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“The Strata of My History’: Reading the Ecological Chronotope in Wendell Berry’s That Distant Land”

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In his 1968 essay, “A Native Hill,” Wendell Berry ruminates on his relationship to place. Of his Kentucky home, he says, “the place and the history, for me, have been inseparable” (4), and he suggests that human experience transcends time through this landscape:

But the sense of the past also gives a deep richness and resonance to nearly everything I see here. It is partly the sense that what I now see, other men that I have known once saw, and partly that this knowledge provides an imaginative access to what I do not know. I think of the country as a kind of palimpsest scrawled over with the comings and goings of people, the erasure of time already in process even as the marks of passage are put down. (12-13)

Like a piece of parchment scraped clean and reinscribed, Berry’s rural home bears traces of past histories that linger long after their erasure. Standing on a fog-encased riverbank, Berry concludes, “I could have been my grandfather, in his time, standing there watching, as I knew he had” (14). The view resonates with Berry because it serves as a connection to his forebears, who lived on and worked this same hill. More poignantly, though, this particular tract of land allows Berry to access its past and the human stories it holds through his imagination. In the present, he writes his own narrative onto the landscape; his is a story informed by the past and that will, in turn, shape the future. Berry is invested in the health of this place that inscribes generations of histories into its geography, preserving them for the future.

Berry’s personal experience serves as a model for his fiction. He situates his novels, short stories, and even some poems in the fictional town of Port William, which he models on his hometown of Port Royal, Kentucky. Throughout Berry’s work, we see Port William transform from a frontier river outpost, to a thriving agricultural community, to a town in
economic decline. A pastoral landscape dotted with farms, woodlots, and river bottoms encircles the cluster of homes and shops within the town limits. We meet residents from the town proper, as well as those from the neighboring farms. The town sits on the banks of “The River,” as it’s known, which is a tributary of a larger river to the north and serves to connect the people of Port William to the wider world. This is a place where one knows his neighbors intimately; blood ties are strong, but the people of Port William live intertwined lives that transcend family relations. Across time and generations, the inhabitants of Port William refer to themselves as The Membership, signaling their strong sense of community, and of communion.

Berry’s characters cultivate an equally intimate relationship with the physical landscape, and the land, in turn, holds within it the history of the Port William Membership. Characters in Berry’s fiction that maintain an ethical and sustainable stewardship of their place inscribe their story onto the land and are held in the collective memory of the community, while neglecting one’s responsibility to the land inevitably leads to isolation. Furthermore, it is through a shared sense of responsibility to the land that the Membership fosters its sense of community, shared history, and timeless connection with each other. While any number of Berry’s fictional works would serve to illustrate this symbiotic relationship between the human and nonhuman world, I focus here on his Port William stories collected in That Distant Land (2004). These stories reveal that place defines the Membership of Port William, and places tell stories that they can read in the rural landscape. The Membership is inextricably connected to this place, to the point that, when they are in another setting, Berry describes them as not being their true self. The state of the land reflects the state of a family and embodies their stories; an old tobacco barn or stand of oaks will call to mind a human history connected to that place. There is also a fluidity of time in Port William, and past, present, and future coexist there. The chronological structure of the stories allows readers to see the growth and development of Port William, but even within stories, past, present, and future seamlessly converge. Yet, as the collection’s title suggests, this place is already distant, just out of reach. It is both alive in its detail and history while also passing away in a changing,
contemporary world. Ultimately, Berry’s collection suggests that, when the people are gone and the landscape changed, only the artist remains to narrate their history. Through imaginative literature, though, readers can access relic spaces such as Port William. This particular town may soon vanish, but it transcends time through fiction and offers us a model for how to build an ethical relationship with the places we inhabit.

Berry’s sentiment that his home and its history are “inseparable” echoes Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, which he develops in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin “give[s] the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature;” in short, the chronotope “expresses the inseparability of space and time” (84). That both Bakhtin and Berry employ the word “inseparable” to describe the relationship between time and space in literary texts underscores the ways in which these two dimensions of experience interconnect and inform one another. Bakhtin continues, “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (84). As my reading of *That Distant Land* will reveal, time in Berry’s fiction “takes on flesh.” Characters long since deceased, for example, become “visible;” looking out a window, characters can literally see past events unfold before their eyes in the present. Similarly, place in the story collection “becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.” The historical artifacts and natural landmarks that characters encounter in their physical world have the power to transport them to an earlier time, allowing them to experience past events in the present or to inhabit the stories that these places embody. The chronotope does not solely represent individual experience but, rather, speaks to the communal nature of living in place. We can extend this aspect of the chronotope to Berry’s fiction as well, as it illustrates the inseparability of not only time and space, but also emphasizes how both dimensions intersect with the communal history and lived experience of the Membership.
In “Notes Toward an Ecological Conception of Bakhtin’s ‘Chronotope,’” Timo Müller identifies intersections between Bakhtin’s chronotope and ecocriticism, positing the ecological chronotope as a useful lens for approaching literary texts. Müller suggests that both the chronotope and ecocriticism “direct our focus... onto the concrete, physical spaces in which the action is situated. They are concerned with the relation between the human and non-human dimensions of the fictive world, and with the implications this relation has for the socio-cultural function of the literary text” (98). Müller concludes “that chronotopic motifs in particular can be shown to reflect, negotiate, and emphasize the status of the environment in contemporary discourse” (98). Aligning with the aims of ecocriticism, which seeks to consider the role and representation of natural and built environments in texts from across the arts and humanities, Müller’s ecological chronotope situates Bakhtin’s theory in “concrete, physical spaces” so as to open and initiate dialogue about environmental concerns in a broader cultural context. Expanding Bakhtin’s more anthropocentric model, the ecological chronotope seeks instead to extend this conversation beyond the pages of the text and into human and nonhuman experience alike. My analysis of Berry’s fiction employs Müller’s notion of the ecological chronotope as a lens for understanding the environmental implications encountered at the intersection between time and place in That Distant Land. Viewed from this perspective, we see how imaginative literature offers readers a model for developing an ethical, and sustainable, relationship with place. Berry’s fiction not only contains the histories of the Membership, but also extends itself to benefit both the readership and the environments we inhabit by instructing us in how to foster such a symbiotic relationship within our own lived spaces.

Before reading the ecological chronotope in Berry’s fiction, I will briefly outline here the ways in which my analysis engages the concepts of “space,” “lived space,” and “place.” We can turn to Lawrence Buell for guidance in making the “distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’ as geographical concepts” (63). “These are not simple antonyms,” Buell notes; “Place entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort. But space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place is ‘space to which meaning has been ascribed’” (63). Reinforcing Buell’s definition in relation to imaginative
literature, David J. Bodenhamer notes that “Most of the narratives we construct focus not on space, an abstract geometrical concept, but rather on place, the particular expression of geographical space” (14). In both cases, it is human engagement with a space that transforms it from objective coordinates on a map into a place that holds particular meaning. Echoing Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, and adding a temporal distinction between the concepts of space and place, Bodenhamer contends that, “A place exists in past, present, and future time, whereas space exists only in the present” (14). He concludes, “Our sense of place depends upon the simultaneous connection of both time and space” (15). Such a definition underscores the “inseparable” nature of time (or, history) and space (a physical location) in the process of place making. We assign meaning to spaces when events of significance transpire in that location. The narration of those events becomes the history of that space which, ultimately, transforms it into a place.

We can think of place in literary texts as growing out of the lived spaces inhabited by its fictional characters: “that is to say, as experienced and valued by the narrator or (one of the) characters in an ideological, emotional, experiential relation to society and power, not as a number of coordinates on a geographical map” (Heirman and Klooster 5). Lived space is embodied; it is a physical, emotional, psychological experience for characters in imaginative literature. A sense of place comes as a result of the process of experiencing lived space. Port William and its environs represent lived space for the Membership; it is never simply a set of coordinates. It becomes a place because the Membership assigns meaning to the space contained within the geographic parameters of the story world. If dwelling is “to live mindfully and deeply in place, to be fully engaged to the sensory richness of our immediate environment,” (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster 5), then we can say that the Membership dwells in Port William. Readers, on the other hand, cannot experience the lived space of a text because they cannot embody it; however, they can come to understand a place through narrative, the story of that place. In Berry’s text, this process of dwelling, of place making, results in narration. As readers, we access Port William through the stories that are inscribed in the landscape and then narrated by the Membership. Readers need not physically visit a place in order to care about it; imaginative literary texts can transcend
the physical reality and help readers meaningfully engage in a place through the stories it tells.

Turning to the stories in *That Distant Land*, we see the inseparability of time and space—Bakhtin’s chronotope—in the lives of the Membership and can note the ways the chronotope intersects with questions of responsible environmental stewardship—Müller’s ecological chronotope. The residents of Port William are intimately connected to their environment, and the physical landscape shapes and defines their character in the present while simultaneously connecting them to the past and future. The Membership belongs to the land in much the same way that a deed records their ownership of it. Tol Proudfoot, for example, knows every inch of land in the county, as his pursuit of Nightlife Hample in “Watch with Me” demonstrates. In this story, Tol follows his mentally unstable neighbor, Nightlife—who totes a highly accurate shotgun—over hill and dale, for the span of a day and night, to ensure that Nightlife causes no harm to himself or others. As Tol moves through the countryside, he notes its features by name: the wooded hollow at Squire’s Branch; Uncle Othy’s tobacco patch; the mouth of Willow Run; the eastward side of Cotman Ridge. Without the aid of lantern or map, Tol remains oriented in his world. Dwelling in this place means to know its every contour and to be capable of navigating through it using only the map imprinted in the mind. The relationship between man and place is reciprocal, and Tol’s history is equally inscribed on the landscape. Fifty years after Tol followed Nightlife cross-country, Andy Catlett finds himself walking the same path along with older members of the community, “talking of whatever the places [they] came to reminded [them] of” (89). As chronotopes, these places serve as monuments to Port William’s past, bringing to mind human histories, which the passersby then narrate in the present.

The group of men represented here spans several generations, speaking to the role each plays in preserving that history for the future. They know this environment as well as Tol had, “knew it by day and by night, and knew something about every scrap of it” (90); such knowledge is the norm for the men of Port William. Andy notes that as they “passed the Goforth Hill road that went up alongside the Proudfoot Place, they began to tell stories
about Tol Proudfoot, quoting the things he had said that nobody who had known him ever forgot. And then when [they] started up along the Hample branch, they told about the time Nightlife threw his fit, and about Tol and the others following him through the woods" (90). As French historian Pierre Nora notes, “memory attaches itself to sites,” (qtd. in Schliephake 574), and this theory holds for Berry’s fiction. It is by moving through physical places that his characters gain access to stories of the past, which are jogged in the memory by landmarks that serve as monuments to another time. David J. Bodenhamer contends that, “All spaces contain embedded stories based on what has happened there. These stories are both individual and collective, and each of them link geography (space) and history (time)” (9). Though long since deceased, Tol’s individual history lives on in the places he inhabited; because Tol cultivated an ethical relationship with the land, farming his acreage using sustainable methods and keeping its health in mind, the land has not forgotten him. As characters move through this environment, the stories come to them, and they can quote Tol’s exact phrasing because the places hold his words. His individual history becomes part of the Membership’s communal story because they inhabit, and care for, the same places. As they encounter the site of Nightlife’s farm, the story of Tol’s vigil over him speaks through his friends a half century later and they, in turn, pass it on to Andy. Christopher Schliephake argues that, “By focusing on the spatial dimension of memory, it becomes possible to integrate the natural world into the overall conceptual framework of ‘memory cultures,’ since it is...not merely to be perceived as the background to cultural processes but rather to be seen as a central actor within them” (570). In passing down Tol’s and Nightlife’s narratives to the next generation, the Membership keeps those stories alive in the present, blurring the lines that demarcate time while simultaneously underscoring the communal, and cultural, value of the landscape. The inseparability of history and place thus instills in the Membership a sense of stewardship toward this land. It is not simply a backdrop: the landscape is a critical container of their heritage.

Nowhere in the collection is the symbiosis between man and place more fully realized than in Burley Coulter and his son, Danny Branch. The story, “Fidelity,” opens with a jarring image, as we find Burley comatose and connected to hospital machinery: “The old
man had not answered to his name, ‘Uncle Burley.’ He did not, in fact, appear to belong to his name at all… He was no longer in his right mind… because he was no longer in his right place” (372; 375). Burley’s family gathers around not him but, rather, “the image on the bed” (373). Far away from the land that he has roamed for nearly 80 years, Burley is not recognizable; he is an abstract “image.” There had been much debate as to whether it was appropriate to bring Burley here in the first place, as the city and hospital are so foreign to him. Now faced with the outcome of that decision, it is not simply the shock of seeing him comatose and connected to sterile apparatus that makes Burley unfamiliar, but, rather, that Burley is out of place. This image haunts his loved ones and compels Burley’s son, Danny, to liberate him from the hospital in order bring him home to die as himself.

“Fidelity” hinges on this core objective, to return Burley to his place so that he can return to himself. As Danny pulls his truck into the deep woods that Burley roamed his entire life, he recognizes his father once again, his face “unmistakably the face of the man who for eighty-two years had been Burley Coulter. Here, where it belonged, the face thus identified itself and assumed a power that kept Danny standing there” (386). Burley is no longer an “image” on a bed, and his face actively “identified itself” because it understood, even if Burley himself was comatose, that it was “where it belonged.” Danny is happy to return Burley to his rightful place, but this emotion is contained not within himself, but in the land: “Danny felt a happiness that he knew was not his at all, that it did not exist because he felt it but because it was here and he had returned to it” (390). By extension, we assume that his father experiences this same sense of joy at his return, simply by being in this place. Burley may not be conscious of it, but the emotion is there all the same. Danny chooses to dig Burley’s grave in a stand of old trees, knowing that ever since his early ancestors “had passed through this crease of the hill, these trees were here, and the stillness in which they stood and grew had been here forever” (391). The old growth forest is a fitting gravesite, as it connects Burley to his ancestors as well as to the time before them; in burying him beneath “a tall, straight chinquapin that was sound and not too old, a tree that would be standing a long time” (391), Burley’s remains will go on to nurture the tree and so join him in a fluid continuum between the past, present, and future. Waking from his coma for an
instant, Burley smiles at sight of the familiar, conveying to Danny that he knows where he is, and soon thereafter passes away. Seeing Burley at peace, Danny feels validated in his decision: “In the hospital, Burley’s body had seemed to Danny to be off in another world.... Here, the old body seemed to belong to this world absolutely, it was so accepting now of all that had come to it, even its death” (408). As Danny goes about the work of burying him, Burley “returned to his mind” and “it was as though Burley stood in full view nearby, at ease and well at home” (408). As with Tol Proudfoot, so too will Burley live on in the place that defined him, and the land will hold his story, which it will reveal to those who knew him.

There is a danger, perhaps, in being defined entirely by one’s place. When, in “Nearly to the Fair,” Tol ventures to the metropolis of Louisville to attend the state fair, he is utterly lost. His wife, Miss Minnie, asks her “well-traveled nephew” who has “urban experience” (175) to draw them a map to help them find the fairgrounds. Whereas the map of Port William and its environs is imprinted in Tol’s mind, he has no such relationship with the city. He tells Miss Minnie, “When you get me past the stockyards, I don’t know left from right, nor up from down” (174). The pace of the city disorients and confounds Tol. He loses all sense of direction and has a collision with another vehicle, finding himself “defeated beyond the power of man to conceive” (179.) Miss Minnie is equally lost, and worries to herself that, “if there was anything worse than being a person who did not know where she was, it was appearing to be a person who did not know where she was” (176). They give up their quest and beat a quick retreat home to the place they understand. Years later, after Tol’s death, Miss Minnie tells Andy Catlett that while they didn’t get to the Fair, they “did succeed in getting all the way home. And wasn’t Mr. Proudfoot happy to be here!” (180). Though in hindsight she sees humor in the situation, Tol and Minnie’s inability to function outside of their lived space suggests a darker consequence of being so thoroughly defined by it. These characters seem happy to remain in Port William, but they also seem not to have any alternative when even a day trip to the city ends in humiliation and defeat. While they can relate the sequence of events from afar and in the abstract, it seems unlikely that either Tol or Minnie could find their way back to distinct landmarks in the city, to which they could point and relate a connected story. As such, their stories similarly become tied
to one particular place and seem not to be transportable beyond this known realm. Aligning with Berry’s reputation for eschewing urban for rural settings, That Distant Land proposes that we cannot foster an ideal symbiotic relationship with the land in urban spaces; built environments disconnect us from the soil, rivers, forests and fields, thus separating us from the histories held within those places.

Throughout Berry’s fiction, knowing where you are is central to knowing who you are. While Tol, the model farmer and steward of the land, names each land feature he crosses in Port William, Nightlife Hample holds no such relationship with his home place. The Hamples had a long history of abusing their once fertile land; thus, they “die[d] out” (92), and theirs is a cautionary tale of the dangers of unsustainable land management. Despite having spent his life in the same place, Nightlife’s “mind, which contained the lighted countryside of Kay’s Branch and Cotman Ridge, had a leak in it somewhere...so that instead of walking in the country he knew and among his kinfolks and neighbors, he would be afoot in a limitless and undivided universe, completely dark, inhabited only by himself” (88). Unable to bridge this abyss, Nightlife remains isolated and misunderstood, existing on the fringe of the community. While they watch over and protect him, Nightlife ultimately never enjoys a conscious sense of belonging to this place and to the Membership. As Walter Cotman notes in “Watch with Me,” Nightlife “don’t know where he is,” to which Tol replies, “Don’t matter where he is...he’s just wandering around inside hisself, looking for the way out. In there where he is, it’s dark sure enough” (115). Nightlife’s aimless cross-country ramble reflects his inner wandering; he moves trance-like through the landscape, utterly unaware of his corporeal being in a physical space. While his mind may have a mental map of the countryside—something of a birthright to those of the Membership—he is not able to access it. He is trapped within himself, unable to connect with the land and, thus, with the people of Port William. In describing his mind as having “a leak in it somewhere,” Berry suggests that Nightlife is not solely responsible for his condition. He does not choose to be disengaged with his environment; his condition is, instead, a byproduct of his ancestors’ neglect of their land. While on the surface one might attribute Nightlife’s condition to an undiagnosed mental health issue, Berry’s text works to
emphasize that it is, instead, a psychological manifestation of generations of Hamples having abused the land through their use of unsustainable farming and forestry practices. The Hample family line has now come to an end. Their homestead still holds Nightlife’s history, though, and the Membership recounts his narrative for younger generations as a reminder of the consequences of not taking care of your place.

To underscore even further the importance of maintaining an ethical partnership with one’s environment, Berry’s text demonstrates the costs of not cultivating a healthy relationship with your place. Kyle Bode, the Louisville detective in “Fidelity” who hopes to arrest Danny for “kidnapping” Burley from the hospital, serves as Danny’s foil. Bode’s father left a farming community, aptly named “Nowhere,” to pursue a better life in the city as a farm equipment dealer. Bode seeks further distance from farming and looks to law enforcement as a means for proving himself a hero. Instead, he is prone to irrational fits of violence and lethargy, has a contentious relationship with his father and brother, is twice divorced and clearly unhappy. Detective Bode is never comfortable in his own skin. He feels hostile toward the land in Port William, seeing it as “god-forsaken hills and hollows,” and he “objected to hills and hollows. He objected to them especially if they were overgrown with trees” (397). Whereas just such a tree-covered hollow serves as Burley’s final resting place, Bode’s distaste for this particular setting speaks to his disengagement with the natural world. The Port William Membership equally confounds him. He feels a sense of duty to uphold the law; thus, he cannot comprehend the Membership’s loyalty to each other above the law. Danny’s lawyer, Henry Catlett, defends the resistance Burley’s friends and family express toward Bode’s investigation, explaining, “Some of us think people belong to each other and to God” (412). Unlike the people of Port William, Bode only half listens to the stories they share, and he regrets his one attempt to join in, realizing, “it was not his conversation he was in” (423). Realizing the Membership won’t betray one of its own, Bode “saw his defeat... [and] felt small and lost” (427). Bode illustrates the consequences of voluntarily severing one’s ties to place—one’s rural place, that is. When Bode’s father leaves the farm for the city, he puts into motion a family trajectory that will end in dissatisfaction and loneliness. The Membership stands unified in their opposition
to “the government and other large organizations” that Bode represents (411), and he leaves town without making an arrest. Berry seems skeptical that the city can offer a fulfilling existence. Bode has no strong sense of self and has no loyalties beyond that which he holds toward an abstract concept of the law. In juxtaposing him with Danny, Berry asks us to recognize what he sees as the dangers of viewing the rural landscape as “Nowhere.”

As the ecological chronotope maintains, intimately knowing one’s place intersects with knowing its history. Time in Port William exhibits a fluidity that connects the Membership to each other and to the land throughout the town’s history. Much like landmarks hold stories, the people inhabit their history through the narratives they share. In telling their stories, past and future converge in the present. In “Pray Without Ceasing,” Andy Catlett reflects back on the day that he asked his grandmother, Margaret, to share the complete history of Thad Coulter’s murder of Ben Feltner, Andy’s great-grandfather. Andy meditates on his family’s unique relationship to time and determines that “even the unknown past is present in us, its silence as persistent as a ringing in the ears” (40). This is an important sentiment for Andy to express at the beginning of a story that breaks down conventional notions of narration. For example, Margaret recounts Thad Coulter’s most intimate thoughts and actions, even though she did not witness those details firsthand. She draws from her own experience on that fateful day while also relying on the Membership’s shared history and the stories held within the farmland and woodlots in order to make it complete. The land holds these stories in and across time, as the main road through town illustrates for Andy:

When I stand in the road that passes through Port William, I am standing on the strata of my history that go down through the known past into the unknown: the blacktop rests on state gravel, which rests on county gravel, which rests on the creek rock and cinders laid down by the town when it was still mostly beyond the reach of the county; and under the creek rock and cinders is the dirt track of the town’s beginning, the buffalo trace that was the very way we came.... And
nothing is here that we are beyond the reach of merely because we do not know about it. (39)

The people of Port William laid down each layer of that road, and, with it, their history. This image encapsulates the concept of the ecological chronotope. The road, with its layers of human history, aptly captures the Membership’s intimate and interconnected relationship to place and time.9 The varied surfaces reflect the overlapping of stories, all of which are there in the land to be read throughout time.10 These narratives coexist in the present while simultaneously reaching back into the past and pointing toward the future yet to come, when another stratum will be added to the road. Dwelling in this place means inhabiting its history, which is a part of the Membership even if they “do not know about it” firsthand. In “Fidelity,” Andy’s brother Henry shares a similar sense of time with Detective Bode, claiming, “If we’re living in the future, then surely we’re living in the past, too, and the dead and the unborn are right here in our midst” (409). While Bode, an outsider, doesn’t grasp this concept, the nonchalance with which Henry states it as fact speaks to the local understanding that time in Port William is fluid, moving backwards and forwards through the present. The ecological chronotope, then, firmly situates the Membership within this place; they maintain a responsible stewardship of it, and connection to each other, because they can read their lives and stories deep down into the strata of the environment.

Characters slip between past and present verb tense when telling stories, which hints grammatically at the blurring of time and place in Port William. Andy Catlett troubles over the verb “was” after he begins the story, “Pray Without Ceasing,” with the statement, “Mat Feltner was my grandfather on my mother’s side. Saying it thus, I force myself to reckon again with the strangeness of that verb was” (40). At the same time, Andy understands that “the past is present also,” and he takes comfort in being able to recall in sharp focus, even 25 years after Mat’s death, the way his grandfather held a hammer or cocked his head when beginning a story. The presence of the past is something he has grown to appreciate only with age and experience, and it was an impossible concept when, a quarter century earlier, he didn’t know the full story of his great-grandfather’s murder.
Looking at a faded newspaper clipping announcing the event, Andy saw “how incomplete the story was as the article told it and as [he] knew it. And, seeing it so, [he] felt incomplete [himself]” (41). It’s a tragic story in the family’s, and the town’s, history; Ben Feltner was a well-loved and respected man, and his murder shook them all. His son, Mat (Andy’s grandfather), we learn, “dealt with Ben’s murder by not talking about it and thus keeping it in the past” (75). The story could not transcend time because it had not been shared. In going through the process of recreating the story with his grandmother, Andy becomes part of it while also liberating the story from the past, allowing it to move fluidly through him. In this, Andy now feels complete, and, in turn, past and future converge in him; he can more fully imagine his future in knowing what came before it. Andy explains that Mat no longer was his grandfather. In the completed story, Mat “is the man who will be my grandfather—the man who will be the man who was my grandfather. The tenses slur and slide under the pressure of collapsed time. For that moment on the porch is not a now that was but a now that is and will be, inhabiting all the history of Port William that followed and will follow” (75).

The narrative voices employed in many of Berry’s stories also serve to illustrate the fluidity of time in Port William. For example, in “Pray Without Ceasing,” while Andy Catlett turns to his grandmother, Margaret Feltner, to learn the full story of his great-grandfather’s murder, the syntax and punctuation suggest that she is not the only teller. Andy initially hands Margaret the newspaper clipping that documented the murder, and she “read a little of the article but not all, and folded it back up” (43). Instead, she “looked out the window, though obviously not seeing what was out there that morning. Another morning had come to her, and she was seeing it again through the interval of fifty-three years” (43). For Margaret, the clipping doesn’t contain the story, and her quick dismissal of it in favor of looking to the environment that holds the story speaks to the Membership’s reliance on their place to contain their history more faithfully than a paper document. As she begins the narrative, Margaret looked “through the window into that July morning in 1912,” and Andy notes that, “She spoke as if she were seeing it all happen, even the parts of it that she had in fact not seen” (43). Looking out onto the porch where a climactic event unfolded, as
well as glimping the farmland beyond it, Margaret can access the story that took place there. Initially, quotation marks punctuate Margaret’s story, clearly indicating it is she who speaks. Soon, though, the text omits quotation marks, save for the moments of dialogue spoken by characters in the story-within-the-story. There are brief moments when Margaret’s words interrupt the narrative. For example, the narration shifts from the statement “They turned to see Thad and the white mule almost abreast of them. Thad was holding the pistol,” to a direct quote from Margaret, who notes, “‘They said he looked just awful,’ my grandmother said. ‘He looked like death warmed over,’” only to slip back into an unattributed narration of the next sequence of events. Later, Margaret’s voice is indicated with quotation marks as she explains her emotions on that fateful day, and in the next paragraph, Andy picks up the story and relates what his grandmother said. In still another instance, the narrative shifts from Andy referring to “my grandmother” to a third-person narrator calling her by her name, Margaret, in the following paragraph (70). Such moments populate the entire story, which suggests that this is not one narrative voice but, rather, a collective voice telling a shared history. The narrative voice simultaneously belongs to Margaret, to Andy, to the Membership and to the physical landscape; it is one unified, communal voice that tells this story. Such slips between quotations, first-person, and omniscient narration emphasize that this history, this past, and this future, belong to them all—human and nonhuman nature alike.

Nowhere in the collection is the ecological chronotope and Berry’s vision of the interconnection between place, time, and story more fully realized than in “The Boundary.” The tale follows Mat Feltner, nearing the end of his life, as he takes one final walk through his woods on the pretext of checking the fence line. When he reaches a stream with a rock wall that was built “long before Mat was born,” he pauses to reflect on the memory it holds (292). Mat first recalls a day 75 years earlier when he joined his father and a small fencing crew, “coming down through the woods, as Mat himself has just come” (292). One member of the party, Jack, makes an impressive vault over the creek, and the young Mat had pleaded, “Do it again!” (292). Jack “did it again—does it again in Mat’s memory, so clearly that Mat’s presence there, so long after, fades away, and he hears their old laughter” (292).
As in “Pray Without Ceasing,” Berry italicizes key verbs to emphasize how the verb tenses “slur and slide.” Here, Mat in the present “fades away” and he is now his young self. It’s no longer a memory but lived experience. He then recalls the day 40 years later when, “coming down the same way to build that same fence” with his son, Virgil, “Mat remembered what Jack had done and told Virgil” (293). Berry’s repetition of the phrasing “the same” points to how the continuity of the creek, wall, fence, and path preserves the human history that unfolded there. Mat lost both his father and son tragically and early, so this place provides him a means for connecting with them in the present. While he reluctantly admits, “they are gone,” he takes comfort in the fact that “still the stream pours into the pool and the circles slide across its face” (293). This place was here before Mat’s time and will continue after his death, and his encounter with it allows Mat to relive his past in the present. Moving further down the fence line, Mat approaches a second rock wall and pool that “he built himself, he and Virgil,” over 30 years earlier (294). They had brought with them a jug of water, for which Virgil created a nook between a stone and tree. Years later, after Virgil’s death, Mat returned to this spot and found “the rock still leaning against the tree, which had grown over it, top and bottom, fastening the rock to itself by a kind of natural mortise” (295). The jug was still there in its nook, now incorporated into the physical landscape. This image embodies the symbiotic relationship that Mat has established with this place: the natural world embraces the human artifact—and, by extension, the human history—and makes it part of itself.

Initially, the story directly indicates that Mat reflects on the past through the use of words like “remembered” and “memory,” but the narrative soon shifts into a seamless transition between present and past. Exhausted from overexertion, Mat “is tired” as he makes his way home (297). In the next paragraph, instead of suggesting that Mat remembered looking with his father in this particular spot for a lost cow, the narration simply states that “he and his father have come down the branch, looking for a heifer due to calve,” and “Mat is tired” (297). The place and sense of fatigue connect Mat’s past and present, but this is no longer presented as memory. He calls out to his father, “Wait, Papa!” to which Ben replies, “It’s all right. It ain’t that far” (297-8). The next paragraph picks up
decades later but treats the scene as if it happens in the same moment. Here, Mat has taken young Virgil out to fix the fence in the same place, and his tired son calls out, “Wait, Daddy!” (298). Comforting him, Mat assures Virgil, “It’s all right. It’s all right” (298). The final paragraph in this sequence returns Mat to the present. Here, only the narrator is left to tell us that Mat “is all right” (298), even if he is tired and must rest on a fallen tree. Worn out, Mat struggles to continue his uphill trek home and faints as he stands up to resume his walk. While no one is with him in his present world, the dead come to Mat’s aid: “‘That won’t do,’ he says to Virgil. ‘We got to do better than that, boy.’ And then he sees his father too standing with Virgil on the other side of the stream. They recognize him, even though he is so much older now than when they knew him” (300). Soon, other lost friends and family members who had once traversed these woods with Mat appear and walk with him now, and he finds strength in their company. The narrator first suggests that Mat “seems to be walking in and out of his mind,” but then immediately corrects this thought, saying, “or, it is time, perhaps, that he is walking in and out of” (301). As with Bakhtin’s chronotope, here, time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible;” time is something that Mat can move “in and out of.” When he falls and regains consciousness, Mat is disoriented until he pushes “his vision and his thoughts out away from him into the place around him,” and then “the place and his memory of it begin to speak to one another” (301). In this moment when time and place “begin to speak to one another,” Mat is able to regain his bearings and continue onward. Viewed through the lens of the ecological chronotope, this moment illustrates the return on Mat’s personal investment in his land: in his hour of need, the land speaks to Mat and guides him homeward.

When Mat reaches a juncture that involves two difficult paths from which to choose, his mind “goes back in time to the house the way it was when he and Margaret were still young” (301). Similar to earlier moments in the story, Mat inhabits that past, and a scene unfolds between himself and his young wife. At a metaphysical junction, made manifest in the fork in the forest path, Mat finds himself in need of motivation to continue on, instead of succumbing to fatigue and the temptation to stay in the woods with the dead. He moves between a scene from his home life in the past, and a scene of Margaret in the present
beginning to worry about him being out so long. Thinking of “the smile of assent that she
gave him once,” Mat understands that “everything that has happened to him since has
come from that—and leads to that, for it is not a moment that has ever stopped happening;
he has gone toward it and aspired to it all his life, a time that he has not surpassed” (305).
Encountering his deceased loved ones in the woods brings Mat comfort, but, ultimately, he
realizes that he can no longer linger with them among the trees. His wife needs him now,
as she always has and always will. Now, when he says, “It’s going to be all right,” he directs
this to his wife, and he resolves to make it home to her (305), the ever present, living
memory of her assenting smile now guiding his footsteps homeward. His connection with
these wooded acres solidly reaffirmed, Mat can now turn his attention to reinforcing a
similarly important human relationship with the woman who cultivated this place, and this
history, with him.

While Mat does manage to get himself home, it depletes him, and he collapses from
exhaustion. Later that night, “when Margaret finds him wandering in the darkened house,
he does not know where he is” (307). It is a chilling ending to a narrative that seemed
initially to illustrate the sustaining power of place and home. Tonally, it hints that the
symbiotic relationship between the Membership and Port William is vanishing as the
landscape changes and the people leave for “a better place” (44), a trend Berry gestures
toward in other stories. In the conclusion of “Pray Without Ceasing,” Andy reflects back on
the day some 26 years earlier when Margaret shared with him the full story of his great-
grandfather’s murder, but it’s unclear with whom he now shares his narrative. While we
might speculate that he passes on this history to his own son, the text gives no such
indication. One is left to wonder how closely the past will communicate with the future in
Port William if no one is there to inhabit its stories in the present. This concern surfaces
more consistently in the later stories. In the titular story, Art Rowanberry notes that the
tobacco harvest would be executed more expediently if only they had the help of “a bunch
of eighteen-year-old boys wanting to show how fast they are” (314). Andy Catlett, painfully
aware of the changing demographic of Port William, provisionally agrees: “He was right,
but we did not have them. We were not living in a time that was going to furnish many
such boys for such work” (314). In “Fidelity,” Burley’s imminent death leads Hannah Coulter to meditate on the broader exodus from Port William. The elders are dying, the children are going off to colleges and city centers, and many adults live “on little city lots carved out of farms, from which they commute to city jobs” (402). In carving up those farms into symmetrical, anonymous lots, their stories are at risk of being lost. The schools of Port William have closed and consolidated at the county level, and the buildings along Main Street are dilapidated. As the Membership gathers in Wheeler Catlett’s office to eulogize Burley Coulter, the absence of any children or young adults suggests that they also eulogize the town itself. The narration here differs from other stories in that there is no clear connection between the narrative voice and a character. It is told by a disembodied, all-knowing voice, in the present tense. While in other stories, it’s typically clear that the narrator is one or more voices of the Membership, here the narrative voice is sympathetic to, but unconnected with, the community. In “Watch with Me,” when Andy returns to the site of Tol’s pursuit of Nightlife, we learn that, “by then, the Hample Place, the Tol Proudfoot Place, the Cotman Place, and others had all been dissolved into one large property that belonged to a Louisville doctor, who had bought it for a weekend retreat and then lost interest in it. Now, except for the best of the ridges, which were rented and farmed badly, the land was neither farmed nor lived on. Every building on it was ruini

In the final story of the collection, “The Inheritors,” as Danny and Wheeler drive home from the city, “they could see a farm that was becoming a housing development. The old farmhouse and a barn were still standing in the midst of several large new expensive houses without trees” (438). The image aptly captures the predicament of the Membership;
the farmhouse and barn may be “still standing,” but surely not for long. Danny and Wheeler may “inherit” each other in friendship, but they are now aged men, and there is no younger generation left to inherit the way of life practiced in Port William since its founding. Like his father, Burley, Danny is a man completely of his time and place, which we learn “suited him well” (379): “He loved his half-wooded native country of ridge and hillside and hollow and creek and river bottom. And he loved the horse-and mule-powered independent farming of that place and time” (380.) It’s the late twentieth century, and Danny still farms with mules instead of a tractor, holding out against the press of the modern world. His own children, though, are conspicuously absent from these tales, suggesting it is unlikely that Danny can expect a burial similar to that which he gave his father, Burley, in “Fidelity.” Burley built a connection to the hollows and ridges surrounding Port William, much as Danny has fostered a healthy relationship with his farmland through the use of sustainable agricultural practices. Danny returns Burley to his place because he understands the nature of this bond. The land holds both of their stories, and the Membership collectively recognizes this place’s significance in defining them, both as individuals and as part of a community that inhabits a shared lived space. This is a two-way relationship, though, and those narratives need interpreters. As the Membership’s eulogy of Burley at the end of “Fidelity” demonstrates, the land whispers Burley’s storied past into their ears. Despite Danny’s adherence to his father’s model, though, his children appear not to have developed a personal relationship with rural Port William County. As such, there will, presumably, be no one there to interpret the stories inscribed in Danny’s fields; Danny’s farm—and his story—will exist only as a relic space confined solely within this narrative in Berry’s imaginative literary text. The broader history of Port William and its people faces the threat of extinction, as human connection to place is a necessary component of the ecological chronotope’s equation—an equation which has heretofore allowed Port William’s and the Membership’s narratives to transcend time.

Much of Berry’s work, both fiction and nonfiction, reflects on the impact of a modern, industrialized world on agrarian communities and the land they cultivate, and he explores the consequences of humans becoming unmoored from our sense of place. In a
1992 interview, Marilyn Berlin Snell asks Berry, “As advanced industrial society becomes more removed from the foundations of culture, does the need for intermediaries, translators, increase.... Do writers and artists become more important as we become more alienated?” (52). Berry responds, “In a truly grounded, locally adapted culture, the artists would be the rememberers” (53). This seems to be the only consolation for Port William. As the farms and people vanish, it will be left to Berry’s imaginative literary text to tell their stories and preserve the knowledge that has been passed down through the land and its inhabitants for generations. Books and other works of art become the artifacts that remember. The loss is not necessarily absolute, though; in sharing these stories with his readership, Berry’s work can help to move new generations to cultivate their own ethical relationship to place.

While some critics deride Berry’s work as a swan song for rural America that nostalgically pines for the United States’ agrarian past, reading it through the ecological chronotope demonstrates the potential Berry’s writing has for influencing human behavior in the present as a means for imagining a livable future. Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster open their study, Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place, by declaring, “that the environmental crisis depends on finding better ways to imagine nature and humanity’s relation to it” (11). While the social and physical sciences confront this critical moment from an empirical, data-driven perspective, the arts and humanities approach it from a conceptual perspective in an effort to translate that research into accessible, and impactful, stories for a lay audience. Lynch et. al. contend, “that literature and other creative arts not only reflect but also influence the ways a culture imagines itself and its place in the natural world,” (11, emphasis mine), positing that, “imagination is one key to developing new and better ideas about how to live in our specific places, including a sense of how our individual bioregions are embedded in a larger global biosphere. Literature and other arts function as vital expressions of cultural values that can ignite emotion, change minds, and inspire action” (12). Imaginative literature operates beyond serving up passive escapism from our daily lives; it has the power to influence the ways we view and engage with our world. Berry’s fiction offers what he sees as “better ways to
imagine nature and humanity’s relation to it,” as reading his work through the lens of the ecological chronotope reveals. That Distant Land proposes that if readers model their attitude toward their own lived spaces after the example of the Membership, they, too, could benefit from such ethical land stewardship. If humans can learn to see the health of the planet as inextricably linked with our own physical and emotional well being, if we can grasp that our histories and our futures depend upon sustainable engagement with our environment, then perhaps there is still a chance to change the course of the environmental crisis that is rocketing toward unimaginable disaster. The facts of this critical moment can be overwhelming, arresting humans in a state of crippling inaction. Perhaps encountering an illustration of the personal and communal benefits of fostering a symbiotic relationship with the places we inhabit could serve as an antidote to such inertia, inspiring instead a sense of personal stakes in the outcome. Careful consideration of the ecological chronotope in Berry’s—and other—literary texts, then, can open up new avenues for exploring a more sustainable land ethic, which could help us carry our narratives into a more hospitable future for both humans and nonhuman nature.

1 In “Dante and Wendell Berry’s Modern Book of Memory,” Dominic Manganiello draws a similar correlation between land stewardship and memory in Berry’s work, claiming that, “Berry foregrounds the act of ‘re-collection’ in his ecological aesthetics. To preserve a valued way of life by retelling the lore that sustains it (culture) corresponds to the work of cultivating the land by maintaining a deep and healthy topsoil (agriculture)” (15). Manganiello’s article outlines Berry’s debt to Dante for this particular aspect of his “ecological aesthetics.” Jeffrey Bilbro also examines the intersections of memory and ecology in “The Ecology of Memory,” but Bilbro approaches it through the lens of Christianity, claiming that, “Berry’s fiction portrays memory as an ecological virtue that the Christian tradition can teach us” (328).

2 Michael Welsh makes a similar observation in his article, “From the Interpersonal to the Environmental.” He notes that the characters that make up the Membership in Berry’s fiction, “have different backgrounds and life stories. Any shared religion is little mentioned, and their living (or not) in immediate proximity is only incidental. What ties this collection of characters together into a community[...] is the relation each feels to the land or place: an anticipating, mutual, and fecund relation” (53).

3 This echoes Berry’s concept of “community speech,” which he outlines in his essay “Standing by Words.” Of “community speech,” Berry suggests that, “its words have the power of pointing to things visible either to eyesight or to memory” (33). He continues, “this community speech, unconsciously taught and learned, in which words live in the presence of their objects, is the very root and foundation of language” (33). As I argue below, Berry’s fiction shows this perspective in practice when the words of characters come to others as they pass through landscapes connected with those words.

4 As Keith Basso notes in his study of the connections between narrative and place in Western Apache culture, “chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members’ images of themselves” (45). Literary scholars have applied Basso’s findings to the function of chronotopes in other literary texts, and it seems fitting for Berry’s work as well. The Membership looks to natural “monuments” across Port William and its environs to read its history, which, in turn, shapes their “images of themselves.”
Müller returns to his conception of the ecological chronotope in a later work, “The Ecology of Literary Chronotopes” (2016). Here, Müller identifies several shortcomings with Bakhtin’s chronotope and offers a new approach that is informed by ecocriticism and cultural ecology.

6 Nancy Easterlin echoes this sentiment in her article, “Ecocriticism, Place Studies, and Colm Tóibín’s ‘A Long Winter’: A Biocultural Perspective,” observing that “Place is a continuous and dynamic redefinition of space” (239). Over time, people engage with that place in different ways; as such, its ascribed meaning is in constant flux, whereas the geographical coordinates of the space remain constant at all times.

7 This echoes Christopher Schliephake’s claim that “Space and meaning are linked in a cognitive map” (573).

8 Schliephake’s approach echoes Müller’s in that he draws from two fields, ecocriticism and cultural memory studies, as a means for understanding “how individuals orient themselves in time” (572). Turning to the field of Bioregionalism in particular, Schliephake examines “the spatial dimension of memory and the way in which the non-human world can be seen as an active agent in our memory cultures” (573). Schliephake’s approach is a useful touchstone for my analysis here, as he, too, extends the concept of the chronotope to consider the nonhuman world.

9 Notably, indigenous peoples are conspicuously absent from the Membership’s conception of the land and its human history. Their presence is only loosely inferred here by the “buffalo trace” that the settlers of Port William used as they moved westward.

10 Müller reads the image of the road in literary texts “as a means for obliterating space and time” (100), which speaks to the road’s significance as an ecological chronotope and reinforces my reading of Berry’s road here.

11 Drawing on the philosophy of Catholic writer Henri Nouwen, John Leax suggests that memory in Berry’s fiction “has much to do with the future. Without memory there is no expectation…. Memory anchors us in the past and then makes us present here and now, and opens us to a new future” (66). We can apply Leax’s claim to Andy in “Pray Without Ceasing;” in knowing the Membership’s complete memory of Ben’s murder, Andy himself becomes complete.

12 Jeffrey Bilbro reads the narration here as primarily a third-person account of events and suggests that in the moments when Andy narrates in first-person, “he largely removes both [Margaret] and himself and allows the characters to speak for themselves. The memory of this event has ceased to belong to any one individual and instead belongs to the community” (332). Bilbro goes on to suggest insightfully that the third-person narrative voice belongs to Andy but is shaped by the voices of the Membership: “It is as if by listening to his grandmother tell the story, a story she herself learned not only from her role in it but also in conversation with Ben’s wife and other participants, Andy has internalized the story. He now shares this story with us from the narrative perspective of the community, a perspective that sees the whole having understood and sympathized with the various individual perspectives” (335).

13 Fritz Oehlschlaeger points to the central role of collective memory and storytelling in Berry’s short stories. He claims, “a community lives by its members keeping faith with one another, and that keeping faith requires a complex responsiveness to what is going on in one’s own and others’ histories. The only way to know those histories is by remembering them and telling them” (188). In this sense, the collective memory is a collective history, and it’s Andy’s responsibility as a participant in the Membership to know this history and to pass it on.

14 Oehlschlaeger notes that, “many readers might call Mat’s experience dementia, but Berry prefers simply to suggest that Mat is now with friends who are part of his realest, deepest experiences, those to be carried to his end and beyond” (139). I agree with Oehlschlaeger and argue here that Berry’s fiction asks readers to recognize how a kinship with one’s place makes possible such tangible encounters with the dead. D. Brent Laytham reads the role of the dead in Berry’s fiction through the lens of the Christian belief in the communion of the saints, claiming, “both the membership of Port William and the membership of Christ’s church are, and know that they are, a community that extends through time in spite of death,” and that a strong relationship with place is central to maintaining a connection with the dead (173-4).

15 Nancy Easterlin echoes this sentiment: “Literature has a special role to play in reviving awareness of those things to which we have become habituated, for in life people are only vaguely aware of their relationship to the physical environment.” (228).

16 Lynch et. al. make the same claim for imaginative texts in general, stating that, “Works of literature and art can also provide models for how to rehabit a bioregion or otherwise transform our relationships to places” (13).

Works Cited


