and starving, the man and his son accidentally stumble across the remnants of an orchard. The man hunts decayed bodies of apples, gathering them in his shirt and bringing them back to his son, whom he is careful to feed first (McCarthy 121). The other implication, however, is that the reason why it is the father --not the mother-- who plays the role of survivor and caretaker in this novel is that without nature, women (even more so than men) cannot
survive. The only survivors capable of enduring the apocalyptic lifestyle, at least for a little while, are men, because just as women are “symbolically associated with nature” men are “identified with culture” (Ortner 12), of which remnants still exist in this wasteland and are useable.

The role of parent applies to both men and women, and for the son in The Road, the only parent is the man: the fact that the man still performs this role signals hope for humanity. “The most widespread form of kin altruism, or nepotism,” that people express regards their efforts in “child rearing” explains William Irons, a critic of human morality and its evolution. He states that evolutionary theory predicts “that organisms will evolve to invest in their own – not others’ – offspring, and to invest more in those offspring that can be predicted to be successful reproductively” (62). Evolutionarily speaking, people have evolved into a species capable of parenting and invest a great amount of personal energy into the rearing of their offspring “not others’ offspring.” Going further, parents have also evolved in investing more energy in those that seem likely and have the ability to reproduce (62) because any energy spent needs to be worthwhile for the parent, who physically and mentally takes a toll from such an energy-depleting role. The first statement, that parents only invest in their children, is true regarding the man at least in The Road, who is bent on protecting only his son, nobody else’s. The second statement however reveals that human behavior in The Road contradicts evolutionary theory described here in Irons’ essay. In the novel, there is very little hope for life, especially life brought about by this frail boy’s “reproductive success.” The man knows this, but even so, the man does anything and everything to keep him alive. The selfless acts parents perform are a part of their evolutionary makeup, but the father’s persistent care of his son, even though his reproduction is unlikely, is not, according to Irons. This seemingly wasted energy can be
explained in two ways. As suggested by Jonathan Turner, another critic of human morality’s evolution, unnatural situations, like for instance having to spend life in a cage, can cause unnatural behaviors and reactions in mammals. This theory can be applied to the man in *The Road*. The fact that he and his son exist in an apocalyptic world, an inescapable pseudo “cage” if you will, that is unlike the world “in which [humans] evolved,” beg the question that “If caging creates unnatural behavior” than can it even be said that these behaviors the man performs, like caring for a son in a land of death “spring from human nature” or “from imprisonment?” (Turner 214). In a confusing, out of place world, people are bound to act in confusing, counter-intuitive ways. There is this explanation, but perhaps even more suggestive is that the man has a vision of success for his son that only he and the “ancestors” of the long ago can see.

From examining the evolution of morally good parents and its manifestation in the male adult character in *The Road*, we turn to examine women, and their evolutionarily determined role as mother that becomes impossible in an apocalyptic landscape. The reason why women are seen as being “closer to nature” is because they continue the species through pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding the child right after birth. Because of their vital role in the beginning of their child’s life, society assumes it only natural for the woman to continue the responsibility of child rearing. This assumption comes from the reality that women tend to be “molded to mothering functions by their own socialization” (Ortner 24) meaning they are more nurturing and directly involved in the child’s life, unlike men, because they are a part of a circular system where they were raised mainly by their mothers, and therefore, know to only follow in their footsteps. However, this is not the case in *The Road*. The son’s mother does not provide primary care to her child, her husband does. The father nurtures the boy, feeds him, protects him, and prepares him for independent survival in the now apocalyptic world. This reversal in the role of nurturer as
primarily male, not female, reveals the fluidity that the two genders do in fact have, releasing them from the restrictive binaries the western world attributes to the “opposing” genders and their resulting oppositional roles. Men can be primary caretakers of the species, but in McCarthy’s novel, the father only accepts this role because there are no other options. His wife died right along with nature, leaving the role of mother empty. Though men can be primary nurturers even if the woman remains living, men, according to Ortner, are associated more with culture -- not children -- because unlike a woman whose “body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life, the male, on the other hand, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, “artificially,” through the medium of technology and symbols” (Ortner 14). In this world, all familiar nature and life have been destroyed. What are left are “technology and symbols,” and it is these remnants of human culture that enable the man to prolong his and his son’s nearly insufferable lives.

McCarthy’s one-dimensional view and description of women as natural nurturers brings up a conflict in the definition of “ecofeminism.” According to “ecofeminism” there is “rational feminism, which would reject any link between woman and nature as a dangerous acknowledgement of biological determinism, and radical feminism, which would argue that women are more natural than men” (Milne 4). The radical feminist, or essentialist feminist, would say that women’s natural, fundamental role in society is reproduction, a role shared by nature, a force also responsible for life and its continuation. This inherent role in The Road can no longer be fulfilled, and this lost role is the reason for the lack of women narrators describing their experiences of this post-apocalyptic world. Radical or essentialist feminism establishes women and nature as “biologically determined” generators of life. Though this association is not inherently bad, it is inherently dangerous, as both Ortner and rational feminism warn, for it
acknowledges both women and nature as primarily mothers, thereby narrowing a woman’s complexity to her womb and therefore her one role, mother. There is the man’s dead wife -- the mother of his son as well as the traitor, because by choosing suicide, she did the opposite of what mothers are evolutionarily meant to do, raise her offspring. She chose death in order to escape rape and cannibalism. Though her action is quite understandable, the man sees her choice as unforgivable because she, as Turner explains, abandoned the “universal mother-offspring” bond that “all mammals” share (214). The wife cut ties with this bond and the man leaves her picture and therefore his connection with her on the road and “went on” (McCarthy 51).

Besides the man’s wife, there is a convoy made up of slaves and “women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant” (McCarthy 92) that the two see travelling the road. Later, there is a small group of strangers walking the road, one “with a waddling gait,” (195) suggesting pregnancy, and whose fetus, it is implied, is later found, cooked on a stick. Finally, the family that adopts the son in the end is composed of a father, a son, a daughter, and the children’s mother. All women described in the man and son’s journey display their maternal roles physically, suggesting again that they have no other role.

Children are rare specimens in McCarthy’s novel because the promise of life held in a pregnant woman’s womb is only suggested, never actualized. The reader only sees the outcome of pregnancy once, and the result is highly unnatural. The “waddling” woman that the man and his son see along the road leaves a part of herself behind. The boy discovers this remnant of her – the fetus, charred on a stick. Though physically, the woman was clearly alive, this discovery can only mean that morally and maternally, she died long ago. Though an explanation is never given, the act alone suggests that her deplorable circumstances caused her unnatural behavior. In order to survive, she carried a baby nearly to term and instead of herself nourishing it, it
nourished her. However, because the reader never sees what actually happened regarding the fetus, it also follows that the woman’s male companions may have forcibly taken the fetus from her. This alternative version coincides with the earlier notion that men are inclined towards violence — though this time it is a child in a woman’s womb, not snakes in a pit. Discovering what a starving woman or man will succumb to makes both their actions unparalleled in their horror, suggesting that both women and men do not belong where nature is gone. Either this woman betrayed her basic biological function and loses her humanity because of it, or the men lose their humanity through infanticide, especially when they are contrasted to the main male character and his success in protecting himself and his child.

The mother introduced at the novel’s conclusion is the only woman who remains attached to her maternal duties and has living children to prove it; what’s more, both she and her husband are the only characters that help other survivors, shown when they adopt the man’s son after his death. As already expressed, parenting is a sign of evolution. What pushes parenting into the realm of morality is when parenting expands to encompass non-kin. Adoption suggests that caring and love can extend beyond genetic bonds. Adoption is selfless; it is an act of innate goodness and because of this, the remaining couple in The Road can be described as moral people, revealing how society has not been completely devastated, though their man-made representations have. The woman who becomes the son’s adopted mother is reminiscent of the benevolent women and the character of nature in Solar Storms. She offers solace and comfort to those who need healing, like the man’s son. She also represents hope for the renewal of nature because as a woman, she embodies the still living hope of natural reproduction and re-growth. This woman is not a new character; however, her benevolent husband is. This man not only takes care of his own children, as the boy’s father did, but he also agrees to take care of this
unrelated boy – something the man never did, nor any other man in any of the other two novels. He is benevolent to the son and gives him a new life start where he will aid the boy physically and emotionally. For the most part, this role has been played by the women characters in the other two novels. McCarthy seems to suggest by this exceptional male character that there is hope in all men if they choose a moral path that does not pave the way for destruction, but regeneration.

Though the man at the end of the novel is depicted as an important, moral part to the family, the woman is shown as the essential caretaker, especially for the boy. This importance is revealed in the fact that she arrives at the novel’s end and speaks the last words that inspire hope, not death: “She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (286). Her words suggest a possible regeneration of life in this otherwise desolate landscape. This woman believes not only in God, but in the belief that God has not nor ever will abandon mankind because he “passes from man to man through all of time.” God lives inside people, like this little boy, this “tabernacle” (273) that contains the divine spirit, and therefore, the possibility of new creation. While the woman’s words can be seen as ironic because she describes God as passing from “man to man” and not “woman to woman,” it makes sense given that it is the boy who is most closely associated with the concept of God, not a woman. Her children and especially this boy are the reason for the woman’s remaining morality and for the fact that she gets the last words; it is now her duty more than her equally moral husband to adopt and care for this boy. As a woman, her continued existence and success at reproduction embodies hope for the re-growth of the natural world just as the child embodies hope for the continued existence of God who, one day, may reproduce the world and its humanity.
V. Epilogue

The western world is not only ignorant in its treatment of technology and nature, but destructive to itself and others. All three novels suggest that the way of life practiced in the western world, especially America, is misguided. The western world is the perpetrator and the victim of its own folly. It is to blame for not only the trials of Native Americans, but Africans, and women in general. The thesis negatively depicts western consumerism. It explores how the western world travels abroad and imposes its religion on other cultures as the superior choice, and it also analyzes and condemns western society and its domineering patriarchal ways that limit and reduce women in all aspects of life. The “dignity” of the western world is being broken as the Nigerian novelist Adichie would say. Someone reading this thesis could sum it up and say, “What a shame the western world is ignorantly destroying the earth.” What a shame that the western world cares nothing for nature or life and uproots civilizations with no apparent moral concern. With this perspective, this thesis diminishes the excellence and successes of the western man–made world by growing darker, bleaker, and “ashier” with each novel it discusses.

The “single story” is a danger, and though this thesis is indeed heavily critical of the western world, it does not just give one voice, one story, or one explanation – there are three novels looked at, and revealingly enough, all three share similar themes not often told in other stories. As Adichie says, there are thousands of examples of western literature, and many of these books glorify or at least do justice to the accomplishments of the western world. What is less universal are books derived from indigenous cultures that share completely different stories regarding the environment and its human connection. These three books, two of which are written by women, one happening to be an indigenous minority, help expand the lesser known,
although growing genre that is ecofiction. And along this journey, all three writers have written about similar themes and realizations revolving around the western world.

The story of how the western world is making strides toward a more eco-friendly, environmentally aware way of life is still lacking in literature as well as reality. Western society and culture have yet to succeed in drastically changing their ways. Consumerism has not changed, and society has become even more dependent on foreign and factory made products. Perspectives on the people in the third world countries, depicted through men like Nathan, have also not altered. This de-humanizing perspective is also shown through Adichie’s personal experience where a young American student, after one of her readings, approached her and said that it was “such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel” (Adichie). In response, Adichie alludes to having read the American novel, “Psycho,” and responds, “it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers” (Adichie). Adichie shares this experience to show the danger of a single story: “It would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel, in which a character was a serial killer that he was somehow representative of all Americans . . . because I did not have a single story of America.” Adichie’s speech promotes the spreading of diverse literature by diverse authors with differing stories and perspectives so that societies can avoid the one voice, the one point of view, and the one stereotype: “The problem with stereotypes,” as Adichie explains, “is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Adichie herself created a “one story” version of events in her own African past but realized afterward that by only looking at these stories, she was “flattening” her own experiences and overlooking “the many other stories that formed me.” This “incomplete story” or stereotype created out of one experience is not only dangerous, it’s criminal.
The need for multiple perspectives is essential and needed in today’s complex world. Following the advice of Adichie, this thesis takes information and discussion from many voices, like Hogan, an indigenous woman, Kingsolver, a white woman, and McCarthy, a white male. Though all three authors are born and raised westerners, their culture and ethnicity give them differing perspectives and these three perspectives share criticism regarding the western culture. It is my belief that this critical main message directed at the western world does not rob the western world of humanity or dignity. Rather, the authors’ message insists for, even demands self-reflection. Self-reflection is the key to progress everywhere and there is no better way to gain this reflection than by hearing other perspectives that, before, went unheard: “Stories matter, many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize” (Adichie). Adichie, as well as the three authors, gives hope to the western world’s future, for not only can these authors as well as others “break the dignity of a people,” they “can also . . . repair that broken dignity” (Adichie); a dignity broken through the western world’s apparent ill-treatment of not only nature but of technology, cultures, and women. Hopefully, these stories will cause men to think about nature and their own connection with it—not just women’s connections with nature. Even if this new perspective does not promote love for nature, at least mankind will see the natural world’s complexity that all cultures and people, including western culture and women, do in fact share. If this complexity is recognized then this new consciousness will allow, as Adichie promises, for the regaining of “a kind of paradise.” And perhaps one day, this “paradise” gained from multiple stories will sustain us all, and heal the land and people damaged by western man’s narrow, single perspective of how to deal with and control not only nature, but technology, culture, and women.
Works Cited


Murphy, Patrick D. "The Procession of Identity and Ecology in Contemporary Literature."


