

## SEEING THE CHIASM: PLACE THEORY AND ECOPHENOMENOLOGY

*Grant McMillan*

*The University of North Dakota*

### **Introducing Place Theory**

I do not know what place to call home. I know where I was born, where I grew up, where my family spent summers, where I moved to start my life as an adult, where I have moved since. But where is my home-place? And for that matter, what is included in a home-place? Is it more appropriate to simply list off names of towns and states, or should I identify geographic regions and landscape features? Should I say I grew up around Clemson, South Carolina, or should I say I was raised in a house in the woods next to Lake Hartwell, that I took my first steps in the Foothills region of the Blue Ridge Mountains where my earliest encounters with the Earth were saturated in jade-colored lake water and red clay bleeding across the driveway in the rains that are present in all seasons? These days I lean toward the latter, but I suspect this has more to do with its romantic tonal qualities than any profound understanding of place on my part. But then again, if this romantic way of describing my home place feels more authentic to me, does that not make it more appropriate, more true?

I suppose what I mean to ask is this: what constitutes place? And what are we talking about when we talk about place? Most likely, we are discussing geographic regions that can be broadened or narrowed into multiple sub-groups and identities. No matter the size of the chosen region, each label still refers to a *specific* landscape filled with *specific* people. And yet even these labels seem to fall short of telling us what that landscape might mean to any given

individual. Did it help you, as a reader, understand the significance of place, generally, to first hear how I remember the specific landscape I was born into? I hope so. But even if it did not, what I want to convey is that the primary tension of place theory is that it is not, fundamentally, about specific regions. Instead, it functions as a praxis to be applied to specific places—it seeks to talk about *how we talk about* all our own home regions.

As Lucy Lippard puts it in *The Lure of the Local*, place theory is concerned “not with the history *of* nature and the landscape but with the historical narrative as it is written *in* the landscape or place” (7). Put another way, the difference between talking about places and talking about place is that in place theory, the emphasis is not on the conversations themselves; rather, the emphasis is on how landscape shapes the narrative that arises from it. This view of landscape and peoples contains two fundamental paradoxes. The first paradox is that natural landscapes, which place theory seeks to dignify, appear to be filtered entirely through human consciousness thus reducing them to mere backdrop, thus subjugating the natural world to a peripheral role in the story of human existence. The second paradox is that in order to discuss the places you or I call home, we must understand place as a concept—which is to say we must necessarily resort to generalizations.

In this paper, I will explore these two fundamental paradoxes of place theory. To address the first, I will turn to historical understandings of the interplay between phenomenology and ecocriticism. I have chosen these two fields to situate this discussion within because of their overlapping interest in human consciousness as molded by the natural world. To address the second paradox, I will read passages of Wilma Dykeman's Appalachian memoir, *Family of Earth* alongside Lippard's definitions of place and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's “phenomenology of the body.” The reason I have chosen Dykeman's book for this task is because she is a paradigm of

what it means to be a regional author and because the region she wrote from, Asheville North Carolina, became my home for two years while I began studying English Literature as an early-life career change. And, more simply, I adore her writing. In taking this phenomenological approach to knowledge, it is my goal to identify a new, non-hierarchical structure that place-knowledge might take on. Ultimately, I will argue that the components of place exist in a state of chiasmic intertwining that renders individual experiences of specific landscape and communal memory inseparable.

### **Anthropocentrism and Ecophenomenology**

*Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has encouraged ecocritics to highlight the sensuous pleasure of encounters with the 'flesh of the world.'*  
— Greg Garrard (36)

Modern ecocriticism warns us of the danger in viewing nature from an anthropocentric point of view. For the sake of brevity, which is, admittedly, not my strong suit, I will trust that we can agree with their premise that when the world is viewed with humankind at its absolute center, the whole of the natural world becomes lesser and therefore subject to manipulation and exploitation depending on whatever strikes our communal fancy. However, I argue that the phenomenological notion that nature must be filtered through individual consciousness is a slippery one—one that need not be as anthropocentric as it might on its surface seem. To begin, we might ask what it means for nature, or indeed anything at all, to be filtered through individual consciousness. It is a metaphysical concern that I will touch on, briefly, by turning to the origins of phenomenology.

To German thinker Edmund Husserl, phenomenology was less a branch of abstract philosophy and more a method, a way of encountering the world. For him, the mission begins by following in the footsteps of Descartes in withdrawing into oneself (Bakewell 48). Martin

Heidegger, who corresponded with Husserl often in his early career, follows in these footsteps. In his trademark style, Heidegger's version of phenomenology begins with Husserl's maxim and adds to it "a breathtaking swirl of questions." Heidegger's questions lead him to a greater focus on everyday life, specifically everyday life as it is rooted in landscape, as an element of consciousness (Bakewell 56-57, 62). The Black Forest of Freiburg, where Heidegger would go on to fill a department chair position left vacant by Husserl, was instrumental in shaping this new movement within phenomenology.

To Heidegger, *dasein*, which can be roughly translated to "presence" or "existence," begins with a sort of poetic awe not just for *being* but for being in a specific time and location on the Earth (Bakewell 87). For Heidegger, that meant adopting the aesthetics of a traditional Black Forest peasant complete with a brown farmer's jacket and knee-length breeches (Bakewell 56). What accompanies his focus on aesthetics of place is a belief in a "death-denying project of world mastery," or a mission of "saving the earth" through artistic expression (Garrard 34). Ecocritics generally agree that Heidegger's vision of nature is fundamentally anthropocentric in that landscapes are subjected to the role of building blocks from which humans may make their meanings. As Heidegger writes,

A stone is wordless. Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked. The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings. (qtd. in Garrard 34)

As we can see from the above passage, Heidegger's vision of the role of humans building meaning out of landscape leaves a fundamental problem of anthropocentrism intact. Critics could argue that such a "human first" position is inherent in phenomenological understandings of the

human mind. Such critics might further suggest that it was this tendency which drove Heidegger to be a staunch supporter of the Nazi party and the beginnings of their quest for earthly mastery in the 1930s, an alignment he was reluctant to publicly disavow even later in his life. They might also note that from the 1930s onward, Heidegger began to detach himself further and further from the world of others, choosing the solitude of his hut in Todtnauberg over a teaching position in Berlin (Bakewell 93). And so, rather than realizing the potential for human connection to each other and to nature, Heidegger would hide away in the Black Forest to write increasingly esoteric works for the remainder of his career. Is this the inevitable end of a phenomenologist approaching nature?

To summarize, phenomenology of this era relies on lived experience as the primary source of revelation, a reliance which led these thinkers, primarily Heidegger and Husserl, to an anthropocentric worldview. However, proponents of modern ecocriticism would do an injustice to this line of thinkers in dismissing them wholly over such criticisms. Instead, we may be better served by turning to another discipline in the tradition of Husserl, the French psychologist and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, begins with Husserl's thinking and stirs into it new swirls of questions. While Heidegger introduces the centrality of a specific historical and geographic setting, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the physical experience of our bodies in the world. In other words, where Husserl commands us to philosophize from our experience of, say, picking up a cup of tea, Merleau-Ponty invites us to focus on this experience as it is delivered to us through our *bodily* senses (Bakewell 231). By following this line of thinking further, we can observe how Merleau-Ponty's branch of phenomenology positions every individual human as a being enmeshed in the world as an equals to it and thus able to "overcome the residual

anthropocentrism of [Heidegger]" (Garrard 35). We can see Merleau-Ponty's desire to subvert this anthropocentrism through his interest in the painter Cézanne, who Merleau-Ponty once quoted as saying, "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness" (Bakewell 185). David Abram sums up this subversion another way, writing that, for Merleau-Ponty, "To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to feel oneself touched by the tree" (qtd. in Garrard 36). To think a tree's consciousness as no less significant than our own—what a radically delightful notion! I contend this bold reversal invites each of us to see how a phenomenological relationship of a body to landscape holds potentials beyond the Anthropocene. In the case of Heidegger, we are given a framework that emphasizes human excellence and nature as tools toward a mastery of self. However, through Merleau-Ponty we see the possibility of the human consciousness as a piece of that nature, one equal part among others, braided together through sensory experience. We will return to the implications of this idea later, but for now we must turn our attention to a specific writer's relationship to place, lest we wind up lost in that second paradox mentioned above, that in order to discuss place theory, as a praxis, we require the particular.

### **Place Theory: Landscape and Memory**

*Space defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place.*  
— Lucy Lippard (8)

In *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard writes, "Space defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place." Lippard's statement acknowledges two interwoven components of place that are equally integral: landscape and memory. Lippard argues the landscape is often conflated with place. A landscape such as the Appalachian Mountains is a specific location, yes, but it is not as significant without the latter component: memory. In this way, landscape serves as an external backdrop, the "scene of the seen" as Lippard puts it (8).

Like in Merleau-Ponty's Ecophenomenology, however, the emphasis is on the braided relationship between components in a system. In other words, a "backdrop" need not be as peripheral as the term makes it seem. Instead, it is on equal footing with the second component we must address: memory.

As Lippard defines it, memory is a living force that is constantly broken down and reintegrated into the present—she writes, "the past is not as separate from the present as its manipulators would like us to think" (85). In her view, memory is more than mere recollection, it is a shared experience that draws the past into the present, and we cannot escape the ways in which memory informs our perception of the present. We also cannot overlook the communal aspect of Lippard's theory. As she puts it, "History known is a good thing, but history shared is far more satisfying and far reaching" (85). But what is the "history" to which Lippard refers? And what "memory?" The obvious answer is that she is referring to general concepts which brings us back around to that second paradox of place theory: that in order to discuss place as a concept, one must necessarily resort to generalizations. But generalizations without specific examples are not so much dead as they have never really been alive. Therefore, we must go beyond mere identification of the mechanical ways in which place theory *might* be applied; we must actually practice applying it to a specific work. For this purpose, we can turn to the writings of Appalachian writer Wilma Dykeman.

### **The Writings of Wilma Dykeman**

*Like a mountain spring, [Wilma Dykeman] gave us a bold, steady stream of sparkling works for over half a century.*  
— Robert Morgan (xvii)

Wilma Dykeman generated the most well-known works of her prolific career during the 1950s and 1960s, when America as a whole was in the midst of great social upheaval and

organized efforts aimed at social change (Jones 74). No matter what genre she wrote in, Dykeman remained steadfastly conscious of cultural movements and often added her voice to those conversations. Perhaps her most well-known work is her regional profile of the French Broad River, appropriately titled *The French Broad*. This nonfiction work was published as part of a 50-volume series by Holt-Reinhart on important watersheds across the United States. The series was meant to promote regional tourism by creating a set of coffee-table books highlighting the natural wonders of each region's waterways (Engelhardt, *Feminist Ecocriticism* 337). What the volumes were not meant to do was criticize; and yet, in *The French Broad*, Dykeman includes the audaciously titled chapter, "Who Killed the French Broad," in which she parcels out both criticism and constructive suggestions for how the region might go about undoing their mistreatment of the waterway at a time when most experts considered controlling river pollution either unnecessary or too expensive (Jones 84).

The important takeaway is this: Wilma Dykeman refused to write about landscape in isolation. She wrote about the French Broad as it was interwoven with the lives of those living around it, with it, part of it. Indeed, she viewed the landscape and its people as two inseparable components of the same entity—as Dykeman once said, "As we have misused our richest land, we have misused ourselves; as we have wasted our beautiful water, we have wasted ourselves" (Jones 82). To her, the people and the river are both, together, the victims in the murder case her chapter's title constructs, and as a result she could not write about landscape in faux-isolation. The majority of Dykeman's work portrays this communal view of place in a way that aligns with Lippard's theory of communal experience. And yet, her posthumously published memoir *Family of Earth* offers another, no less important, take on the memory and the experience of place.



The story of Dykeman's memoir is a curious one. For a writer who worked on many biographies over her lifetime, she did not often publish work that included herself in a direct way. She focused on other individuals or her local community and its shared homeland. However, a decade after Dykeman's passing in 2006 at the age of eighty-six, her son, James Stokely III uncovered a box in her home labeled "Northwestern." The box contained various materials related to her time at Northwestern University in 1940 as well as the 200-page manuscript that was eventually published in 2016 as *Family of Earth* (Dykeman vii). The manuscript, which Dykeman wrote at age 20, meditates on the first fourteen years of her childhood and her personal relationship with her mountain homeland, Beaverdam Valley in Asheville North Carolina. Appropriately, Dykeman's mother often referred to their family home as "The Place" (Engelhardt, *Woods and Words* 20). And the memoir is very much about her specific home—her specific place. As Robert Morgan writes in his foreword to the book, the primary theme explored throughout the memoir is the closeness of the natural world to the members of the Dykeman family (viii).

But how tantalizing it is to read such reverent words about a writer without having yet experienced the textures of her prose! Such patience is to be rewarded as we can now turn to *Family of Earth* and see how Dykeman's memoir explores her own personal experience of consciousness enmeshed in place. We will see, too, how Dykeman's prose exemplifies the idea that, to borrow a passage from the writer herself, "any true realist, that is, one with imagination, [cannot] help also being a romantic" (37). Who better to lead us on this journey than a romantic realist?

### **Landscape in *Family of Earth***

*Between the background and the people, our lives lay more with the mountains than the people, for we knew them with more kinship and more intimacy. —Wilma Dykeman (9)*

From its opening pages, it is clear that *Family of Earth* is a memoir about landscape and memory as two intertwining threads. Even the book's subtitle, "A Southern Mountain Childhood" implies the importance of geography and memory in the book. Dykeman's depictions of landscape can be categorized in two main ways: vast natural backdrops to her community and intimate memories of nature at specific moments in her childhood.

As in Lippard's theory, landscapes play a staging role throughout *Family of Earth*. In her introduction to the memoir, Dykeman gives an overview of the mountain valley in which she grew up. She takes great time and care detailing this place. It is as if she is using her words to create a mural of her home, shining a light on each major feature important to the mountain valley. She begins by establishing the geographical parameters of this space, writing:

The valley proper stretched from the little promontory where the Baptist country church stood, to the ring of mountains which formed the head of the valley. Branching from the main highway were many tributary roads which ran up the small canyons and coves ... stretched out from the main long line of peaks like fingers reaching from an ageless hand. Up these coves the people had settled, making for themselves a place in the friendly, yet foreboding, presence of the hills. (7)

Here, Dykeman offers a sort of establishing shot of the region and its people. This excerpt illustrates how Dykeman does not view the valley as a place on its own; rather, it is the action, the living presence of the people settling in the valley that allows it to become the version of the place she remembers. This depiction of place as a confluence of people and landscape falls in line with how Lippard discusses people and communal remembrance.

In each case, a landscape must be populated. The experience of life then works with the landscape to generate a living memory, resulting in a sense of place. And yet, despite this opening focus on the valley and its mountain community, Dykeman almost immediately withdraws from the larger human community. As she writes just a few paragraphs later, "Between the background and the people, our lives lay more with the mountains than the people, for we knew them with more kinship and intimacy" (9). This point is where we, as readers, realize just how personal Dykeman's memoir will feel in comparison to place theory. This difference makes sense, of course, given the genre conventions of memoir and theory. However, this distinction is still noteworthy when we approach a genre such as memoir as a valid medium through which to convey theory. Therefore, it is important to note that, although Dykeman steps back from the community of the valley, she does not sever the landscape's ties to humanity. She merely narrows her focus to her and her family's experience of that landscape. In doing so, she is able to offer more intimate depictions of the specific features of the land that wove themselves into the fabric of her early years. The establishing shot of a communal landscape quickly gives way to a more intimate portraiture of place.

The book continues from that point to be devoted to the personal—Dykeman does not write about her valley home in generalizations. One particularly memorable section of the book explores the forest that lay opposite Dykeman's home. She does not try to write a chapter about these woods and what made them important to her over the course of her entire childhood. Instead, she recalls one specific memory of it: a forest fire she witnessed when she was only nine years old. Dykeman describes how she could smell traces of pine, oak, chestnut and maple mixing together in the smoke that permeated the air (105). She describes the sound of trees falling along the mountainside, splintering into each other in echoing bursts. She describes the

look of grey plumes of smoke curling up, thick against the dark blue sky overhead, and the foreboding "nocturnal beauty" of the black earth and black tree trunks that the fire left behind.

No, Dykeman does not attempt to write about this forest in general, at all times, in all seasons. Such generality would reduce the forest to backdrop. But by delving into one specific moment in her experience of the forest, she fertilizes her place, as it is constructed in writing, with her own memories, feeding its interconnected systems of roots and trunks and leaves, feeding the very overstory that shades those same memories. As she writes of that moment, "The remembrance of the red flames among the green and brown of the hillside, the orders and the sounds, and the terrifying presence of a familiar thing gone wild ... these were beautiful in their dark terror" (106). The result is one small and intimately explored vision of the forest. In this vision, the forest is rendered a place, the kind that invites the individual to take a sensory bath in its essence, to be experienced in that phenomenological way. To better understand the implications of this shift, we can return to theories of consciousness that emphasize sensory experience over ontological categorization.

### **Phenomenology of The Body**

*"To understand" means ... the unique way of existing that finds expression in the properties of the pebble, the glass, or the piece of wax.*  
— Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945)

Around the same time that Wilma Dykeman was exploring her valley homeland in North Carolina, Maurice Merleau-Ponty was in France formulating the distinct brand of phenomenology. As discussed previously, Merleau-Ponty took up the phenomenological quest of Husserl to know not what *is* but rather the *experience* of what is (Smith). To this framework, Merleau-Ponty adds the idea of *enmeshment* which places the human consciousness among the world's phenomenon rather than presiding over it as is the case in Heidegger's work. This

distinction may seem slight, yet it is crucial to our development of an ecophenomenological reading of *Family of Earth*.

The basic question, the differentiation between *what is* and *the experience of that what is*, is precisely the subject of Merleau-Ponty's later works as anthologized in *The Visible and Invisible*. In these collected chapters and essays, Merleau-Ponty frames the "visible" as objects—"real" things that are in the world. However, to a phenomenologist, these objects may be "real" but they do not exist outside of how an individual experiences them through current perception and memory of past perception. Personal experience of these real things is the "invisible." In his theory, the human subject does not reign over the world of objects; rather, consciousness is inseparable from lived experience of that world (Siegel 456).

The distinction between the visible and the invisible in Merleau-Ponty's work runs parallel to Lippard's equation for place. In her theory, landscape could be described as that visible component which does not exist without an invisible experience. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception is similar to Lippard's place theory. However, where he begins to depart is the same place at which Dykeman separates: the role of the individual.

In perhaps the most well-known essay from the anthology, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty lays out his theory of being in a way that bears striking similarities to how Dykeman describes her experience of place in *Family of Earth*. His theory, often described as "Phenomenology of the Body," flows forth from the idea that "perceptual awareness consists in neither sensation nor judgment but in the skillful bodily exploration of an environment" (Merriman & Winter 1754). In this way, one could argue that Merleau-Ponty's framework emphasizes how a body explores environment or, put another way, how a body explores

landscape. In her memoir, Dykeman expresses a nearly identical sentiment when recalling the feeling, the experience, of gliding through the air on a swingset as a child. She writes:

I gave myself wholly to the swinging, as children do ... Rising and falling... rising and falling... this *sheer body pleasure* was a great good thing ... Vitality was in us, and we were in the moment. Then we would pump the swing with all our body, throwing ourselves forward into the air, dropping back upon the air, rising, falling... rising, falling... (36)

What is this expression of "sheer body pleasure" if not an illustration of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of the Body*? In both cases, the emphasis is on bodily exploration of a space as it is experienced through sensation and touch. Such a passage, in this context, calls to mind the passage I quoted previously about the trees of her valley home aflame against the dark sky. If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, trees touch us just as we touch them, we are left to wonder how these trees might have felt, or in their approximation of feeling, as they burned, swayed, and cracked against the forest floor.

This emphasis on sensory experience is the second key aspect of the two writers' overlapping ideas. To each, such experience is composed of both sight and touch, each inextricable from the other. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "Every experience of the visible has always been given to me within the context of the movements of the look, the visible spectacle belongs to the touch neither more nor less than do the 'tactile qualities'" (134). In this theory, the "visible spectacle" is intertwined with tactile sensation, forming a chiastic structure. In other words, if we return to a scene I suggested earlier in which we are sitting down for a cup of tea, we might, simply by seeing the scene in our minds eye, sense the smooth coolness of the cup's lip as it parts ours, feel the wet, dense steam that floats from the tea's surface to our nostrils, and

even flinch from the sudden hot bite of just-boiled liquid on our tongues. That is to say, our senses are wrapped up in each other—as we see, we feel.

Key to this chiasm is a series of reversals that, rather than replacing one hierarchical knowledge structure with another, subverts hierarchy entirely. Merleau-Ponty concludes that language itself involves humanity in this chiasm of consciousness and objects, writing, "The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of 'psychic reality' spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said" (155). In the same way, we can conclude that the sight of a swing or the tactile experience of that swing is not simply a layer of "psychic reality" spread over the swing but is the totality of what is felt and what will later be collected and expressed by the unifying force of memory.

At a glance, it may have been tempting to say that Dykeman and Merleau-Ponty's theories of bodily experience and place align perfectly with Lippard's place theory, but having gone on this deep dive into the textures of Dykeman's world, we now know better. While Lippard focuses on communal memory, a phenomenological reading of Dykeman's memoir emphasizes *individual* consciousness. Because of this emphasis on personal perception, her theory would appear to elevate the role of the individual memory over the role of communal memory. However, such a reading would be in error, as it would only replace one hierarchy with another. Instead, we can build from the embrace of chiastic structure in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of the Body* as we perform one last series of reversals to see the interwoven nature of this three-faceted braid between individual, community, and landscape.

### **A Community of Individuals: The Second Paradox of Place Revisited**

If the second fundamental paradox of place theory is that we must resort to generalizations to discuss what is necessarily specific, a direct corollary is that in order to uncover communal memory of place, we must explore how place is experienced at the level of individual consciousness.

Dykeman's memoir covers the first fourteen years of her life in her Southern Appalachian homeland. As previously discussed, her introduction to the book mentions the larger community of the valley only briefly before shifting focus over to her individual experience of the landscape. This choice to focus on herself may seem odd in light of the fact that Dykeman spent the majority of her writing career with an ear turned to social causes as illustrated in perhaps her most famous work *The French Broad*, which took an ecocritical look at her community's natural environment. However, an answer of sorts may be found in the final paragraph of her introduction to *Family of Earth*. Here, Dykeman writes, "The life of one human is the life of every other living thing on earth... All life is kin and all men are brothers, yet each is a stranger, one to the other, and will always be so" (10). In other words, the life of one human is the life of every human, yet the life of this "every human" is unknown to any one human. To summarize, we can view Dykeman's body of work as a series of reversals meant to capture general truths about places specific to individuals and their experiences of those places. But Dykeman is not the only place theorist who engages in this sort of reversal—Lippard's text, which we have drawn on for our basic understanding of a more communal view of place, engages in reversal from the other side of the structure.

In *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard acknowledges the need for personal narrative and addresses it through the stylistic design of her theoretical book. Although the main part of each



page covers concepts relevant to place theory, Lippard also makes the significant decision to include a small, personal narrative of her own home, Maine. She does not confine this personal narrative to an appendix, nor does she publish it as a separate work with a separate purpose. The book weaves her personal narrative into her place theory through small running text at the top of each page, divided from the main text by a thin black line. On the very same page where she first expresses her theory of landscape as a backdrop, she also includes a narrative in which she steps into her own backdrop and describes how it feels to her to arrive home after a long time away. She writes,

If the tide is out, mud squooshes between my toes and then hard sand, clam shells crunching harmlessly underfoot as I wade in the channel, tiny creatures tickling my ankles. If the tide is in ... then to Far Far Beach with its white granite point, looking out to Seguin, the big humped lighthouse island three miles out to sea. The texture of sand and rock and seaweed under bare feet is the surest sign that I am home. (8-9)

Lippard describes how this narrative text keeps the rest of the book from floating adrift, writing that this "'vein of Maine' that runs through this book is like a vein of granite or quartz through schist ... an anchor line for my driftings" (4). Her narrative and her theory exist together as interwoven as reasonably possible for a textual artifact. The two threads of conversation are concurrent, forming a chiasm that constantly reserves back on itself without each component dissolving into each other. Through Lippard's book and through Dykeman's body of work, we can see two individuals as they turn both inward and outward in an act of individual remembrance as part of communal knowledge sharing. Because this is what humans do; this is how we communicate. We involve ourselves in our subjects. We are excited to talk about the

places we've been, the places we'll go, the landscapes and our memories that form that which we call home.

Even now, I am writing on the topic of place theory, a praxis that requires generalities and concepts—and yet how I ache to tell you that my latest home-place is a small town in the Great Plains, and that just this morning as I shuffled out into the sub-zero winter air to scrape ice off my car's windshield, I heard among the trees that line my street the kind of silence that is no silence at all, but is the echo of a backdrop that longs to be heard. And how I yearn to tell you that as I stood on layers of compacted snow, a northern wind whisked a flurry of ice crystals into a swirl around me and, for a moment, I was enmeshed in a sparkling sea that seemed to radiate *being* itself. But then again, we all are enmeshed, at all times, aren't we? I mean to say, we are, by our very bodies, tethered to this fiercely swirling, radiant world. Isn't it a joy?

### **Systems Theory: An Interwoven Tapestry**

As we wind our braid of being down to its last threads, we must surely see the interconnection around us. The goal of my ecophenomenological place theory is the study of this braid, one that, by nature, is a *systems theory*. *Systems theory*, which originally grew out of cybernetics in the mid-twentieth century, studies complexity and communication and argues against "mechanistic models that reduce matter to mere components" (Conklin and Psaros 111). In a similar way, an ecophenomenological approach to place theory resists the reduction of nature to set pieces upon which human consciousness may play. Thinking of place in terms of systems enables us to recognize that the interplay of parts is no less important than the parts themselves, and, importantly, this interplay creates feedback loops that allow a system to learn, grow, and adapt to adverse conditions. Norbert Wiener, founder of cybernetic theory, once said that "We are not stuff that abides. We are patterns that perpetuate themselves; we are whirlpools in a river

of ever-flowing water" (qtd. in Conklin and Psaros 111). We may paraphrase Wiener to say that place is not a "thing" that abides; rather, it is a patterning created by the interplay of individual humans with other living things around them including the specific landscapes in which they live, breathe, and perceive every day.

So I ask again, what are we talking about when we talk about place? General ideas about specific places; individual recollection of communal history—art and academia, theory and paradox, woven together by the hands of artists and scholars. Just as memory requires the individual, history requires the community. Just as landscape requires the community, experience requires the individual. And place? Place requires each and every thread, woven together into a tapestry that is at once intimate to individuals and also shared across communities. But what are the implications of such a realm of theory? Wilma Dykeman's words, as always, may be fitting:

We wonder if a baby's birth does not hark back to those primeval people's and times. He is born as other animals are born, without the benefit of clothes or possessions outside his own body, and how solitary is his appearance in the world. All the keynotes intimidating what will come in later times are present in that overture. The dominant theme is loneliness. (11)

The emphasis here on loneliness may seem surprising given how our discussion to this point has argued for an ecophenomenological reading of *Family of Earth*, a reading that reveals a chiasmic braid between human consciousness, communal memory, and landscape. But the isolation about which Dykeman writes is not an original state but rather a fractured one. For what is loneliness but the recognition of lost connection? What is loneliness but the desire to see that lost connection restored? We must remember that Dykeman, despite her attunement to loneliness, or perhaps because of it, would go on to live out a socially active career in which she sought to

repair injustices wrought upon communities and landscapes. We might also recall the passage, quoted previously, in which Dykeman writes, "The life of one human is the life of every other living thing on earth" (Dykeman 10). Yes Dykeman saw loneliness in the world, but so too did she see a great web of enmeshment, that tapestry of the personal alongside what is remembered and shared.

### **Ecophenomenological Place Theory: Implications**

Our identities are shaped, increasingly, in reference to the global tragedies we've endured. This pattern is especially true of displaced peoples. Indeed, if we affirm the chiasm of people and landscape, we must conclude that to forcefully sever this connection is to perform a spiritual violence to all parties. It follows that such a view forces us to confront displacement on a microscale including acts of eviction, gentrification, and artificially skyrocketing rent prices driven by cartels of property owners. And we must also consider displacement on a macroscale including ongoing climate-change-driven survival migration, the deportation of these same climate refugees, and the historical broken treaties upon which many of our hometowns and universities here in the United States were built, historical crimes made ever-present by the nearly universal dismissal of land-back movements.

The implications here are grave, complex, and many. It is beyond the scope of this paper to confront each and every way that individual components of our global family of earth have faced the adverse effects of a system out of balance. Such a call is beyond the scope of any one paper, book, or field of study. But we must remain engaged and do what we can so that we may *not* become like Heidegger and disappear into our private forests. No place belongs to us and us alone, nor do we belong to ourselves and ourselves along—we belong to our places, and that

includes our peoples. We must recognize *all* components, *all* members of our local place systems. To do any less is to perpetuate grave injustice on individuals and on ourselves also.

In closing, I'd like to leave off with a short excerpt from *A Herbal* by Irish poet Seamus Heaney from his 2010 book *Human Chain*. The book, his last published work before his death in 2013, treats memory and landscape with a sense of world weariness but not in a way that succumbs to pessimism. As Colm Tóibín writes, the book examines memory itself and finds that "memory here can be filled with tones of regret and even undertones of anguish, but it also can appear with a sense of hard-won wonder." That hard-won wonder is what we must remember, and so, I leave you with Heaney's words:

*Between heather and marigold,  
Between spagnum and buttercup,  
Between dandelion and broom,  
Between forget-me-not and honeysuckle,*

*As between clear blue and cloud,  
Between haystack and sunset sky,  
Between oak tree and slated roof,  
I had my existence. I was there.  
Me in place and the place in me.*

---

*Where can it be found again,  
An elsewhere world, beyond  
Maps and atlases  
Where all is woven into  
And of itself, like a nest  
Of crosshatched grass blades?*

### Further Reading

For further reading on ecological frameworks, see Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) which argues for a view of the world as intertwined with all elements of itself and proposes humans engage in sym-poiesis, or making-with, rather than auto-poiesis, or self-making. See also *The Atlas of Disappearing Places* (2021) by Christina Conklin and Marina Psaros which measures the impacts of climate change on humans and non-humans through case studies from specific places across the globe. Finally, see *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) by Peter Wohlleben for a joyful, scientifically driven exploration of the interconnected nature of our forests.

For nonfiction place narratives from specific locations and peoples, see Jeremy Jones's *Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland* (2014) which looks at contemporary southern Appalachia through the lens of family history. Also see Paul VanDevelder's *Coyote Warrior: One Man, Three Tribes, and the Trial That Forged a Nation* (2004) which explores the history of the legal battle between The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes, and the US federal government over the flooding of tribal lands as a result of the Garrison Dam's construction in 1953 in what is now North Dakota.

For digital humanities projects related to place see *Looking at Appalachia*, a crowd-sourced photo-documentary project showing images taken from all parts of the Appalachian region. The project is curated by photographer Roger May and can be found online at <https://lookingatappalachia.org/>. See also *Native Land Digital*, an online, interactive map database showing traditional tribal lands and languages, primarily across the continents now known as North America, South America, and Australia. The resource can be found online at <https://native-land.ca/>.

## Works Cited

- Bakewell, Sarah. *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*. Other Press, 2017.
- Conklin, Christina and Psaros, Marina. *The Atlas of Disappearing Places*. The New Press, 2021.
- Dykeman, Wilma. *Family of Earth: A Southern Mountain Childhood*. University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Engelhardt, Elizabeth S. D. and Elizabeth Sims. "Wilma Dykeman: A Biography of "Woods and Words"." *Appalachian Heritage*, vol. 41 no. 2, 2013, p. 19-26. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/aph.2013.0060.
- Engelhardt, Elizabeth. "Nature Loving Souls and Appalachian Mountains: The Promise of Feminist Ecocriticism." *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, edited by Danny L. Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman. Ohio UP, 2005.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd. ed., Routledge, 2012.
- Jones III, Oliver K. "Social Criticism in the Works of Wilma Dykeman." *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, edited by Danny L. Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman. Ohio UP, 2005.
- Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New Press, 1998.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Intertwining—The Chiasm." *The Visible and the Invisible: Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, edited by Claude Lefort, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern UP, 1968.

"Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1908–1961)." *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter, vol. 3, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006, pp. 1753-1755. *Gale eBooks*.

Morgan, Robert. Preface. *Family of Earth*, by Wilma Dykeman, University of North Carolina Press, 2016, vii-xviii.

Siegel, Jerrold E. "A Unique Way of Existing: Merleau-Ponty and the Subject." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 29 no. 3, 1991, p. 455-480. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/hph.1991.0072.

Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>.

Tóibín, Colm. "Human Chain by Seamus Heaney—Review." *The Guardian*, 2010, review <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/21/seamus-heaney-human-chain-review>.