On September 19, 1870, a small group of tired, hungry men held a legendary conversation around a campfire at Madison Junction, the confluence of the Firehole and Gibbon rivers in what is now Yellowstone National Park. The Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, consisting of nine amateur explorers, three packers, two African American cooks, and five soldier-escorts, had set out on horseback from Helena, Montana, on August 17 “to investigate tales of scenic wonders in the area” (Sellars 8). Along the way they created maps and designated names for some of the most famous hot sulphur springs, boiling mud cauldrons, and explosive geysers in the Yellowstone region.

Since winter comes early to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, their trip was not always comfortable. They were pelted with rain, hail, and snow on September 13, and they awoke the next day to two feet of wet, heavy snow. A torrential rainstorm greeted them on the 18th. Only one man—Nathaniel Langford, whose published diary of the expedition is widely known among park historians and naturalists—had a pair of waterproof boots. Some were sick from drinking the sulphuric water. They traveled in fear of being attacked by Indians, and a dearth of competent marksmen in the expedition required them to rely on “vigilance” to survive (Langford 7). One member of the party was lost for thirty-seven days (he was later found by a team of “experienced” mountaineer-trappers), and others harbored “dread apprehensions” of getting “inextricably involved in the wooden labyrinth” that engulfed them (Langford 100–101, 22). While they were certainly awestruck by the area's unique
features and sublime beauty—Langford even quotes Keats and Byron in his diary—by September 19 most of the party’s members were also dirty, exhausted, homesick, thin from subsisting on dwindling provisions (mostly dried lake trout in those final days), and guilty about their still-missing companion.

This might not sound like a glamorous scene to contemporary ears—and it probably wasn’t, perhaps least so for the two African American cooks, who remain voiceless in the historical record—but the campfire story has nevertheless become a familiar part of national park folklore, the best-known account of the idea for Yellowstone and all other national parks. When Richard West Sellars recounts the tale in his influential history of the National Park Service (NPS), *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, he explains how most versions of the story omit or downplay the hardships that my description accentuates. More popular renditions go something like this:

As they relaxed and mused around their wilderness campfire, the explorers recalled the spectacular sights they had seen. Then, after considering the possible uses of the area and the profits they might make from tourism, they rejected the idea of private exploitation. Instead, in a moment of high altruism, the explorers agreed that Yellowstone’s awe-inspiring geysers, waterfalls, and canyons should be preserved as a public park. This proposal was soon relayed to high political circles, and within a year and a half Congress established Yellowstone Park. (Sellars 8)

In this version of the tale, our explorer-protagonists seem quite comfortable, able to “relax” and “muse” around a campfire while recalling the “spectacular” nature they’d seen—much as today’s park tourists might do at a manicured campground. They were visionary heroes, far-sighted altruists whose love of this place was intense enough to inspire the American public and compel government bureaucrats to preserve this and other national treasures. Sellars goes on to provide a more nuanced historical account that complicates the campfire story and informs my analysis here; however, the mythical version is the one most people know. Even Wallace Stegner feeds into this version in “A Capsule History of Conservation,” where he describes Yellowstone as the result of the “spontaneous overflow of public enthusiasm” initiated by these “Montana tourists,” who were “struck by the wonders” of the area (126).

This romantic origin myth is a gem. It offers a succinct, vivid story that is easily remembered and passed on; it creates compelling, heroic characters in an inspirational setting; and it casts the NPS in favorable terms that are music to the ears of a public eager to consume the resources the agency manages. As Sellars puts it, this creation story gives the NPS a “virgin birth,” free of any complicating socioeconomic and political factors (8). But as Michel Foucault and Edward Said warn, origin stories like this one can be deceiving for a variety of reasons. Typically, they assume narrative coherence (or an “essence”), continuity (a linear progression of events, instigated by the one in question), and an almost “divine” passivity; the event develops an aura of sacredness that can be put to various uses. Sacred origins leave out the complexity of factors and the dynamics of power that characterize historical events. As one of nostalgia’s most common narrative incarnations, origin stories simplify and restore an idealized past toward which audiences can turn.

**Figure 1.** 1957 reenactment of the campfire conversation held by members of the Washburn-Langford-Doane Party’s Expedition of 1870 at the junction of the Firehole and Gibbon rivers (Madison Junction), the legendary origin of the National Park Idea. (Courtesy of the Department of Interior, National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center; photographer, John A. Tyers)
for explanation and reassurance. The campfire chat implies a coherent, unifying vision shared by the parks’ founding fathers—the vision of preservation rather than development. Nature seems to accept its role as the spectacle that condones the men’s plan. One can almost see Old Faithful spouting its patriotic affirmation.

Like most nostalgic tapestries, though, this one’s threads start to unravel upon careful scrutiny. In fact, the story perpetuates some troubling figurations: the inherent separation of humans from the natural world; the construction of nature as an aesthetic spectacle; and the exclusion of non-white people from the nation’s “public playgrounds.” In regard to this last point, it is notable that, despite the fact that the Crow, Shoshone, Sheep Eater, and Bannock Indians all relied on Yellowstone’s resources, there are no Indians in the mythical version of the story. As Langford’s diary indicates, the expedition did encounter plenty of evidence of Indian life: Crow hunters inside what are now the park’s boundaries; abandoned Indian camps; used Indian trails; a teepee; a game run; and piles of lodgepole pines stacked for later use. In accordance with nationally circulating ideologies about Indians as perpetually “disappearing,” the explorers “dismissed these signs as ancient remnants of vanished Indians” (Spence 42). Along with such denials of Indian use, new myths emerged to justify Indian expulsion. For instance, these early explorers believed regional tribes feared Yellowstone’s geysers—presumably (and nonsensically) as manifestations of a Christian hell—and so steered clear of the area now preserved.

Another tenacious thread of this nostalgic origin story is the idea that the parks’ founding fathers “rejected the idea of private exploitation.” Their expedition was partially funded by the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, a corporation that subsidized artist Thomas Moran and lobbied successfully for the formation of the parks. Unlike the fabled explorers in the campfire myth, the railroad could hardly claim “high altruism”; its primary motive was the development of a monopolistic trade corridor across southern Montana Territory (Sellars 10). From the perspective of the railroad, government-managed nature would prevent private land claims, haphazard development, and competing commercial uses. As Robert Sterling Yard’s various editions of The National Parks Portfolio illustrate, the railroad industry and parks both wanted to promote tourism (and sustain their own organizations) by advertising the parks’ accessibility and their link to a national heritage rooted in the natural world. Funded in part by the United States Railroad Administration, Yard’s park literature often cross-referenced railroad propaganda, using some of the same photos and verbatim written blurbs to describe the parks. Far from being untouched by financial interests, park management was shaped by corporate influence long before the NPS was formed.

We can see, then, what Foucault means when he suggests that “what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the indivisible identity of their origin; it is the disruption of other things. It is disparity” (“Nietzsche” 142). For the National Park Service, “disparity” is written into its very mission in the form of what is sometimes called its “dual mandate,” as defined by its founding legislation, the Organic Act. The act instructs the NPS “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (qtd. in Sellars 38). Sellars argues that the contradictory language of the act reveals what park policy has historically shown: there was never any explicit intention toward preservation. The institution’s main concerns were protecting scenery, encouraging tourism, and efficiently managing the parks—concerns better addressed by landscape architects than by biologists and other scientists (39). Yet the influence of tradition within the NPS, exemplified by the circulation of origin stories like the Madison Junction campfire conversation, tends to safeguard the agency’s decisions from criticism. Can all these people wearing the “Smokey the Bear Hat”—people who clearly love their jobs and the environments they work to protect—possibly fail to put nature first? In this context, nostalgia may comfort tourists and park officials alike, but it obscures the sticky politics involved in managing nature.

* * *

Nostalgia’s faults have been well rehearsed. As David Lowenthal succinctly explains, nostalgia stands accused of being “ersatz, vulgar, demeaning, misguided, inauthentic, sacrilegious, retrograde, reactionary, criminal, fraudulent, sinister, and morbid” (27). In some cases, it is guilty as charged. Nostalgia’s scapegoat status stems from a range of admittedly problematic traits: its easy cooption by capitalism, which critics like Fredric Jameson say generates a postmodern cultural paralysis in which old styles are recycled and marketed without critical effect (or effect); its ubiquity in the media and the arts, which signifies a lack of creativity, alienation from the present, and complicity in consumer
culture; its tendency to romanticize the past through imagining an origin that is too simplistic; and its reactionary bent—the use of nostalgia by right-wing forces to gloss over past wrongs and glorify tradition as justification for the present.

Because of these associations, the term nostalgic is often used interchangeably with words like conservative, regressive, ahistorical, or uncritical to disparage or dismiss writers, politicians, scholarship, and cultural texts. Scholars have attended to nostalgia’s social dimensions most frequently through exposing its ideological ramifications. Susan Stewart, who is often cited for her characterization of nostalgia as a “social disease,” explains that nostalgia “is always ideological; the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack.” Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality” (23).

Stewart’s point is well taken. But the past has a material, geographical reality as well as an ideological, narrative one. Considering how nostalgic longing takes nature as an object complicates the notion that the past is “only” ideologically real. There are material components that must be accounted for, even if those components have been radically altered over time. In order to grasp the ideological dimensions of nostalgia, we must attend to its environmental dimensions as well.

Although critics, doctors, writers, and social scientists have largely considered nostalgia as a temporal longing, as Stewart does when she theorizes its “future-past,” nostalgia’s spatiality has been latent from its first diagnosis. In fact, nostalgia was originally conceived of as a bodily, and so a material, condition. It was also linked to particular geographies. First diagnosed in 1678 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, nostalgia was considered “an affliction of the imagination” (Ritvo 16) caused by “the desire for return to one’s native land” (Hofer, qtd. in Boym 9). In 1720 another Swiss doctor named Theodore Zwinger identified nostalgia’s symptoms in soldiers, prisoners, exiles, or “anyone for whom homecoming was not an available option” (Ritvo 20). Furthermore, the nostalgic was someone for whom “longing for their native land became their single-minded obsession” (Boym 16, my emphasis). Despite the obvious importance of physical environment to these early diagnoses, nostalgia’s temporal dimensions were paramount. Patients were conceived of, primarily, as “cut off from their past” rather than separated from a familiar environment (Ritvo 20). Of course, physicians could not locate the disease in the body or come up with a unified taxonomy of causes. Accordingly, nostalgia was de-medicalized around the turn of the twentieth century, at which point it lost its bodily connotations and became even more linked with time, rather than space.¹

I suspect it is “free-floating nostalgia” that most distresses scholars, since an abstract, romanticized relationship to the past is unlikely to yield critical thinking about the present or progressive thinking about the future (Wall 110). But what if we stopped privileging temporality and began to map nostalgia, to follow its winding courses and plot its particular trajectories? I believe re-placing nostalgia¹ in this way renders the object of longing more tangible and opens up new possibilities for how nostalgia might function. My project reclaims nostalgia by foregrounding its nature—that is, by re-centering the environmental dimensions that were key to its first diagnosis—and by carving out a new discursive “place” for nostalgia within scholarly discourse.

Specifically, I seek to participate in and extend conversations about nostalgia “as a more ambivalent, more engaged, critical frame” by highlighting its spatial characteristics and exploring its nuances (Scanlan 4). As both an emotion and an ideological narrative—a narrative Linda Hutcheon deems capable of the “twin evocation of both affect and agency”—nostalgia exceeds its typecast roles (“Irony” 199). It is high time to breathe new life into nostalgia, to revitalize and rearticulate its diverse possibilities, and to put it to work in the service of more progressive politics. In the chapters that follow, I hope to show how examining nostalgia’s spatial dimensions becomes especially important when questions of environmental and social justice are at stake.

Literature emerges as an indispensable ally in this effort. While much contemporary theory subscribes to the standard criticisms of nostalgia, a surprising amount of American fiction envisions nostalgia as a disruptive, productive, even progressive force. Perhaps because it is typically less confined by expectations of coherence or didacticism than traditional scholarship, literature contributes its own “theories” of nostalgia, many of which are unique and transformative. Literary texts implicitly define nostalgia as both a narrative device—a way for authors to manipulate language, drive plot, develop characters, and influence readers—and an emotion, which is felt by readers and characters (and sometimes, the authors themselves), shared by groups, perpetuated by institutions, and instilled by both texts and lived experience. Accordingly, my project treats nostalgia as a longing to return home that can be
felt, wielded, manipulated, and retold in a variety of ways. My formulation of counter-nostalgia, which I define below, suggests nostalgia should not be dismissed as inherently conservative or reactionary. Rather, in some contexts, it can be a mechanism for social change, a model for ethical relationships, and a motivating force for social and environmental justice.

Nostalgia that takes nature as its object of longing has been prevalent throughout U.S. history. But despite the frequency with which nostalgic discourse governs conversations about nature, there is very little scholarly work that links nostalgia and nature. William Cronon and Raymond Williams are salient exceptions. Cronon, in particular, has been instrumental in exposing how mainstream environmentalism has been nostalgic in troublesome ways. In his seminal essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” Cronon points to Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* as a notable example of this prevalent environmentalist nostalgia. (I revisit Cronon’s critique in chapter 5.) Williams’s *The Country and the City* reveals the tendency of the pastoral tradition to be ahistorical and demythologizes the idea that there was ever an Edenic origin. Via a sort of historical “escalator” that traces nostalgic narratives further and further back in time (10–12), Williams exposes how instances of pastoral nostalgia are “reaction[s] to the fact of change” and directs our attention to nostalgia’s particular sociohistorical contexts (35).

Both thinkers offer what I call anti-nostalgic arguments about nature: they use an expository, didactic genre to condemn nostalgia for being a totalizing, romantic, and oversimplified narrative approach to a complex socioeconomic past. Similar critiques have challenged nostalgia throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—usually for good reason. However, by focusing only on its detrimental effects, anti-nostalgic criticism tends to foreclose the possibility that nostalgia might, as Scott Slovic puts it, “work in opposite directions” and in more complex ways than we might expect (“Authenticity” 270). One of the first in the field of ecocriticism to think beyond anti-nostalgic assumptions and gesture toward nostalgia’s positive potential, Slovic encourages us to appreciate “the potent emotional tug of nostalgia as one of the most vigorous and useful strategies in the literature of social reform” (“Be Prepared” 56). This call to action challenges entrenched scholarly assumptions that nostalgia is a natural enemy of reformist politics.

Like Slovic, I am invested in exposing the multidirectional capacities of nostalgia, and I also approach this task from an ecocritical perspective. However, I prefer the phrase green cultural studies to ecocriticism, since the former more directly references the interdisciplinarity, the willingness to engage a range of cultural texts, and the attention to power dynamics that have been fundamental priorities for both cultural studies scholars and most ecocritics. My working definition of cultural studies follows the one given by Lawrence Grossberg et al. in their landmark anthology *Cultural Studies*, where they describe the field as a sort of “bricolage” that probes the “everyday terrain” of people and cultures, enlists “whatever fields are necessary” to answer the questions at stake in a given project, and seeks to intervene in, not just “chronicle,” cultural trends (2, 11, 2, 5). Combining a cultural studies methodology with more traditional ecocritical strategies, green cultural studies is an approach committed to confronting networks of power while exploring the socio-environmental dimensions of various kinds of texts. It is the task of green cultural studies, Ihan Hochman asserts, to add nature to the “nexus of concerns” already addressed by cultural studies (race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability, etc.) in order to make sense of how ever-more complex representations of nature have effects on their audiences and, through us, the material world (2). The term ecocriticism seems to be here to stay. But with the expansion of ecocriticism into the interdisciplinary areas of animal studies, film studies, and postcolonial studies, among others, it seems safe to say that, whether or not they label it as such, many contemporary ecocritics are doing green cultural studies work.

In keeping with these trends, my book’s project diverges from more traditional ecocritics; mine is not explicitly an eco-activist endeavor or a deep ecological lesson in “earthcare” (Buell, *Future 23*). It may even be more anthropocentric than ecocentric, more cultural studies than green. If “nature proper” is seldom a primary object of my analysis, it is partly because I remain more invested in how nostalgia points toward social justice issues and partly because there is no “nature proper.” Most scholars—whether they prefer “nature-culture” (Latour), “worldnature” (Hochman), or some other phrase—now understand nature as inescapably tied to human culture. Since this is the case, my analysis often slips from nature to humanity (and back), just as I jumped, in the preface, from the rugged mountains and rushing creeks of Grand Teton National Park to the NPS uniform and what it signifies. Chapter 1 starts with changing conceptions of wilderness but moves to discussions of the savage-civilized binary as it affects human cultures. Other chapters take us from pastoral landscapes to the American counterculture, or
to precolonial indigenous communities, or to a neo-agrarian ideal that works against global agribusiness. Often, my analysis shows how a nostalgic relationship to a particular landscape can propel a character, an author, or a reader into an insightful critique of present-day concerns, such as poor working conditions, racist ideologies, toxic environments, or the downsides of a postnatural consumer culture. Because "nature" can refer to objects or ideals as diverse as an unpopulated wilderness area, an organic crop, or an indigenous community, I find it inevitable to turn to human politics and environmental justice and consider such things as race, class, postcoloniality, and global capitalism alongside the more-than-human world.

Some chapters—chapter 5, in particular—take shifting understandings of nonhuman nature as a central focus because the texts demand it. In general, though, the emphasis of this study is on following the multiple directions of nostalgia where they lead, beginning with the natural sites, and nature narratives, invoked in a given text. I make every effort to be explicit about whether wilderness, frontier, pastoral, or postnature narratives are at stake in each text—even when the text itself confuses them—without losing sight of my main goal, which is to re-place and reclaim nostalgia so as to draw attention to issues of power and justice. Instead of reifying nostalgia as always fostering problematic environmental or social narratives, my book works at the intersection of green cultural studies and American studies to reveal how nostalgia might lead to more informed, more nuanced, and more ethical conceptions of the human and the more-than-human.

In the United States, nature has often been invoked as "proof" of American exceptionalism. Indeed, nature and nation are joined etymologically as well as ideologically, since they share a common root: *nasci," to be born." Especially after the closing of the western frontier in 1890, many American nature narratives are tinged with nostalgia—for that very frontier, for untouched wilderness, for a preindustrial agrarian society, for pastoral communities in which humans and nature coexist in peace, or simply for a time when "nature" was easier to define. Following Kate Soper and others, my project treats nature as both a material reality—that which exists autonomously from human control—and a social construction, produced by humans within specific contexts for particular purposes. My use of nature invokes this "realist position" and assumes that discursive, socially constructed "nature" and material, or "first," Nature are always imbricated in complex ways (Soper, *What Is Nature?* 8). Often figured as the quintessential home, and frequently

posed as the Eden from which humanity has tragically fallen, nature demands attention as a slippery object of nostalgic longing throughout U.S. history.

Scholars have made headway in charting the American nature myths of the frontier and the pastoral—myths that are often nostalgic—and my study is indebted to this scholarship. Richard Slotkin’s influential work on the frontier, along with scholarship by "New Western" historians such as Richard White and Patricia Limerick, has problematized the version of the frontier popularized by Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt. My study certainly does not attempt to redeem a myth that has earned its bad reputation—indeed, I would be surprised to see anyone vouch for a concept that historians have dubbed the "the f-word"—though I do point out when authors seize frontier rhetoric for their own ends (Limerick, "Adventures" 72). More broadly, I find that the frontier and the pastoral are often connected in American literature as consecutive phases of the Turnerian "civilizing" process. Since frontiering is understood to yield a pastoral environment—which, for Turner, precedes an urban one—it is no surprise that many backward-looking texts reference both pioneers and their second-nature pastoral environments.

Though the frontier myth is arguably beyond recuperation, scholars have found positive potential in the seemingly more benign pastoral. Leo Marx, with his formulation of a "complex pastoral," was the first to do so in an American context; his opposition of a complex to a "sentimental" pastoral begins to demonstrate how the pastoral sometimes serves politically oppositional ends" (Marx, *Machine 5*; Buell, *Future* 145). Following his lead, Lawrence Buell and Terry Gifford have explored the complexity of pastoral narratives in reinvigorating studies of their own. Greg Garrard, too, has called for scholars to reevaluate the pastoral's capacity to "engender a genuine counter-hegemonic ideology"—a challenge that was taken up with great interest at the 2011 ASLE Conference ("Radical Pastoral"? 464). These laudable efforts nonetheless warrant a word of caution from Buell, who reminds us that "we would be quixotic to expect to sift 'progressive' pastoral from 'regressive' using some political program as a litmus test... For pastoral as ideological *form* tends to remain more or less constant even as ideological content changes" (Environmental *Imagination* 51–52, original emphasis).

With sensitivity to this difficulty, I nevertheless intend to defend nostalgia from the common charge that it is inherently "regressive" by showing that nostalgic narratives can, in some cases, be "sifted" according to
their progressive functions. To prevent this rescue mission from being too "quixotic," it is necessary to gain a clear picture of the windmills I am up against—that is, to understand how nostalgia works for worse as well as for better. According to Svetlana Boym, "nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress"; even as it mourns some of progress's casualties, nostalgia implicitly reaffirms the assumptions that underlie progress narratives (19). With the centrality of spatial expansion to American history, nostalgia has sometimes worked to underscore the nation's faith in its Manifest Destiny and, so, to legitimate U.S. imperialism. On a large scale, nostalgic longing can take the shape of what Renato Rosaldo has termed "imperialist nostalgia," one incarnation of which occurs when first-world countries long for environments they have played a leading role in destroying. Shari Huhndorf makes the similar point that nostalgia can "reaffirm the racialized, progressivist ethos of industrial capitalism" (14). Indeed, nostalgia at its worst can elide oppressive or violent histories, silence the people whom those histories have victimized, and construct an idealized, coherent version of the nation that is itself bulletproof.

Frequently, nostalgia at the national level can promote a sense of a shared past as "a place of sacrifice and glory" by creating a kind of "collective belonging that... transgress[s] individual memories" (Boym 15). Jennifer Delisle argues that it is precisely this slippage from the personal to the national, this "drive to create cohesive imagined communities, where the nation is privileged over the individual lives of its citizens, that makes nostalgia dangerous" (31). Delisle suggests, then, that we distinguish between "the experiential nostalgia of individuals, and the cultural nostalgia created by national memory, myth, and simulation"—terms she fashions as two ends of a continuum (17, original emphasis). It is hard for me to see, though, how the experiential and the cultural do not inevitably collapse. Her assertion that "personal and therapeutic uses" of nostalgia should be distinguished from "nationalistic, consumptive, aggressive temptations" only works if we understand "the personal" as distinct from other scales of belonging (31). I find it more useful to treat all nostalgia as cultural—not in the sense that it is necessarily collective, but in the sense that even personal nostalgia can't help but participate in cultural tropes.

Delisle is right to note how "dangerous" national myths can be, but there are other scales at which nostalgic tropes circulate. It is crucial to theorize the ways in which nostalgic longing refuses to privilege the nation and instead imagines belongings at other scales—sometimes smaller, more localized, at other times larger, even transnational. Reclaiming nostalgia involves a renewed attention to the ways in which the United States' "racialized, progressivist ethos" has relied on—but can also be countered by—nostalgic nature narratives. This book foregrounds alternate narrative births that oppose dominant conceptions of the American nation, fraught as it is with imperialist tendencies. As a broad, affective narrative with the potential to unite disparate groups of people, nostalgia acts as midwife to various kinds of newborn stories.

With this variety of stories in mind, I do not intend to glorify nostalgia as essentially positive or to set up an inviolable binary between "conservative" and "progressive" nostalgia. Like all nostalgic narratives (and like all narratives about the past) nostalgia for nature serves a range of political agendas. It can justify both localized and national violence, as in Thomas Dixon's The Clansman, or envision inclusive social justice movements on a global scale, as in Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead. Sometimes, nostalgia can be both progressive and problematic at the same time, as was the case when the environmentalist campaign "Keep America Beautiful" attempted to generate nostalgia for a disappearing natural world by affiliating that world with American Indians. Since it functions at so many registers and operates at a range of scales, and because it means different things in different historical moments, it can be hard to get a handle on just what nostalgia is. That is no formula for exactly how nostalgia becomes progressive—no checklist of six traits like the one Gifford generates for his post-pastoral framework—is, I think, a testament to its complexity. Nostalgia is not a single origin myth or a recurring narrative structure, even if the world it invokes is sometimes a conventional pastoral one. It does not have a constant ideological form, even though it functions with/in other narratives that do.

My project begins, then, with a new theoretical framework—underwritten by a new vocabulary—to enable more nuanced discussion of such diverse narratives and effects. The work of Boym, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, and John Su provides useful starting points for thinking about nostalgia in more nuanced ways. In The Future of Nostalgia, Boym proposes a model based on two kinds of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. She formulates her terms by dividing the word nostalgia into its two parts—nostos, the "return home," and algia, the "longing." Restorative nostalgia, linked with nostos, poses as truth, embraces tradition, and seeks a reconstruction of the lost "home," imagined as a return to a coherent origin. She links this sort of nostalgia with national memory and identity. Boym locates transformative potential in longing, which
she associates with reflective nostalgia. “Ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary,” reflective nostalgia does not attempt to reconstruct a coherent “home” but opts to “explore ways of inhabiting many places at once” (50). This kind of nostalgia embraces ambivalence with the intention of fostering creative dialogue through collective, local memory rather than national metanarratives of linear progress. Ritvoi’s Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity shares Boym’s goal of recovering productive uses for nostalgia and offers important insight toward that end. Rather than being inherently conservative, she argues, nostalgia can “signal the breech [between past and present] and inaugurate a search for the remedy” (39). This “breech” can be a productive site from which to construct alternate narratives and look toward positive social change.

In the same vein, Su’s ambitious study of nostalgia in Anglophone literature, Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel, suggests that looking backward is a precondition for imagining a better future. Loss and nostalgic yearning can, and do, shape “ethic visions” in numerous literary texts, and many authors “consciously exploit nostalgia’s tendency to interweave imagining, longing, and memory” in ways that can challenge social injustices (Su, Ethics 3). Su attends to the “lost or imagined homelands” the authors in his study long for and the ways that these homelands are “deeply flawed or never even existed”; yet he rightly explains how these authors still embrace and exploit nostalgia to explore “relationships and communities that could have been” (12, original emphasis). Even if it can only indirectly help move us in more ethical future directions, nostalgia “enables a more precise sense of how previous systems of social relations failed to address genuine human needs” (175).

Su’s study does attend to nostalgia’s particular objects, including nature, but his primary investment lies in recuperating nostalgia from its position as memory’s embarrassing right-wing relative by exploring its relationship to ethics. Unlike Su’s study, which reads a range of Anglophone texts, my own is grounded in particularly American narratives, and my inquiry focuses on how nostalgia for nature functions at the national scale as well as within individuals and more intimate collectives.

Building on the theories of nostalgia that Boym, Ritvoi, and Su articulate, I introduce “counter-nostalgia” as an operative term in a genealogy of nostalgia that theorizes new ways of imagining both the “return” and the “home” (or origin) for which nostalgic narratives long. Much nostalgia is characterized by totalizing metanarratives of return that posit coherent origins as points on a progressive timeline leading to the present day. Its purpose is to justify the present, and to stabilize history. Counter-nostalgia, however, does something quite different. Nostalgia becomes “counter” when it is strategically deployed to challenge a progressiveist ethos. Counter-nostalgia is nostalgia with a critical edge. Counter-nostalgia depends upon a tactical reappropriation of more dominant strands of nostalgia through creative, often literary, means; for that reason, its functions are historically contextual. It can be reflective, in Boym’s sense: ambivalent, localized, contingent, and ironic. It often depicts “home” as fragmented, complicated, and layered. But it can also be restorative, insofar as it mimics totalizing or coherent narratives in order to challenge or reinvent them for its own ends. When the counter-nostalgic text envisions a home that is a pure origin—a cohesive site or event constructed by simplifying and romanticizing a complex past—it has devised that origin in a performative, strategic manner. Such is the case, for instance, with Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem, which invokes nostalgia for Haiti, for Africa, and even for the pastoral American South in order to draw attention to the violence of colonialism and slavery and, at the same time, to excavate and celebrate a distinctive African American history.

Because of their nuances and complexities, I distinguish counter-nostalgic from anti-nostalgic texts, like Cronon’s and Williams’s, which work within an expository, theoretical genre of writing that seeks closure in the form of argument. In such texts, nostalgia is the object of critique. In counter-nostalgic literature, nostalgia is the vehicle through which critique happens. The authors in this study deploy nostalgia. They wield it. They toy with dominant nostalgic narratives in order to subvert them. They manipulate their readers by eliciting nostalgia. Counter-nostalgic texts work within the blurry realm of readers’ emotions rather than the rule-bound world of argument, asking us to help construct the “arguments” at stake and grapple with questions about the worlds we inhabit. For instance, when Don DeLillo’s Murray speculates that “it is possible to be homesick for a place even when you are there,” concerned readers can’t help but wonder if he is right (White Noise 257).

Like Murray’s homesickness, all nostalgia is a form of longing. While Boym emphasizes longing as a transformative emotional state, I focus on the “return home” and the ways in which specific literary homes are imagined as sites from which the politics of the present may be renegotiated. What distinguishes counter-nostalgia, then, is its attitude toward the object of this longing—the home—and the ways in which it envisions a return to this space and time. Anyone who has felt nostalgic for a family quarrel on Christmas, an overdeveloped suburban landscape, or a
“cozy” studio apartment that felt more like a prison cell at the time, will recognize that the homes we long for are often fraught. As I will continue to suggest, longing can be a personal emotion as well as a larger, collective, even national sentiment. While much nostalgia, especially at this national level, encourages its adherents to return to a celebrated origin to find both comfort and justification for the present, counter-nostalgia revisits a dynamic past in a way that challenges dominant histories and reflects critically on the present.

As Foucault explains, a historical event “is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked ‘other’” (“Nietzsche” 154). The counter-nostalgic authors in this study appropriate dominant “vocabulary” to highlight history’s messy events, rather than its comfortable homes. McKay’s deliberate back-and-forth between his characters’ reminiscences of their pastoral childhood homes and their harsh living and working conditions in the present are a case in point. Zitkala-Ša uses a similar tactic as she inverts the civilization-savagery binary and identifies her childhood home as a site of culture and “wild” freedom. Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson narrate environmental losses and caution against a lack of nostalgia while invoking pastoral origins as counterpoints to the damages humans are inflicting on the natural world and on our own communities. N. Scott Momaday exploits countercultural “back to nature” nostalgia to fuel his critique of colonialism, violence, racism, and government relocation projects of the period. Later in the century, DeLillo considers the homesickness that permeates the everyday lives of Americans living in a postnatural world, and he exposes some of the losses and risks generated by a late-capitalist economy. Ruth Ozeki imagines diverse fictional communities based on a nostalgic agrarian ideal and enlists these unlikely allies in her twenty-first-century critiques of late capitalism, global agribusiness, and ideologies of racial and genetic purity.

All of these authors maintain complicated relationships to the past and skepticism toward the notion of progress. Boym reminds us that “nostalgia, like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time” (13). However, counter-nostalgia is irreverent of the notion that time is “unrepeatable.” Instead, counter-nostalgic narratives are often attracted to seasonal or cyclical conceptions of time rather than linear ones, as in Momaday’s House Made of Dawn or Ozeki’s All Over Creation. The past is not a truthful origin but a beginning, in Said’s sense of “impl[y]ing] return and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment” (xiii). Counter-nostalgia inverts the idea of progress, maintaining the concept of irreversible time only insofar as it recognizes “real” historical events at a broader scale—the displacements, forced migrations, and acts of violence that have resulted in both U.S. hegemony and a faltering democratic project within the nation itself. Just as racism, imperialism, and violence tend to repeat themselves in the present, the nonhierarchical communities for which counter-nostalgia longs might also be repeated. By recognizing history as nonlinear and events as complex—but continuing to long for them in their complexity—counter-nostalgia has the potential to challenge the logics of “feeble domination” that govern both past and present.

Each of the following chapters makes a unique argument about a counter-nostalgic literary text as it touches down on specific features of the rocky landscape of American history. Brief interchapters set up and contextualize the full-length chapters through close readings of cultural texts. These interchapters encapsulate the more dangerous tendencies of their period’s nostalgia even while some—like the third interchapter, on Ansel Adams’s project Born Free and Equal—contain the seeds of counter-nostalgia within otherwise hegemonic ideological positions. The main chapters offer literary examples of how counter-nostalgia reappropriates, redirects, or otherwise intervenes in dominant nostalgic trends. By framing my readings of the literature with the culturally focused interchapters, I hope to sketch each historical moment as a cross-section of aesthetic, cultural, and political forces—what Foucault calls a “profusion of entangled events” (“Nietzsche” 155).

Although I do not attempt a comprehensive overview of the time period in question, I do suggest trends, identify continuities, and note disjunctures and shifts in American nostalgia for nature. For instance, readers will discover peaks in nostalgia at the national scale at the turn of both centuries—first following the frontier’s closing, and again as the twentieth century draws to an end. Pastoral nostalgia remains a strong presence throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, with particular appeal in the regionalist backlash to modernity and in 1960s counterculture movements and their loosely defined “back to nature” impulse. We will also see how, in the late 1980s, an emergent “end of nature” discourse points toward different objects of longing—to things like originality, unmediated experience, a unified self, and the
cohesion of signifier and signified—even as traditional American nature narratives continue to provide jumping-off points for embarking on these emotional escapades. The nostalgia accompanying "end of nature" anxieties becomes, for some, an affective "check" to the sense of having crossed a line in human-nature relations and stepped into a "postnatural" world.

With attention to Roosevelt, Leopold, Carson, McKibben, and Edward Abbey, the book also keeps tabs on environmentalism’s slow momentum during the period in question—a momentum that ebbs and flows with economic prosperity. Environmentalism grapples with changing conceptions of nonhuman nature, which undergo a sort of pendulum swing in the twentieth century, moving from a primarily materialist understanding of the world based on a clear human-nature separation, to an antithetical view—emerging with postmodernism and debated primarily within intellectual circles—of nature as socially constructed rather than materially real. Like pendulums eventually do, this one comes to center by the twenty-first century, leaving most intellectuals in agreement that nature can only be understood as both materially real and inevitably conflated with the social.

By foregrounding counter-nostalgic narratives about the most powerful American understandings of nature—the frontier, the pastoral, wilderness, and postnatural nature—my goal is to push beyond the pendulum stop that defines nature as both real and socially constructed, toward new ways of talking about the effects nostalgia has historically helped produce, as well as what future natures and future cultures it might help imagine. The problems with nostalgia are important to be aware of, but counter-nostalgia offers more fertile ground for rejuvenating conversations about nostalgia. As Boym suggests, “The study of nostalgia might be useful for an alternative, nonteological history that includes conjectures and contrafactual possibilities” (351). Beginning with the premise that “homesickness is a great teacher,” my “nonteological history” of nostalgia for nature uncovers in American literature latent possibilities for a world that is more socially and environmentally just (Stegner, “Finding the Place” 17).

In 1916—the year the National Park Service was formed—Yosemite National Park held its first Indian Field Days. This inaugural event brought together nearly 150 Indians from the Yosemite region and approximately 1,500 park visitors for a daylong celebration of Indian culture. Rugs, jewelry, and baby cradles made by regional tribes were on display at the dramatic Yosemite Falls pavilion, and competitive contests—such as potato races and tug-of-wars—contributed to an event that was “part rodeo, part pageant, and part craft fair” (Cothren 195–98). NPS judges, some wearing “Indian” attire themselves, granted awards for the “Best Indian Warrior costume” and the “Best Indian Squaw costume.”

There was also an Indian Baby Show, which rewarded the “healthiest-looking babies” (Cothren 200).1 By 1929, the last year of the Field Days, a promotional poster (see Fig. 2) advertised both adventure and economic opportunity: “EXCITING HORSE RACES,” a “BASKET AND BEAD-WORK EXHIBITION,” “Indian ceremonial and war dances” and (in bold letters) “$1500 IN PRIZES.” In case visitors were daunted by the big spenders from San Francisco who would flock to this “big sale,” the poster assured its audience that “small” and presumably more affordable items would be “the best sellers.” The top of the poster promised a cast of performers worthy of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show: a military band and a U.S. Cavalry troop along with “hundreds of Indians, Rangers and Cowboys.” These were sure to be “the best Indian Field Days ever.”

The Field Days were initiated as part of a park strategy to promote tourism in Yosemite during the late summer season, when visitation
Indians and nature have been versatile, often contradictory, foils for constructions of white American identity since European settlement. Indians have a long and distinctive history of being both quintessentially “American” and the very antithesis of national identity. In Playing Indian, Philip J. Deloria describes how, for instance, Revolutionary War-era Indians were “noble and customary, and they existed inside an American society that was not British. But Indians were also savage, existing outside of a British society that included both colonists and officials” (26). The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of especially dynamic change, as constructions of “savage” Indianness evolved in tandem with conceptions of wilderness. Sometimes Indians were the “natural” occupants of wilderness areas; at other times they were a “problem” for management—a blemish on natural landscapes that needed to be erased to create “pure” natural spaces. In the nineteenth century, whether Indians were romanticized or ostracized depended largely on land availability. In the early part of that century, Indians were often depicted as “picturesque and ‘noble,’” their lives idealized in the face of growing unease about industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. By the end of that same century, as “free land” in the West became scarce and indigenous people were framed as trespassers on desirable property, Indians were more frequently described as outlaw tribes who had “regressed into ‘treacherous, bloodthirsty savages’” (Spence 30). Far from a clean break or an absolute paradigm shift, both depictions—the noble Indian and the trespasser (who could safely be deemed a bit less “savage” with the end of the Indian wars)—persisted into the early twentieth century, informing national park management and public perception.

As spectacular geography replaced Native presence as the primary indicator of wilderness in the American mind, situating Indians as both “self” and “other” enabled white Americans to affiliate themselves with the natural, “savage” elements of Indian culture—a kind of cultural imperialism that accompanied the now trendy tourism of nature—but still justify poor treatment of these “others.” In the modern period, both nature and Native Americans were often posited as preindustrial antidotes for a quickly changing nation and, so, rendered “past tense”—origins, of sorts, to which the American public could return for unreflective consumption and imaginary authenticity (Wall 103). “Playing Indian” in modern America, as tourists at the Field Days did, promised an authentic connection to the nation’s “origins” by “help[ing] preserve a sense of frontier toughness, communal warmth, and connection to the continent,” especially to its coveted natural world (Deloria 129).

Arguably “the nation’s most sacred myth of origin,” nature, like Indianness, has a long history of being alternately respected and romanticized, or feared and tamed (Cronon 77). As William Cronon explains in “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” wilderness is not just a material reality; rather, popular perceptions of wilderness have always been socially constructed and historically contingent. Throughout much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the United States, wilderness, stemming from biblical references, was “a place to which one came only against one’s will, and always in fear and trembling” (Cronon 71). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this understanding of wilderness had begun to change drastically. Cronon notes that rapid industrialization, combined with the nineteenth-century emergence of the American sublime (adapted and popularized by writers like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir) and the construction of the frontier myth (by Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt, and others), contributed to a reversal of the earlier wilderness ideology. As industrialization marched steadily forward, more Americans cultivated an anti-modern nostalgic backlash to help alleviate the anxieties accompanying technological, economic, and social change. Wilderness was no longer a scary place in need of taming, but a valuable asset in need of protection.

A major shift in American environmental values had occurred. Nostalgia for nature had been catapulted into the forefront of the national imaginary, and the nation began to embrace a new ethic of preserving its
dwindling natural resources. Perhaps the largest contributing factor to this shift was the declaration by the U.S. Census Bureau, in the year 1860, that the frontier was “closed”: there was no more land for westward expansion. Three years later, Frederick Jackson Turner identified the frontier as central to national identity in his well-known and much-contested essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” With the frontier’s closing came the recognition that American nature—a unique cultural asset, often invoked to prove the exceptionalism of “nature’s Nation”—was perhaps being tamed a bit too quickly. Up until this time, nostalgia for nature had existed in diffuse literary and artistic cultural enclaves—for instance, in the work of the transcendentalists or the Hudson River School. But nineteenth-century nature was still considered an infinite resource for the nation, and questions about how it might be put to use superseded questions about how it might be left alone. The closing of the frontier, and the concomitant sense that this “resource” was running out, helped solidify what had been relatively minor and disparate nostalgic stirrings into a broader, more dominant, national nostalgia for nature.

Frontier nostalgia in Turner’s essay relied on problematic assumptions and rhetorical strategies—including erasing the country’s indigenous inhabitants in order to construct a West with “free land” for the taking—and other scholars have detailed the many problems with his “frontier thesis” more thoroughly than I will here. One aspect of the thesis that is crucial for my study is Turner’s formulation of the frontier as an origin to which Americans could “return” again and again to establish a national character: “American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (187). This kind of “beginning over again” sounds like Said’s theory of beginnings, especially insofar as it seems to disrupt the idea of “advance along a single line.” However, while Said imagines beginnings that destabilize both past and present, Turner’s “perennial” return works not to reevaluate the present but to reaffirm it as the natural endpoint of a kind of teleological progress. Unlike the authors in my study, whose work follows Said’s model by calling into question such progress, Turner situates “expansion westward” along the frontier as a reliable and static national origin myth.

Of course, this origin myth was largely a bourgeois, anti-modern narrative; its nostalgia was felt strongly by some Americans but hardly registered by others. When John Muir wrote of the “thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilised people” who were “going home” to the mountains, it hardly needs to be said that such a home would not have been “universally appealing” (qtd. in Outka 156). Exemplifying what Renato Rosaldo has called imperialist nostalgia, lamentations of “lost” wilderness typically came from elite white males—the people who profited most from the exploitation of the nature whose loss they mourned. Not surprisingly then, this nostalgic longing was complex, dichotomous, and often contradictory. A split tradition of post-frontier nostalgia emerged and was re-coded in two different versions of American history that sought to explain national identity in the modern present. Along with this nostalgia, national rhetoric situating savagery or primitivism against the forces of civilization evolved in new directions during the modern period and beyond. Because this frontier rhetoric is so integral to the work of the writers I analyze in this chapter and throughout this study, I will spend some time here detailing its emergence.

On one hand, the American frontier past was coded as primarily a pastoral, democratic space, occupied by a harmonious community that lived and worked on the land. This version of the frontier remained truer to Turner’s idealized national history. Richard Slotkin explains that Turner’s nostalgic vision glorified the yeoman farmer and understood “the past as a place in which, once upon a time, our political life was regenerated and purified”; the corrupt present, by contrast, could no longer profit from the frontier’s revitalizing effects (“Nostalgia and Progress” 612, 636). In this version of nostalgia, the negative effects of the frontier’s taming—such as Indian removal—were quietly overlooked in favor of a neo-utilitarian ethic concerned primarily with appreciation of the natural world. Violence, even while it continued in the present, was downplayed, couched safely within the “progressive” rhetoric of Manifest Destiny or the liberal ideology of uplift. As Paul Outka argues, the sublime landscapes of the American West—especially as linked to (white) national identity via Turner’s frontier myth—provided a natural space in which “the racial trauma that had organized the national geography for much of the nineteenth century could be left behind” (154). In the modern United States, a new “cultural nationalism,” based on touring the country’s natural wonders, “grew out of a nostalgic ideal of America as nature’s nation” (Shaffer 146). The Indian
Field Days demonstrate how tourism erased violent histories even as it became, in effect, a new form of pioneering—a way to experience the frontier in small, safe doses.²

On the other hand, in an alternate version of the turn-of-the-century frontier story, nostalgia for the more traditional frontier remained prominent—nostalgia for the violent West of the boom town and the gold rush, now popularized by dime novels, by Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show, and by Western American fiction like Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. This was the West of the cowboy, a nostalgic national symbol whose popularity coincided, ironically, with the end of the frontier that had spawned him and nurtured his way of life.³ This West was also the proving ground for the figure Cronon describes as the “mythic frontier individualist”: a racialized, masculinized subject position that values and romanticizes “unspoiled” or “savage” wilderness as the site of identity formation (78). In this strand of nostalgia, the frontier’s violence was essential for national progress and, as such, was naturalized and even celebrated through its performance (in the popular Wild West Show, for instance) and its canonization in Western literature. Indians and other “uncivilized” groups were implicated in this myth of the West as well, usually as “natural” foils for white identity formation.

Perhaps the man who best embodies this second, more violent manifestation of the frontier is Theodore Roosevelt. Slotkin explains how Roosevelt developed and popularized a particular variation of Turner’s frontier myth. While Turner’s work downplayed the frontier’s violence, Roosevelt’s sense of frontier history emphasized not only the “egalitarian democracy” fostered by frontier life but also “the course of savage war” that helped create a “class of those invested with heroic, history-making capacities”—a “race of heroes” of which Roosevelt counted himself a member (*Gunfighter* 54). Slotkin concludes that the balances each man struck between nostalgia and progressivism were different, since each embraced a slightly different myth of the frontier: Turner’s was “thoroughly nostalgic in its contrast of happy past and troubled present,” but Roosevelt’s adaptation valued the enduring potential of the frontier in the present. For Roosevelt, positive “effects on racial morale” could and should be maintained via “a disciplined program of preaching, myth-making, exercise, and conquest” that drew on historical struggles to further national agendas and revitalize national identity. In other words, Roosevelt’s frontier was “not an alternative to the present, but was its justification”—a national resource to be mined in the service of imperialist projects (*Slotkin, “Nostalgia and Progress”* 636).

We might say, then, that Turner embodied one pole of the frontier’s new split—a pastoral and less outwardly violent pole, which emphasized a break with the past and foregrounded environment rather than race as the key factor in shaping national identity—while Roosevelt embodied the other, in which a “new class of hero-leaders” that included the “wilderness hunter and Indian fighter” kept the “spirit of the frontier” alive (*Slotkin, “Nostalgia and Progress”* 611, 636). This comfortable binary is complicated, though, by Turner’s frequent association with violence in contemporary, especially scholarly, discourse and Roosevelt’s widespread association with nature preservation. A self-made “frontier individualist,” Roosevelt is also well known and respected by many of today’s environmentalists for his substantial contributions to nature conservation. And for good reason. The National Forest Service was created under his guidance, and he set aside millions of acres of land for forest reserves and national monuments. But if Roosevelt’s nostalgia was beneficial for some environments, it was detrimental to Americans who did not occupy the identity category he privileged—the white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual male.⁴ For one thing, Roosevelt promoted both nature’s preservation as an antidote to excessive civilization and the tourism-driven development that, ironically, molded that nature into a “reflect[ion of] the very civilization its devotees sought to escape” (*Cronon* 78). Moreover, Roosevelt’s prescription for Americans to “get back to nature” was an elitist one, which ignored historical and cultural differences between people. The brief, rejuvenating sojourns into nature he advocated were only available to those with adequate leisure time, ample money, and the right skin color.

Ultimately, Roosevelt, like Turner, did draw on rhetoric and myths that were “thoroughly nostalgic”—and he did so in a way that early American theorists of nostalgia had foreclosed. Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer had admired nostalgia as an indication of excessive patriotism, but American doctors of the eighteenth century saw the “disease” as a sign of an unhealthy country and initially repudiated the idea that it might exist in the United States. Specifically, the American military doctor Theodore Calhoun considered nostalgia to be “a shameful disease that revealed a lack of manliness and unprogressive attitudes” (Boym 13). But by the early twentieth century, Roosevelt had claimed frontier nostalgia as not just available but a patriotic resource that helped bolster confidence in the nation’s “manly” progressivism (*Nostalgia and Progress* 634). Perhaps because Roosevelt saw himself as a member of the “race of heroes” evolved from the rigors of the frontier, elitism and
racism infused both his domestic and foreign policy. Roosevelt posited nature as an antidote to “race suicide”: the fear that the white race was dying out due to excessive civilization, leaving it unfit to compete with more “primitive” races. In response to this perceived threat, Roosevelt lauded male virility, which could be regained through the patriotic duty of contact with wilderness. Not surprisingly, then, he advocated extending the U.S. frontier abroad, through imperialism, and he celebrated conflict and conquest as character-building traits.

Gail Bederman explains that, for Roosevelt, “regression to savagery was only temporary and proved the Americans' racial superiority” (182). The term “savage” could apply to African Americans as well as to Indians, for Roosevelt, since he considered both to be “uncivilized” (183). Thus, being “close to nature” could function as either a disparaging association, if you were a person of color, or as a desirable connection—provided you were a white male and only temporarily dabbling in the wilderness for the ultimate benefit of civilization. A comparable double standard informed national park visitation. For instance, George Bird Grinnell, an influential preservationist who helped designate Glacier National Park, encouraged Americans to “uncivilize” themselves a bit and return to the mountains on a regular basis, whereas he instructed Blackfoot Indians “to become ‘civilized’” and assimilate into the American mainstream (Spence 78).

Indeed, some of the criticisms I (and others) have made of Roosevelt could just as easily be made of the newly formed NPS. If nature in its pristine state was the antithesis of civilization, then groups of people who were considered closer to nature were also antithetical to the (white) civilized world. Moreover, if nature was, by definition, the place where humans were not, then identification with nature meant certain groups of people were effectively dehumanized. These cultural logics indicate the powerful effects of the period’s progress ideology, dependent as it was on an opposition between savagery and civilization, with its sense of inevitable movement toward the latter. They also suggest that turn-of-the-century racism was, to some degree, predicated on nostalgic constructions of nature.

At their most extreme, concerns about preserving the white race emerged in Southern literature of the period that promoted identification with regional landscapes combined with a racialized nostalgia for exclusively white communities. Thomas Dixon Jr.’s The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan demonstrates this nostalgia at its worst; it anchors white supremacy in the natural world in order to legitimize and promote class- and race-based violence. Although Dixon’s nostalgia might be an extreme case, the blatant racism of his “romance” did not prevent it from being made into the popular motion picture Birth of a Nation, a film still acknowledged, in spite of its racism, as an important part of film history. A more mainstream instance of a comparable form of nostalgia might be Gone with the Wind, a film notable for its celebration of Southern landscapes and its nostalgia for the passing of the South’s way of life, including the racial hierarchies that enabled some to enjoy leisurely lives within the plantation system. As I will discuss in later chapters, the Dixenique strand of nostalgia for nature was later picked up by the Southern agrarian regionalist movement and represented by the anthology I’ll Take My Stand, as well as in less overtly racist forms in regional political movements like the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s. This strand of nostalgia, while not dominant, illustrates the dangerous tendencies of nostalgia to draw racial boundaries and foster destructive ideologies.

Racial boundaries were, of course, central to turn-of-the-century nation-building projects that relocated and reproduced frontier violence via American imperialism. Within the nation’s boundaries, Richard White explains how “descent from true Americans” became the new standard for citizenship once the frontier experience was no longer an option (47). Of course, new immigrants could claim neither frontier experience nor native ancestry; thus they became “dangerous” and “unassimilable” in the eyes of those who, like Roosevelt, prized “true Americanness” (White 47). Patricia Limerick identifies a related effect of the frontier’s closure on ethnic minorities as she remarks on the role of nostalgia during this time period: “When Indian war dances became tourist spectacles, when the formerly scorned customs of the Chinese drew tourists to Chinatown, when former out-groups found that characteristics that once earned them disapproval could now earn them a living, when fearful, life-threatening deserts became charming patterns of color and light, ... the frontier could be considered closed, even museumized” ("Adventures" 74). In effect, the closed frontier and its accompanying nostalgia cemented racial difference in the national imaginary. People of color and other “out-groups” could be included in the nation only as tourist attractions or as emblems of disappearing cultures. These people’s histories—including their contributions to building the nation—were effectively “museumized” or erased. Nostalgia aided in legitimating these unfortunate erasures, but it was also a key tool in resisting them.
The dominant nostalgic narratives embedded within and spread by the National Park Service and political figures like Roosevelt, combined with the even more extreme versions of nostalgia found in texts like Dixon’s, left little space for writers of the time to rewrite nostalgic nature stories for alternate purposes. However, within the “hazardous play of dominations” perpetuated by hegemonic narratives, there is always room for exploitation (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 148). One author who successfully wrote about nature counter-nostalgically is Zitkala-Ša, a Yankton Dakota writer and activist whose poignant and often critical autobiographical stories and Lakota-Dakota legends were published during the early twentieth century. Born on the Yankton reservation in South Dakota, she left home at a young age to pursue a boarding school education at White’s Manual Institute and Santee Normal Training School. She later attended Earlham College (which was all-white), taught briefly at the notorious Carlisle Indian School, then redirected her energies to political activism. Her three-part autobiography, which was reissued in American Indian Stories in 1921, was first published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1900. As Jeffrey Myers points out, this meant she was publishing at the same time, even in the same journal, as W. E. B. Du Bois—who had just theorized “the problem of the color line”—and Muir, who was championing nature preservation (Myers 116). Like these other writers, Zitkala-Ša intervened in the broader discourse about race and nature at the turn of the century. She wrote to preserve her tribal culture—and, as her pan-Indian activism indicates, all tribal cultures—to locate Indians squarely in the Western landscape, and to redeem these “savages” in the eyes of her readers.

Hers was no easy task. As Foucault argues, to successfully write history—itself a “system of rules” enabling both domination and resistance—one must be “capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them...so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules” (“Nietzsche” 151). In this sense Zitkala-Ša was able to redirect the rules of her time concerning nature, nostalgia, and American Indians so as to present Indian concerns to white readers in a language they would be inclined to hear. Though she does not necessarily blur racial categories—she inverts the existing binary between Native and non-Native but only rarely deconstructs race itself—she certainly questions who the “true Americans” are as she writes her own “out-group” back in to the natural

and cultural landscape. By counter-nostalgically identifying Indian culture with nature and presenting white civilization as “unnatural,” Zitkala-Ša’s American Indian Stories capitalize on contemporaneous fears about overcivilization and industrialization in order to humanize American Indians, complicate the progress narrative implied by Turner’s frontier thesis, and call into serious question the presumed benefits of assimilating to white American culture.

Many anthologies today include Zitkala-Ša’s work. Most often, this inclusion is framed by her cultural exile, the political pressures to which she was subject, and her ability to create literature in the face of these pressures. Yet as Jessica Enoch points out, many anthologies fail to accentuate her “rhetorical sovereignty and pedagogical resistance” in the face of the “systematic silencing” of her work that plagued her career; instead, she is most often presented as simply an example of American literary “multiculturalism” (13). My reading of Zitkala-Ša foregrounds elements of American Indian Stories that other critics have either not explored or have underemphasized: her inversion of the civilization/savagery binary (which, because of its close connection to frontier ideology, I shorthand as frontier rhetoric); her reappropriation of dominant stereotypes and deliberate identification of Indians with nature; and her tactical use of nostalgia to achieve her literary and extra-literary goals.

Myers’s recent work on Zitkala-Ša comes closest to addressing these concerns. He reads her writing as “an ecology that brings together environmental awareness with social justice”; he suggests she imagines common ground for Native and non-Native people to come together to foster “a multicultural, ecologically sustainable inhabitation of North America” (114). In Myers’s mind, American Indian Stories and Old Indian Legends must be read as “two parts of a whole work, a conglomerate of Native American and European literary traditions” that “speak in different voices about twin concerns: Euroamerican racism toward American Indians and Euroamerican destruction of the natural world” (114). Like Myers, I highlight the environmental dimensions of Zitkala-Ša’s work, especially as they connect to her joint critiques of assimilation and racism. But I focus on American Indian Stories, especially its autobiographical stories, as not only adequate for addressing these related issues together but also more appropriate for contextualizing her work within the nostalgic frontier rhetoric circulating at the time. I do not disagree with Myers’s claims—indeed, he productively extends scholarship on her work—but my focus on American Indian Stories enables an investigation of how nature, Indians, and frontier rhetoric were interarticated in
dominant culture as well as how Zitkala-Ša manipulated and reworked these intertwined narratives via counter-nostalgia.

Zitkala-Ša emerged on the literary and political scene just as the ideologies I have been describing were beginning to inform national organizations and institutional rhetoric. As Indians faced the loss of their distinctive oral traditions, the partitioning of tribes on reservations, the fragmentation of tribal communities, and declining populations, some Indians began to create written records of their tribal legends, folktales, and personal stories (Fisher v.). Zitkala-Ša was among the earliest American Indian writers to begin making the transition from oral to written culture, and her writing negotiates the tensions between traditional Indian culture and the expectations of assimilation into white America—tensions between “the remembered past and the alien present” (Fisher vi). Further, as the “darling” of white readers of Harper’s and Atlantic Monthly, where she initially published many of the essays that would later make up American Indian Stories, Zitkala-Ša’s ability to keep her writing in print hinged on meeting the criteria for “attracting attention” determined by her audience (Fisher vii). She wrote and published amid mounting pressures to work within the confining expectations of the ethnographic narrative; to write on behalf of the concerns of her “race,” to represent those concerns accurately, and to subjugate creative endeavors to more political pursuits.

Even within the rigid guidelines of these expectations and the overwhelming material limitations facing Indians at the time, Zitkala-Ša was able to find a surprising amount of creative leeway through which to make political statements. Partially adopting the genre of sentimental autobiography allowed her some writerly freedom, extended her audience appeal, and enabled her to embed a political critique within her ostensibly sentimental stories. But her adoption of sentimental autobiography is incomplete and so ambivalent, in a sense, as she refuses to fulfill the generic contract of the narrator’s ultimate resolution into a whole, complete individual. Most of Zitkala-Ša’s stories are ambivalent; sometimes the same story will both celebrate and decry the white “civilization” to which she was expected to conform. Often characterized as an inevitable result of trying to engage white audiences, her ambivalence can also be read as tactical, contrived, and deliberate. Julianne Newmark, for instance, suggests that the “gaps between words” (342) produce a discord within the text, which Zitkala-Ša exploits to make her critique of white civilization. In my reading of her stories, the stories’ nostalgic gaps between past and present become a central, and very powerful, rhetorical strategy. Far from embracing assimilation or merely lamenting her position between two cultures, I suggest Zitkala-Ša deploys counter-nostalgic ambivalence to emphasize the “breech” between two binary positions—past and present, Indian culture and white (over)civilization. Western landscapes and the industrialized East—and coax the reader into identifying with the former over the latter. By revising her white audience’s expectations of the “return home,” Zitkala-Ša’s stories represent Indian cultures as civilized and Indians as fully human.

White readers, in effect, are tricked into longing to return to a natural home that not only is not what they imagined it to be—an unpopulated Eden—but was never their home in the first place. What is found at the nostalgic origin is the violent uprooting of a cultured, civilized people, and a history of inequity. Zitkala-Ša’s contrasting depictions of the West and the East force white audiences to see themselves as the “savages” and Indians as the original inhabitants of “Eden.” As Enoch argues, Zitkala-Ša “inscribes a kind of white savagery” through her descriptions of the Carlisle School and so “break[s] down the false dichotomy that... define[s] Indian culture as savage and white ‘American’ life as civilized” (Enoch 7). Indeed, for Zitkala-Ša, white civilization has become so overcivilized that it embodies the worst of the “savage” characteristics typically attributed to Indians at the time. However, most readings of her work, including Enoch’s, do not ground the analysis of her frontier rhetoric in contemporaneous understandings of the natural world; nor do they grapple with Zitkala-Ša’s identification of Indians with nonhuman nature, which was still characterized as the antithesis of (indeed, antithetic to) civilization during this time period. Introducing nature and nostalgia into the savage/civilized dichotomy enables a richer understanding of how her stories work.

Throughout the stories, Zitkala-Ša identifies Indians with nature through formal linguistic strategies (like metaphor) and by emphasizing, rather than downplaying, the widespread conception of Indians as closer to nature. She foregrounds this and condemns the ways in which this conception has led to exploitation by whites as she longs for her lost community’s positive experiences in and with the natural world. She achieves her critique through a twofold process of linking the white “civilizing machine” with images of homogeneity, antisepic formalities, empty ritual, even death, and contrasting this civilization with her tribe’s culture, which she depicts, nostalgically, as natural, happy, and free (66). Her argument also works by invoking nonhuman nature as a moral authority—a source of cultural righteousness and ancient beauty that she sets in opposition to excessive civilization. Such a definition
of nature is consistent with the one popularized by Roosevelt and the National Park Service and, so, would have been recognizable to her audience.

Even while she toys with dominant understandings of nature, though, Zitkala-Ša insists on her own definitions, which she grounds in white conceptions only enough to effectively engage her audience. Displaced from her home at a young age, she becomes an exile, for whom everything that happens in her new environment "occurs against the memory . . . of another environment" (Said, "Reflections on Exile" 186). Once she leaves her reservation to begin her education, she is "at home" neither in white culture nor in Dakota culture. Culturally homeless, she also suffers, in Said's words, from "the loss of contact with the solidity and satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question" ("Reflections" 179). My reading of Zitkala-Ša's stories thus attends to the role of the actual landscape rather than just the metaphorical one, as I tease out the roles both nostalgia for her Yankton reservation and antipathy toward the bleak environment of the "civilized" East play in her stories.

Her love for the South Dakota landscape is apparent in many of the stories and essays in the collection. As a child growing up "in the lap of the prairies," she feels a strong connection to her home region (22). She and her friends run and play "like little sportive nymphs on that Dakota sea of rolling green" (23). As a student at the boarding school, she dreams of the "Western rolling lands" where she grew up (65). When she returns home to recruit new students for the school, she shouts aloud with apparent pleasure upon seeing the wigwams situated amid the "old familiar sky lines of rugged bluffs and round-topped hills" and the sunflowers, plum bushes, and other plants that dot "this nature's garden" (87–88).

But her understanding of "nature" goes beyond landscape or "garden" to include a worldview that encompasses relations between all species. Her essay "The Great Spirit" (originally titled "Why I Am a Pagan") explains why she prefers "excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard" to the "dogma" of Christianity (107). The essay begins with joyful expressions of her love for nature's aesthetic properties but goes on to describe an even more powerful understanding of the more-than-human world that infuses the entire collection, including the autobiographical stories. She starts with a description of her exuberance over the "loving Mystery" of nature on a summer day, as she sits on the bank of the Missouri River (101). She immerses herself in the day's beauty: the shifting shapes of clouds, the "soft cadences of the river's song," and the nearby prairie flowers that "soothe [her] soul" (101). As Myers points out, the "lyrical" language of this passage resonates with the British romantic tradition—most directly, Wordsworth's poetry—as well as with Muir's brand of nature writing, with which she could have conceivably been familiar (Myers 119).

If she has had a sublime encounter with nature here, it is not one that leads her to retreat into comfortable divisions between humans and nature. To the contrary, once she returns to her cabin and her writing desk—"buoyant with good nature" after her time outdoors (103)—she expresses her feelings of "keen sympathy with [her] fellow-creatures" (104). Interestingly, racial categories dissolve for her as she sees the world as consisting of a "living mosaic of human beings" that renders not just her tribe but all of humanity "one large family" (104–5). Unlike in the autobiographical stories, where her negative depictions of "palefaces" and the boarding schools tend to reinforce racial boundaries, in this essay she indicates that we all participate in a kind of "kinship to any and all parts of this vast universe" (102–3).

The first section of American Indian Stories, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," makes a point of illustrating these beliefs as they play out in the everyday life of Indians on her reservation in South Dakota. Zitkala-Ša's home is cultural as well as natural; "her tales of Indian home life are marked by descriptions of art, etiquette, and social code" (Enoch 6). These early stories emphasize the feelings of kinship, the respect for others' space, and the familial caretaking and hospitality that characterize her tribal community. Her mother trains her to follow the tribe's rules of etiquette; in return for good behavior, she is treated "as a dignified little individual" (Zitkala-Ša 20). In "The Coffee-Making," for instance, Zitkala-Ša tells of her humble efforts to "play the part of a generous hostess" by doing her best to make coffee for a tribal member who stops by unexpectedly when her mother is out (27). Although her coffee is hardly deserving of the name, neither the visitor nor her mother makes her feel embarrassed for its poor quality; rather, they reward her efforts with "the utmost respect" (29).

The "social codes" her stories depict include children as worthy of respect, women as trusted authority figures, the role of hospitality in fostering community, and the important rule not to "intrude . . . on others" (8). Beginning the collection with the story called "My Mother," which emphasizes her mother's sorrow and anger at the "palefaces" and their devastating effects on tribal culture—including various "intrusions" like land theft, forced migrations onto reservation lands, and the diseases that killed both Zitkala-Ša's uncle and sister—foreshadows the losses she will
soon face. We are not surprised, then, by her experiences at the boarding school, where she is objectified, tossed around like a doll, and perpetually subject to intrusive treatment by her white “benefactors.” This treatment, like the federal government’s treatment of tribes, breaks each of the tribal norms she so carefully details in her opening stories.

Zitkala-Ša’s representations of tribal life are clearly culturally specific, distinctive to the Dakota tribe. However, they can also be seen as pastoral insofar as they reveal a community that lives and works in harmonious connectivity with a bountiful nonhuman nature. The home she writes into existence resonates with dominant nostalgic narratives that position the pastoral as a counterpoint to excessive civilization. The role of labor in close proximity to nonhuman nature also renders the text, broadly speaking, pastoral. As Greg Garrard notes, an emphasis on a “working rather than an aesthetic relationship to the land” is common to American pastoral formulations, rooted as they are in Jeffersonian agrarianism (Ecocriticism 49). The early stories of tribal life nearly all depict work—women’s work, since we follow women’s lives more closely—including tasks like gathering water, preparing food, drying corn, pumpkins, and fruits, and creating beadwork for moccasins and other items. Given that much of this labor reflects her tribe’s cultural priorities, to situate the stories squarely within an American pastoral tradition would be unfair. Yet Zitkala-Ša’s descriptions of tribal life would have resonated with white readers whose expectations about the West included the belief that frontier expansion had remade environments into pastoral communities like the one she describes.

Contrary to the frontier myth, her pastoral community actually precedes the frontier and its violent, colonial project. By situating Indians as inhabitants of the American West prior to pioneer settlers’ intrusion and by emphasizing her tribe’s various codes, Zitkala-Ša challenges the frontier ideology that would declare her a savage in need of civilizing. At the same time, she debunks the myth of a “pure,” unspoiled natural world that is devoid of human impact—a myth upon which the NPS and much contemporaneous environmental rhetoric relied. The natural home for which she is nostalgic is most definitely inhabited, and any Edenic qualities it possesses stem from human interactions with their environment, not from the absence of humans. Unlike tourists dabling in nature as an antidote to excessive civilization, Zitkala-Ša shows that an everyday life balancing nature and culture is a more realistic and satisfying option. Rather than replicating the romanticization of Indians as a national symbol of “wildness” or the museumification of Indian culture perpetuated by the national parks, she constructs her natural home as structured, egalitarian, welcoming to all living things, and, most important, still functioning in the present. If the state of this home has declined since colonization began, and if Indians are, in that sense, “vanishing,” it is because of the violent displacement and cultural loss imposed on them by non-Natives under the pretense of assimilation.

Zitkala-Ša thus dismantles the common equation of nature with savagery and reconfigures Indian life as “civilized” in its own right. Furthermore, Indian culture, for her, is a more “natural” and healthier form of culture than white civilization, which her stories critique for being alienated from nature and, as such, extremely uncultured. In the world of her stories, Roosevelt’s fears of excessive civilization have come to pass: whites are pale, weak, anonymous automatons carrying out empty routines. A central metaphor reflecting this state is the telegraph pole—an example of the “unnatural nature” created by white civilization. On her way to school in the East, Zitkala-Ša observes that “along the edge of a road thickly bordered with wild sunflowers, some poles like these had been planted by white men . . . and, hearing its low moaning, [she] used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it” (48). Later, she invokes the telegraph pole metaphor again, describing herself as “a cold bare pole . . . planted in a strange earth” (97). In Foucauldian fashion, the civilizing machine carves such poles through institutional discipline, the uprooting and transporting of Indian bodies to the East; the physical alteration of those bodies; the partitioning of individual students; and finally, the indoctrination of the students into new cultural norms at the expense of the old. As the founder of the Carlisle School, Captain Richard C. Pratt, infamously put it, this was a process of “killing the Indian and saving the man.”

In American Indian Stories, the civilizing machine is faceless, powerful, even violent—a combination of spectacle and surveillance in which individual students could be visibly, corporeally punished as “examples” even while institutional power was “permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent . . . capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 214). The “iron routine” of the “paleface day” contains a variety of disciplinary mechanisms, including rote learning, military-style drills, an unsympathetic approach to physical illness, and the separation of the students from each other, as they were separated from their homes and families. Many critics have noted the humiliation expressed in Zitkala-Ša’s description of her first haircut at school as a powerful example of its “cold” discipline, after
which she writes: "Then I lost my spirit" (56). The school and its teachers are described at various points in terms of military barracks and prisons, and Zitkala-Ša slowly realizes that "the large army of white teachers in Indian schools had a larger missionary creed than [she] had suspected" (95). Thrust into the cells of this educational panopticon, she shows her readers how racist white power functions to rob its victims of their spirits through routine, isolation, and the oppressive structure of the institution's physical space.

In addition to depriving her of her language and other cultural elements, alienating her from the nonhuman nature that had been central to her tribal home is also crucial to this "missionary creed." Zitkala-Ša often notes the absence of nature in her new environment. Through indoctrination into white culture, she has "lost all consciousness of the nature world about [her]" and is left feeling that "even nature seemed to have no place for [her]" (96, 69). Given her model of nature as encompassing all life forms without prejudice, the "even" here has significant impact: the loss of nature equates to a loss of spirit and identity that is akin to death. If the "palefaces" are telegraph poles—homogenous tools sculpted out of, but ultimately separate from and fundamentally unlike, the natural world—then she herself becomes one such tool, especially later in life when she becomes a teacher.

The primary way Zitkala-Ša deals with her cultural and geographic alienation in these stories is through nostalgia—for the landscapes of the West, for her home, and for her mother, from whom she has become estranged. Dorothea M. Susag recognizes Zitkala-Ša's nostalgia, suggesting that while we might read in the stories a "nostalgic respect for a 'vanished' way of life," her writing "powerfully surpasses nostalgia" in the final analysis (21). While I concur with Susag's reading of Zitkala-Ša's stories as humanizing and empowering, I argue that it is through, rather than in spite of, nostalgia that the stories achieve their counter-hegemonic effects. Here, Susag displays the prevalent tendency among academic writers to dismiss nostalgia as an inherently conservative or politically impotent narrative. D. K. Meisenheimer Jr. reveals similar assumptions when he writes of Zitkala-Ša's work: "Just as there is no self-pity in Zitkala-Ša, there is no nostalgia" (21). To be fair, Meisenheimer is situating her stories within the genre of regionalism, which he defines as partly "elegiac ethnography"; his essay, then, is invested in formulating progressive potential for regionalism as it attempts to recuperate a "less tragic reading" of her work than the genre typically allows. Yet his definition of regionalism as inherently nostalgic—and nostalgia as inherently "tragic"—limits his reading of Zitkala-Ša's work (not to mention his understanding of regionalism), to the point of refusing to acknowledge the presence of a nostalgia that is everywhere in her stories.

For Susag and Meisenheimer, as for many critics, nostalgia is "naturally" a narrative that longs for, romanticizes, and eulogizes the past, but not a narrative that imagines a future, resists dominant power structures, or enables a critique of oppressive forces. However, it is not necessary—or necessarily desirable—to "surpass" nostalgia, or deny its existence, in order for a text to resist oppression. Rather, as Zitkala-Ša's stories indicate, counter-nostalgia can invert, complicate, and ultimately challenge dominant cultural narratives. In her deployment of nostalgia for nature, Zitkala-Ša picks up on the larger national trend of nostalgia for the landscapes of the American West after the closing of the frontier. White readers of the time would identify with the anxieties about development expressed in these stories and the concomitant loss of intimacy with nature feared by Roosevelt and others. While these dominant nostalgic narratives contributed to the displacement of American Indians in the West, Zitkala-Ša is able to speak to her audience through these very narratives, by carefully inverting them to contest the mistreatment they also justified.

Two key examples of such inversions are her chapters "The Big Red Apples" and "Land of the Red Apples," which combine a rewriting of the Christian Garden of Eden origin story with a reversal of Turner's frontier narrative. In these chapters Zitkala-Ša casts white civilization as the serpent that corrupted humanity and repositions Eden in the pre-frontier West. In "The Big Red Apples," the final chapter in the larger section, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," the trajectory of Western migration is geographically as well as symbolically reversed. Rather than positing the West as the new frontier, the "wonderful Eastern land" is situated as the new land of plenty—home of civilization, progressive technologies, and orchards where the young Indian children "could reach out [their] hands and pick all the red apples [they] could eat" (42). Here, Zitkala-Ša rewrites Turner's frontier narrative: in her Edenic temptation story, East, rather than West, is the promised land. For the young Zitkala-Ša, the East promises a land of abundant resources, "a more beautiful country," and most important, freedom to "roam among [the orchards]" (39, 42). Both physical landscape and the lure of plentiful nature help tempt her away from a home she loves dearly, even in spite of her mother's discouragement. In anticipation of happy times to come, she sets out eagerly for "the Wonderland" (40). With a word
that ironically echoes common descriptions of American national parks as the nation's "Wonderlands," the text reminds us that these are lands from which Indians were expelled.

In case readers are tempted to identify with this sympathetic child's wide-eyed excitement about her journey East, Zitkala-Ša gives us plenty of hints that this mythical place will not live up to the image the palefaces have marketed. Her mother warns her not to heed "the white man's lies," since "their words are sweet, but...their deeds are bitter" (41). While her mother is often a voice of outspoken critique in the stories, an even more overt foreshadowing sentiment comes from Zitkala-Ša herself. Reminding the reader of the stories' retrospective narration and warning the reader of conflict to come, she writes, "Alas! They came, they saw, and they conquered!" (41). Rewriting Julius Caesar's often-quoted declaration of victory, she locates empire as central to the origin story of the West and applies this violent rhetoric to the U.S. assimilationist project. This statement situates American Indians as the victims of empire and sets the stage for the "Fall" that assimilation mandates.

Indeed, once she gets on the "iron horse" that is to transport her East to "Red Apple Country," disillusionment sets in quickly. Instead of a pleasurable ride, she is confronted by "throng[s] of staring palefaces" with "gloomy blue eyes" that discomfit and "scrutinize" the children (47). Several white children sitting near her gawk rudely and "point...at [her] mocassined feet" while their mothers add fuel to the fire by "attract[ing] their children's further notice to [her] blanket." Rendered an exotic commodity subject to the white gaze, the narrator is kept "embarrassed...constantly on the verge of tears" (48). Missionaries try to appease the anxious children with candy—like the mythical apples, bitter for the eager "pioneers." Throughout the stories, whites are cast in the role of Eden's serpent-like devil, whose apple tempts the children with the promise of knowledge through civilization. Like Eve, Zitkala-Ša is exiled from her home after succumbing to temptation; unlike Eve, she does not feel shame at her "naked" exposure to the "semblance of civilization" that was supposed to be her salvation, but instead depicts the serpent as the guilty party (99). Portraying herself in sympathetic terms, Zitkala-Ša is "as frightened and bewildered as the captured young of a wild creature" (45). In contrast to a young girl's fear and naïve expectations, the white colonizers' treatment of the hopeful child and her companions comes across as merciless.

In "The Land of the Red Apples," the first chapter in "The School Days of an Indian Girl," the reader is privy to Zitkala-Ša's disappointment upon arrival. Having found only "whitewashed room[s]," "throng[s] of staring palefaces disturbed and troubled by [her]" and a perpetual homesickness, she "dream[s] of roaming as freely and happily as [she] had...on the Dakota plains" (49, 47). As her situation at school worsens, Zitkala-Ša increasingly longs for home and for her mother. Upon arrival, when she is tossed playfully into the air by a "rosy-cheeked paleface woman," Zitkala-Ša reflects, "My mother had never made a plaything of her daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud" (50). Similar nostalgic moments abound, and Zitkala-Ša often connects them to her biggest mistake: "[Darling] to disregard nature's warning with such recklessness" (85). In short, for the white man's "papers [she] had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks" (97). The youthful narrative voice and repeated assertions of nostalgia help align readers with the story's political critique.

Although her nostalgia is for "Western rolling lands and unlassoed freedom," the West for which she longs is not Turner's. Rather, the "unlassoed freedom" of her childhood stands in stark contrast to the "civilizing machine" of institutionalized learning and disciplinary authority—the civilization Turner's teleology celebrates for "taming" the American West (66). Her nostalgia is also, to a large extent, for nature more generally. "Like a slender tree, [she] had been uprooted from [her] mother, nature, and God," and she longs to return to the "trees and brooks" of her childhood (97). By contrasting nature with the "iron" Eastern civilization she despises, Zitkala-Ša associates Indians with "the natural" and repudiates civilization as a negative, brutal force, which works, in a sense, "against nature." If there is a linear trajectory of degeneration for American Indians—a "Fall" from a natural origin—Zitkala-Ša is clear that it has been initiated by white violence and forced assimilation.

* * *

Eventually—older, disillusioned, and "worn"—Zitkala-Ša becomes a schoolteacher herself. Although she does decide to "spend [her] energies in a work for the Indian race," it is with a sense of conflictedness; she does not subscribe uncritically to ideologies of "uplift" (81). Her eventual resignation from her teaching job follows upon the recognition that "the encroaching frontier settlers" were still conquering, and she tires of looking for "latent good in [her] white co-workers" (96). Shifting the burden of judgment away from herself, the final story concludes with a challenge to readers to reconsider the presumed fruits of assimilation:
Examining the neatly figured pages, and gazing upon the Indian girls and boys bending over their books, the white visitors walked out of the schoolhouse well satisfied: they were educating the children of the red man! They were paying a liberal fee to the government employees in whose able hands lay the small forest of Indian timber. In this fashion many have passed idly through the Indian schools during the last decade, afterward to boast of their charity to the North American Indian. But few there are who have paused to question whether real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization. (98–99)

These oft-cited, if somewhat uncharacteristic, final lines are indicative of the powerful critique Zitkala-Ša is able to weave into her writing. Indeed, their placement in the final story, "Retrospection," leaves little doubt as to her position: "real life" is not found in the Eastern schoolhouse but in the West, at home, close to nature. By identifying herself and all American Indians with the "lost" nature that has been harvested for profit and development—the "small forest of Indian timber"—she links her people with popular understandings of nature as a commodity and generates sympathy for both. The passage also echoes other references in the stories to Indians as natural resources that have been exploited and mistreated. One poignant example occurs in "The Cutting of My Long Hair." After she endures her first haircut—one of many "extreme indignities" she suffers at school—she explains her madre has become "only one of many little animals driven by a herder" (56). Later, she describes herself as one such "herder" when she is "turn[ed] loose to pasture" to recruit new students in the West (85). "Retrospection" and these other references critique the utilitarian ethos, embodied by the NPS and a hallmark of the Progressive Era, that treats both nature and Native people as exploitable, consumable resources.

Moreover, in the final story’s dramatic depiction of busy schoolchildren dutifully learning to assimilate, Zitkala-Ša describes a touristic gaze much like the one inflicted upon the Yosemite Indians at the Field Days. These "examiners" inflict a comparable othering of Native American culture that enables distance, objectification, then domination. Just as the Yosemite tourists were "well satisfied" at seeing their tax dollars at work in protecting both nature and culture, these "charitable" donors to the Indian schools participate in liberal notions of uplift that glorify the civilization Zitkala-Ša calls into question here. Thus, the phrase "liberal fee" becomes suggestively political: liberalism, as represented through the Indian school’s benefactors, is critiqued in this passage for perpetuating cultural loss and homogeneity within capitalism’s hegemony. Through its assumption of a universal, national citizen, and its efforts to compel all Americans to fit that mold, the Indian school extracted a "fee" from its students that was, indeed, "liberal."

Zitkala-Ša leaves her readers to wonder: At what cost is this "civilization" attained? And is it perhaps only a "semblance" of life that has been achieved? By this point in the stories, the reader has learned to identify the schools with a repressive disciplinary system that is cold and harsh to the point of inhumanity and to understand the schools as an example of "liberal strategies of government... that promise to create individuals who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves, master themselves, care for themselves" (Rose 45). Understanding the schools in this light, the reader is prepared for Zitkala-Ša’s message that, despite advertising themselves as an avenue to Americanization, the Eastern schools yield only "lost freedom" rather than the promised fruit of educational opportunity (52). The carrot of freedom-through-assimilation (enforced by the stick of disciplinary institutions) is revealed as an illusory reward. Racism prevents Indians from ever achieving a "civilized" American identity, and assimilation is revealed as a false promise.

A particularly poignant illustration of this racism occurred in Zitkala-Ša’s own life when she represented Earlham College at the Indiana State Oratorical Contest in 1896. There, she was taunted by a large banner with a hand-drawn image of an Indian woman on it, labeled with the derogatory word "squaw." Zitkala-Ša was able to overcome these insults in life (she won second place in the contest) and in her stories where, to her credit, she turned the rhetorical tables on the offending racists by lamenting their "worse than barbarian rudeness," thus describing them as the "savages" they would accuse her of being (79). This real-world example of deploying frontier discourse mirrors the effective rhetorical reversals so prominent in American Indian Stories.

Claiming that not just freedom but also "real life" has been lost, Zitkala-Ša’s counter-nostalgic stories disrupt the period’s dominant nostalgia for “vanishing” Indian culture and locate Indian experience in real time and real space rather than in museumified parks, tourist scrapbooks, or a distant prehistorical era. Yet despite her powerful claims, the extent to which Zitkala-Ša subverted dominant narratives remains contested. As with her isolated acts of rebellion at the school, where the disciplinary mechanism of the educational institution continually attempted to "neutralize the effects of counter-power" that challenged the school’s
authority, it is questionable to what degree her stories’ "counter-power" was defused by the school or absorbed by her white readers (Foucault, Discipline 219).

The Carlisle School tried to deflect Zitkala-Ša’s attacks by “saying that her critique is true of all institutions” and claiming “that anything white America does for the Indians is better than the ‘barbaric’ state in which they are living” (Enoch 12). Far from being “true of all institutions,” though, the kind of power functioning at the Indian schools was geared toward particular ends: the schools did not just train young Indians to blend into “the American ‘melting pot’” but also “to adopt the work discipline of the Protestant ethic and to accept their proper place in society as a marginal class” (Lomawaima 211). A distinct history of oppression—legitimated in part by nostalgic nature narratives—differentials the treatment of Indians from other objects of disciplinary institutions.

Even as Zitkala-Ša struggled to rewie the dominant narratives, the schools helped solidify Indians’ marginality. While being “systematically divested of their land and other bases of an independent life,” Indians were expected to be grateful for the opportunities the schools offered (Lomawaima 211). Much like freed slaves who were considered “uppity” if they did not continue to serve and demean themselves in front of whites, Zitkala-Ša was condemned as ungrateful for her Indian education. Appearing in a 1901 edition of the Red Man, one of two newspapers published by the Carlisle Indian School, a telling review of her story “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” was prefaced with this reprimand: “All that Zitkala-ša [sic] has in the way of literary ability and culture she owes to the good people, who, from time to time, have taken her into their homes and hearts and given her aid. Yet not a word of gratitude or allusion to such kindness on the part of her friends has ever escaped her in any line of anything she has written for the public. By this course she injures herself and harms the educational work in progress for the race from which she sprang” (qtd. in Enoch 117). Implying that Zitkala-Ša did not “know her place,” this reviewer dismissed her story on moral grounds because it called into question the disciplinary goals of the Carlisle School. Through its journalistic propaganda in both newspapers—the Indian Helper and the Red Man—the Carlisle School enforced the same view. “Insolence” was often pointed out as something for “his boys and girls [to] guard against,” lest they be reprimanded by “the Man-on-the-bandstand”—a symbolic representation of the school’s central authority as well as a physical statue recreating that authority, visibly, on the school grounds (Enoch 122).

Likewise, there were advantages and disadvantages that came with being considered the “darling” of her enthusiastic white audience. The following account, which appeared in a 1900 Harper’s Bazaar column called “Persons Who Interest Us,” foregrounds some of the challenges she faced: “A young Indian girl, who is attracting much attention in Eastern cities on account of her beauty and many talents, is Zitkala-Ša [sic] . . . Zitkala-Ša is of the Sioux tribe of Dakota and until her ninth year was a veritable little savage, running wild over the prairie and speaking no language but her own” (qtd. in Fisher vii). Considered noteworthy partly on account of her physical beauty—defined in opposition to her “savage” youth—Zitkala-Ša achieved popularity according to criteria determined by her white audiences. There was always the threat that if she did not conform to these standards—both in writing and in physical appearance—she would be silenced. Within the rigid ideological structures presented by the “Us” of Harper’s elite readership, it is impressive that Zitkala-Ša achieved the amount of success she did, and the apparent ambivalence in many of her stories comes as no surprise.

Yet it is clear that, even in the face of such powerful forces, Zitkala-Ša revises the dominant frontier narrative. It is not a savage wildness that has been overcome by the assimilation process, but “wild freedom” that has been captured and sniffed out by cultural imperialism and violent conquest (8, my emphasis). Rather than longing for an idyllic past that has mysteriously disappeared, American Indian Stories longs for a historically rooted, “re-placed,” tribal community. Her longing details how her loss came about and expresses how much was lost through the violent displacement enabled by frontier rhetoric. This loss is precisely what generates resistance; through displaying her own nostalgia for nature and exploiting that of her audience, Zitkala-Ša effectively makes her critique. Literature, particularly the genre of sentimental fiction within which she was working, provides the ideal outlet for the manipulation of readers’ emotions in the service of fostering critical thinking about past and present. By the end of the stories, readers have been forced to ask “questions concerning [their] native land, native language, and the laws that govern” them; the natural “home” for which readers may long has become far more complicated (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 162). Capitalizing on the modern period’s widespread frontier nostalgia and inverting that nostalgia through redefinitions of both nature and Indian culture, Zitkala-Ša’s stories achieve a measure of resistance to white norms.

She also attempted to bring about reform through existing political organizations as well as the one she founded in 1926: the National
Council of American Indians. She served as president of this organization until she died in 1938. Prior to that, she worked as secretary of the Society of the American Indian from 1916 until its dissolution in 1920. Zitkala-Ša’s marriage to Raymond T. Bonnin also involved her in politics, since her husband worked as a lawyer for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. *American Indian Stories* includes her most overtly political text, “America’s Indian Problem.” This final piece in the collection overturns the myth of Europeans as compassionate protectors of Indians through an examination of the Bureau of Indian Affairs that highlights its “sham protection,” its “fraud, corruption, and institutional incompetence,” and its erroneous characterization of native residents as “wards” of the state rather than sovereign citizens (192–93). She directly addresses white women activists and attempts to enlist their support in helping American Indians “have [their] day in court” (186). In fiction and in her life, Zitkala-Ša’s work undermined white civilization as a reliable touchstone and began to carve out a self-determined natural, cultural, and historical space for American Indians.

Even though she formed her own family, Zitkala-Ša never reconciled with her mother, from whom she was alienated in the ways her stories describe. As such, loss and nostalgia underlay her personal life and political career much as they do her stories. Counter-nostalgic longing for a natural home, where all living beings are treated with respect regardless of gender, race, or other social constructions, provided Zitkala-Ša with a model for socially just societies—societies that are unrealized in the present and, so, are relegated to the future even as they draw on the past. Like all pleas for social justice, hers resounds “only for those ears that are bent with compassion to hear it” (68).

“It is out of fashion these days to look backward rather than forward,” admits John Crowe Ransom at the start of the opening essay in *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1). For Ransom and the other Southern agrarians, looking backward was a radical, if not a fashionable, way to counter a modernity they accused of breeding alienated individuals who had lost touch with community and place. These writers found an ideal “extended metaphor” in the American South, home of “a society, they felt, in which leisure, tradition, aesthetic and religious impulses had not been lost in the pursuit of economic gain” (Rubin xi, viii). Along with Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson, Ransom was one of the “Nashville Fugitives,” a group of writers at Vanderbilt University who began publishing poetry and criticism in the *Fugitive* and other publications in the early 1920s that lamented the debased state of life and the fine arts within an increasingly industrial and materialistic nation. The Fugitives joined forces with the Southern agrarians—writers, teachers, and other “men of letters”—to publish *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930 (Rubin xi).

The agrarians constructed Southern tradition out of two basic principles: first, a respect for nature—coded as white—and second, an explicitly anti-industrial and anti-national political agenda. Writing against what they saw as an “industrial regime,” the agrarians prized a regional culture that valued “regard for a certain terrain” (the Southern landscape); tradition, identified with white European cultural heritage and tied to the aristocratic South; leisure, the presumed result of cultivating
tradition; and labor, which should take place in nature and proceed “leisurely” (1). The South was a “lost cause” that was worth fighting for, even if it was likely to be a difficult, even unwinnable battle (2).

Most notably for my study, I’ll Take My Stand yokes nostalgia to a highly racialized ideal of nature as it sounds its call to arms in support of “the Southern tradition” (3). In his provocatively titled essay “Reconstructed But Unregenerate,” Ransom recommends physical and cultural “rootedness” as the best prescription for a country sickened by industrialization. He decries progressives as having lost touch with traditional values by obsessively looking forward. According to Ransom, “The progressivist says in effect: Do not allow yourself to feel homesick” (6).

Thus, nostalgia—feeling homesick—becomes, for Ransom and the other agrarians, a necessary corrective to progressive values and, as such, an inherently conservative emotion and narrative. Ransom defines nostalgia as follows:

Memories of the past are attended with a certain pain called nostalgia... Nostalgia is a kind of growing pain, psychically speaking. It occurs to our sorrow when we have decided that it is time for us, marching to some magnificent destiny, to abandon an old home, an old provincial setting, or an old way of living to which we had become habituated. It is the complaint of human nature in its vegetative aspect, when it is plucked up by the roots from the place of its origin and transplanted in foreign soil, or even left dangling in the air. And it must be nothing else but nostalgia, the instinctive objection to being transplanted, that chiefly prevents the deracination of human communities and their complete geographical dispersion as the casualties of an insatiable wanderlust. (6)

For Ransom, nostalgia operates as both a narrative tool—to manipulate readers into sharing the author’s political beliefs—and a collectively shared sentiment, which readers might choose to adopt. Ransom recovers nostalgia as a productive emotional experience that grounds an individual or a culture in the conservative values of home, family and community. He presumes nostalgia will “cure” victims of progress by causing them to appreciate the values of staying, or returning, home. More than that, his definition links nostalgia with mobility: Ransom posits nostalgia as a much-needed antidote not just to progress itself but also to the migrations—both actual and symbolic—that unchecked progress spurs.

Ransom picks up on nostalgia’s historical meanings—its original “diagnosis” in soldiers and exiles—when he describes the emotion as a homesickness felt by displaced people. Yet there is a strange paradox embedded in his definition. How can this “growing pain” be both the result of an alluring “march” toward “some magnificent destiny” and a backlash against the invasive act of being “plucked up by the roots” from one’s “origin”? How can it be both an unfortunate repercussion of “an insatiable wanderlust” and a resistance to being “transplanted in foreign soil”? This contradiction involves a fundamental difference in agency and intentionality. That is, Ransom’s explanation contains a tension between nostalgia that results from deliberate action—the consequence borne by the marchers and insatiable wanderers—and a passively afflicted nostalgia, suffered by the uprooted transplants. Indeed, we might say there are two different versions of nostalgia at work here, and two different groups of people experiencing this “originally” longing.

On the surface, Ransom’s prose assumes “wanderlust” is a trait common to all modern individuals, albeit a trait one can and should keep in check. Many of his white readers would share the assumption of a common “magnificent” destiny, whether or not they shared Ransom’s wariness of this temptation.1 But the experiences of the passive nostalgics—the ones whose nostalgia was sparked as they were “plucked up” and either “transplanted” or “left dangling in the air”—are also invoked by Ransom’s argument. Perhaps unintentionally, Ransom’s dual account of nostalgia calls to mind others who were forced to leave home: the uprooted slaves upon whose labor the “leisure” of the Southern aristocracy depended. Just as Ransom conflates labor and leisure—after all, labor was leisurely if you were a member of the Southern aristocracy during slavery—he confuses voluntary travel with the forced migrations of the slave trade and the migrations of blacks out of the South during this time.

Of course, the degree to which South-to-North migrations were “forced” is debatable. Many historians characterize the Great Migration as a demonstration of agency on the part of Southern blacks.3 Still, it seems important to recognize the constraining forces—economic and otherwise—directing this migratory flow, even as we celebrate its landmark power. Ransom’s rhetoric becomes even more interesting when we take into account the historian James Grossman’s observations that many Southern whites attributed the Great Migration “to ‘the Negro’s love of travel’ or ‘wanderlust’” (56). This “travel” narrative fueled white hopes that black migrants would return to the South to resume their “natural” role as the region’s primary labor force. In reality, few migrants did return (Grossman, “Black Labor” 56). Although both white and black
communities had natural connections to Southern landscapes according to this formulation, whites linked themselves to the leisurely enjoyment of nature, while the role of blacks was tied to labor. In effect, the “natural home” narrative reified both nature and African Americans as (still) the property of white Southern aristocrats.

Ransom’s essay suggests close ties between race and region, but it only alludes to another kind of nostalgia that emerges more clearly in some of the other pieces in the collection. For instance, Stark Young’s capstone essay, “Not in Memoriam, but in Defense,” makes mention of “the nostalgia for one’s own blood,” a phrase that leaves little doubt that the Southern culture for which these authors are nostalgic is understood as a natural expression of whiteness (336). Even for Ransom, those whose “blood” renders them subordinate to this elite group are a spectral presence; they slip into the text unannounced, despite his determination to erase the violence inherent in slavery. When African Americans do receive mention, Ransom justifies their position in the Old South by claiming that “people were for the most part in their right places. Slavery was a feature monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice.” He insists that “all were committed to a form of leisure, and that their labor itself was leisurely” (14). Given the racism so deeply embedded in this text, it is not surprising that Ransom seems unaware of his paradoxical definition of nostalgia; that he claims to speak for “all” Southerners, or that he neglects to explore the nostalgia resulting from the historical or present-day trajectories of those whom his Southern practices uprooted.

Although Ransom and the other Southern agrarians might be considered extremists in their racist conceptions of the past, the nostalgia they cherished was powerful in its time and beyond. Like most traditions, theirs was carefully crafted. Part of the anthology’s appeal lies in the way it tells the story of that cultural tradition. Their simple, inspirational tale of an essentially good community helps generate longing for a South in which everyone is “in their right place.” Imagine an origin that is coherent, reductive, and romanticized allows these writers to sublimate the extremely problematic realities underpinning such a story—in this case, white supremacy, forced migration and enslavement, and the centrality of black labor to the South’s “way of life.” Their traditional South was “a society that perhaps never existed” but, in their minds, “should have existed” and so might serve as a model for the future (xiv, original emphasis). While some of the contributors admit they “can never go back” to this way of life, the nostalgic origin still works as an ideal, as a guide for present-day beliefs (Young 328).

Like Thomas Dixon Jr.’s The Clansman—but without the violent struggle—I’ll Take My Stand constructs a narrative of homeland defense: the South is being attacked by Northern-led industrialism, which is threatening to deprive the region of its cultural heritage. Their manifesto retaliates against this perceived invasion by conjuring an ideal of a lost pastoral environment in which humans and nature coexist peacefully, aesthetic appreciation of nature is an integral part of everyday life, and leisurely labor allows ample time to enjoy the beautiful landscape. Their nostalgia aligns them with Turner’s in that both told stories of national decline and contrasted a “fallen” present with an Edenic past. But unlike Turner and most other early-century proponents of nostalgia for the lost frontier, the agrarians were not nationalistic; nor were they primarily interested, like Roosevelt, in regenerating manliness by replaying the violence of the frontier. Although the agrarians did fear for their manhood—they end their statement of principles with the threat of “impotence” (xxx)—and they certainly shared Roosevelt’s concerns about overcivilization, the rhetorical focus of I’ll Take My Stand is on recreating a pastoral environment, not a frontier, to which to return. This focus makes sense given their vested interest in minimizing the violence that enabled their “leisurely” Southern culture.

Contrary to progress-courting pioneers, who were fighting a losing battle—because “nature wears out man before man can wear out nature”—the agrarians claimed a harmonious relationship with nature, not a combative one (9). Theirs was a way of life “deeply grounded in the love of the tiller for the soil, where affection for a “spot of ground” was one of life’s fundamental principles (18–19). Leo Marx points out that “the soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urbanized landscape is largely a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness” (Marx 6). It is precisely such a “green republic” that the agrarians construct and romanticize, and the end result is a nonfictional example of what Marx calls the sentimental pastoral (5). Given the history of agrarianism in the Southern United States and the popularity of early-century regionalist movements, tapping into the widespread modern nostalgia for the pastoral was a timely tactic for this expository manifesto.

While the violence embedded in frontier narratives is comparatively easy to pinpoint, the violence in pastoral narratives can be as harmful, but less obvious. Just as the frontier requires the domination of nature and those people associated with it, the pastoral can justify (or obscure)
social relations that are hierarchical, racist, and imperialist. What at first seem to be incompatible narratives—in this case, Ransom's nostalgic invocation of a lost pastoral world and his simultaneous brushing aside of those whose labor made that world possible—are integrally connected. If "in the pastoral economy nature supplies most of the herdsman's needs and, even better, nature does virtually all of the work," then the agrarians' "nature" is synonymous with slaves (Marx 23). As Jeffrey Myers argues in relation to the nation's best-known agrarian, Thomas Jefferson, "racial and ecological hegemony merge" in narratives (like Notes on the State of Virginia) that define white Americans in opposition both to people of color and to nature (19). The Southern agrarians' "stand" reminds us, then, how race and nature are, to use Myers's phrase, "converging stories."

Even today, a pastoral ideal continues to resound in some contemporary environmental writing. Agrarianism is sometimes still characterized in terms similar to those of the Southern agrarians. In The Art of the Commonplace, for instance, Wendell Berry posits a Jeffersonian agrarian ideal as an antidote to Americans' "general homelessness" (Wizrza vii). Although Norman Wirzba claims in his introduction that Berry's essays are "not nostalgic" (xix), there is a measure of carefully doled out longing in them. The cultural shifts Berry challenges are similar to the ones the Southern agrarians resisted: an unselfconscious embrace of progress, a loss of leisure time, an unnatural separation between humans and their environments, an increasingly specialized capitalist economy (which has become primarily knowledge-based in recent decades), and the sense that we have "cut ourselves off from [our] roots" (ix). But Berry's nostalgia is not for a way of life based on exploiting others. To the contrary, in "Racism and the Economy" he argues that the exploitation of African Americans through slavery was based not strictly on racism but on a desire to avoid hard work; he clarifies that "their labor promised to free us of the obligations of stewardship" (47). Berry's work thus highlights one of the realities the Southern agrarians' nostalgia overlooked: that slave labor enabled others' freedom.

Berry's belief that migration to cities was an instance of "dispossession" and a lost opportunity (50) aligns him with bell hooks, whose often-anthologized essay "Touching the Earth" also reminds us that "black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers" (hooks 173). She argues for the importance of reaffirming cultural traditions based on "renew[ing] our relationship to the earth" and "remember[ing] the way of our ancestors" (173). In moving to reconnect African Americans with nonhuman nature, hooks advocates an environmental justice ethic based on an awareness of blacks' agrarian history. Even though Berry self-identifies as "something of an anachronism" in contemporary America (4), he and hooks both insist that agrarianism is not an outdated or archaic way of life but rather an ethic that can be lived out in the present.

Whether these new agrarian manifestos seem anachronistic or not today is debatable. But during the 1920s and '30s, when many regionalist writers and artists articulated similar values, they likely would have seemed timely, if perhaps a bit "out of fashion." The Southern agrarians were far from alone in valuing a strong attachment to place and a notion of nature as central to everyday life. Most interwar regionalists hoped to counter the negative aspects of modernization—overindustrialization, progress for progress's sake, poorly planned urbanization, the rise of consumer culture, and the emergence of a particularly modern brand of alienation—with an emphasis on folk culture and local heritage. The following chapter entertains the idea of the Harlem Renaissance as a kind of regional movement, albeit one that diverges from writers who demonized cities and glorified rural lifestyles. Even some urban-set novels, like Claude McKay's Home to Harlem—the subject of chapter 2—did not entirely abandon the pastoral or the nostalgia associated with it. Indeed, McKay deploys nostalgic memories of pastoral settings in the rural South and romantic ideals of Haiti (both of which may have been influenced by his own nostalgia for his Jamaican homeland) alongside celebrations of African primitivism to expose negative living and working conditions in the present. Like Zitkala-Ša, McKay identified himself and other black Americans with a more natural form of culture that countered modernist anxieties about becoming overly civilized. But while Zitkala-Ša refused to be labeled "savage" (indeed, she hurled the insult back at her oppressors), McKay tapped into, embraced, and revised modern narratives of "primitivism" that marked African Americans as the exclusive owners of desirable cultural traits. McKay also exhibits the simultaneously local and global dimensions of modernity when he takes nostalgia beyond national boundaries, where it can resonate at both personal and transnational scales. Juggling frontier and pastoral discourse, McKay's work attests to the flexibility and impact of pastoral nostalgia—even if the past it invokes is far from perfect.