

**Bioregional Literature at the “Continent’s End”: California Writers, Agenda-Setting, and  
Citizen Mobilization for Local Environmental Protection**

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**Abstract**

Throughout the 20th century, California set the national standard in environmental policymaking. By the 1970s, California's uniquely attractive natural scenery had become a major part of its residents' identity, creating a high degree of citizen mobilization for stringent environmental regulation. An under-researched driver of this citizen mobilization is California's robust tradition of regional environmental literature. Media scholars have examined the agenda-setting function of mass media, but have not paid as much attention to the ways in which literature influenced public opinion. Literary scholars argue that literature that deeply engages with the local "bioregion" engenders environmental thinking in its readers, but these scholars have struggled to articulate how cultivating a sense of place actually creates policy outcomes. This project analyzes a narrow corpus of regional literature that I define as "bioregional"—works that elevate California's unique landscape to become absolutely integral to the narrative's plot, such that readers come away with a deeper conviction that their region is worth protecting. Through a bioregionalist perspective, I read my assembled corpus of prose and poetry from the Central Coast and Owens Valley, two regions with robust local literary cultures. I find that literature has influenced policymaking in California by serving an agenda-setting function, fostering awareness and prioritization of a bioregional perspective among citizen-policymakers.

**Keywords:** California, bioregionalism, agenda-setting, environmental literature, John Steinbeck, Robinson Jeffers, Henry Miller, Mary Austin

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## Introduction

In 1960, a county planning commission in the rural Central Coast of California commissioned a design firm to resolve a critical debate: as their rugged cliffside region became more popular with vacationers and pilgrims, would they sprint towards development or restrict building to protect their coast's pristine scenery? The Monterey County planning commission chose environmental protection over commercial opportunity, opting for stringent density controls on future development. Five decades prior, a coalition of farmers in the high desert's Owens Valley found themselves dealing with the consequences of the opposite decision. Los Angeles' water agency, with minimal input from Valley stakeholders, had bought out water rights throughout the valley and diverted the Owens River southward. Emboldened by an environmental politics that emphasized resource autonomy, the farmers hoped to intimidate construction crews with guns and explosives. Their protests were no match, though, for the buying power of Los Angeles' water-seeking elite. In both the Central Coast and Owens Valley, local citizen-policymakers advocated environmental planning that was specifically designed for the unique ecology of their home regions. Their environmentalist politics was the product of many cultural forces. This project examines one such cultural force, California's bioregional literature, for its special influence on citizen-policymakers' environmental thinking.

Literature is no stranger in environmental policy histories: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, after all, published in 1962 to national publicity and acclaim, is widely regarded as the spark for the modern American environmental movement (Brinkley 265). Countless works of regional environmental literature, from Cape Cod to Big Sur, also drew in smaller contingents of readers who became passionate environmental advocates for their local landscapes (Brinkley 7, 346). California in particular has a robust history of environmental literature, with local authors like

John Steinbeck and Mary Austin writing themselves into the national canon. Though California policy historians claim that these writers' ideas affected local environmental planning, the path by which literature influenced policymakers' attitudes remains unclear and understudied (Brooks, *Big Sur*; Vogel). I argue that, in California, bioregional writing created awareness and prioritization of local environmental issues among citizen-policymakers. Environmental literature convinced readers that their region was worth protecting; as a result, regional literary archetypes appear throughout coastal protection plans and water policy debates.

Historians of California's environmental policy often invoke the state's culture of "citizen mobilization" to explain its progressive streak. To understand citizen mobilization better, this project turns to agenda-setting theory, which posits that mass media fosters awareness and prioritization of political issues among the public. Agenda-setting scholarship has so far ignored the potential for literature as media that can influence environmentalist discourse and policymaking. Simultaneously, literary scholarship on regional placemaking and environmental politics has not been able to articulate how certain literary characteristics appear within the policy process. This interdisciplinary project addresses these gaps by investigating the regional literary cultures of the Central Coast and Owens Valley regions. I draw a novel connection between bioregional literature, a subset of regional literature uniquely concerned with the physical landscape and local politics, and an agenda-setting framework. Ultimately, bioregional literature has served an agenda-setting function in California policy history, encouraging citizen-policymakers to incorporate bioregional ideas into their environmental policymaking.

Recognizing that bioregional writing can pierce the public imagination and ignite environmentalist discourse, it remains an open question whether literature's agenda-setting function persists into modern politics. Nevertheless, the legacy of environmental writers like

John Steinbeck, Robinson Jeffers, and Mary Austin looms large in modern policymaking today. By identifying literary influences on policymaking documents of California's past, this project equips scholars with a toolbox to consider the interplay between literature and policy in California's present.

## **Background**

California is a place of exceptional regional diversity. The U.S. Geological Survey identifies 10 bioregions within the state of California, spanning desert, coastline, forest, and mountains (Western Ecological Research Center). With such ecological diversity comes a lineage of strong regional cultures, including regional literary cultures that make heavy reference to the land. In the earlier days of California literature, John Muir published lasting narratives of his time in the Sierras, Mary Hunter Austin narrated life in the high desert, and John Steinbeck and Robinson Jeffers wrote California's Central Coast into the national imagination. The canon of California literature also includes dozens of writers whose works chronicled urban and farmworker experiences in California. The appetite for environmental literature set in California has not lapsed, and California's ecological literary tradition continues today with novels like Richard Powers' 2018 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* and Marianne Wiggins' 2022 novel *Properties of Thirst*.

California also became a leader in environmental policymaking during the 1960s and 1970s. In these decades, the state outpaced the federal government to pass nation-leading, stringent environmental regulations, including:

- Limiting automobile tailpipe emissions in 1964;
- Establishing the California Air Resources Board in 1967;
- Placing restrictions on coastal oil drilling after 1969;
- Passing the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in 1970;

- Securing residents' access to the beachfront in 1976; and
- Enacting Title 20 appliance energy efficiency standards in 1977. (Vogel 4-5)

While the government in Sacramento took the lead role in these policy achievements, voters also advocated environmental protection via California's ballot initiative system, like creating the California Coastal Commission via Proposition 20 in 1972. Even more importantly for this project, a number of local governing bodies took action coinciding with these statewide policy pushes. Citizen-policymakers participated in local governing bodies like planning boards, bringing their own environmental politics into policymaking fora. Given California's diverse landscape, local policymakers had to respond to different regional geographies and environmental policy challenges. California's combination of geographic diversity, environmentally mobilized communities, and mosaic of robust literary cultures makes California an ideal theater for an inquiry into the relationship between regional ecological thinking and local environmental policymaking.

## **Literature Review**

This inquiry takes place at the intersection of well-trodden scholarly fields: regional literature of the American West, ecocriticism and bioregionalism, and California environmental policy history. The project takes cues from regional literary critics, who carved out stringent standards for the genre. I follow their mandate to only consider works in which a unique sense of place pervades the narrative and impacts characters and plot. Bioregionalist literary criticism also figures prominently in this project. Bioregionalists analyze literature from the perspective that environmental thinking should be oriented around ecological regions rather than political boundaries. This project relies on (bio)regional criticism to construct a working definition of a bioregional work.

While some writers explicitly adopted the bioregional worldview, many other Californian writers not associated with the movement nevertheless published works that can be categorized as “bioregional” for their deep engagement with local biota and topography. Though bioregionalism has been influential in the academy, its critics are skeptical that its strong placemaking is actually enough to create practical environmental action. This paper posits that the characteristics of bioregional literature that make it *bioregional*—meaningful engagement with the specific landscape, and a sense of place that intervenes with human characters via plot—have reached California policymakers in ways that other bioregionalist projects could not. This literature has influenced policy by placing bioregional values on the public agenda of local citizen-policymakers (McCombs & Shaw). In the Central Coast and Owens Valley, two California bioregions, citizen-policymakers incorporated archetypes of local environmental literature into their policymaking projects.

### *The Literary Region*

One pioneering writer of the American West, Mary Hunter Austin, writing from the 1900s to 1930s, already complained in those early years that her region’s literature was being discounted by the American literary elite. Contending that stories with strong regional identity were actually the “most intensively experienced”, Austin argued that the literary establishment should take regional writing more seriously (101). Austin believed that descriptive nature writing on its own was not enough to create this unique reading experience. Instead, she lays out the following criteria to stringently define regional literature: “the region must enter constructively into the story... as the instigator of plot” (105) and the story must be “reflecting in some fashion the essential qualities of the land” (106). The works analyzed in this project fit Austin’s narrow definition of regional literature.



Several decades later, in response to a wave of scholarship on globalization, studies of regional identity regained popularity in the academy. Similar to Mary Austin, 1990s theorist Michael Kowalewski expressed frustration at the shallowness of much of this resurgent regional literary scholarship. Kowalewski argues that regional literature became a fad, only entering serious academic discussions when it overlapped with more popular critical categories of 1990s academia: race, class, and gender (173-174). According to Kowalewski, many ecocritics claim that the region is important but end up discussing sense of place only superficially. By creating a “literature of place without a place to evoke” (178), these writers extract shallow universal themes from works that actually advance profound local themes. Incorporating Kowalewski’s arguments into this project, works under consideration must not deprioritize local themes by attempting to broaden a work’s scope to a national or universal scale.

### *Bioregionalism*

Regional literary criticism evolved in the 1970s with the advent of bioregionalism, an interdisciplinary philosophy that instructs people to orient their ecological thinking around a local sense of place. Crucially, bioregions are delineated by natural boundaries—watersheds and forest boundaries, for example—rather than political borders (Lynch et al 2-3). Theorists argue that stronger environmental thinking emerges from internal coherent bioregions compared to regions defined by external political boundaries like “California” (Lynch 22). In other words, a Monterey resident’s environmental politics are more likely to emerge from their Central Coast identity than their Californian identity.

Compared to other theories in environmental studies, bioregionalism is goal-oriented, prescriptive, and necessarily political (Heise 34). Bioregionalism demands a practice of “living-in-place,” where lifestyle choices are designed to match the local ecology.

Living-in-place requires an active process of “reinhabitation,” which often takes the form of ecosystem restoration, environmental pedagogy, and locally-sourced buying habits (Lynch et al 6). Bioregionalists believe that reinhabitant politics are better suited for naturally delimited areas (e.g. a watershed) rather than arbitrary politically delimited areas (Lynch 17). Proponents of bioregionalism assert that individuals’ sustainable choices encourage and inspire environmental policymaking (Lynch et al 3).

In the 1980s, a crop of essayists and novelists began to build a literary culture in explicit pursuit of the bioregional project (Aberley 24). These bioregional writers argued that by appealing to a dedicated local readership, their literature could help renew a sense of place and motivate readers to resist environmentally harmful practices (Lynch et al 13). Their goal was to enable readers to “imagine how they move... from the word to the world” (Lynch et al 16).

Though several 1980s writers were explicit adherents of bioregionalism, bioregional thinking can also be observed in earlier regional literature. To identify these earlier bioregional works, I construct a working definition of a bioregionalist perspective. To do so, I synthesize Austin and Kowalewski’s definitions of “regional literature,” Lawrence Buell’s concept of the “environmentally oriented work,” and Tom Lynch’s description of bioregional literature. Literary scholar Lawrence Buell defines an environmentally oriented work as one in which:

- 1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history;
- 2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest;
- 3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation;
- 4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (Buell 7-8).

For a work to be bioregional, though, an environmental orientation is not enough. The narrative must also foreground the local. According to Tom Lynch, “aspects of literature that are

often perceived as backdrop, setting, or localized trivia shift to the foreground and take on new interest when perceived through the bioregional prism” (Lynch et al 22). Lynch rounds out this project’s working standard of bioregional literature; he prioritizes works that are written by the people in the region, for people in the region. According to Lynch, literature that emerges in this home-grown way contributes the most to bioregional imagination (27-28). Admittedly, Lynch’s criterion does narrow the corpus of bioregional literature. However, it ensures that books that get the label “bioregional” will be received among the local readership as legitimate additions to the region’s literary culture rather than books for faraway cultural elites.

A narrower bioregionalist perspective has particular strengths: it guards against the overly broad view that ecocritics often fall into, a view of human-landscape interactions only as a means to analyze other social phenomena (Lynch et al 16). Bioregional approaches are especially useful in studies of California, a place whose identity is so colored by potent social connotations that the varied natural landscapes beneath are often obscured (Lynch 26). With bioregionalism as an analytical tool, I can read for signs of regional environmental thinking in *all* literature that engages with Central Coast and Owens Valley landscapes, whether or not that engagement was intended to support projects of reinhabitation.

Collectively, scholarship on environmental literature suggests that a work must meet a minimum standard of engagement with its landscape to qualify as (bio)regional literature. This project defines “bioregional” literature as works that elevate local landscape particularities to become absolutely integral to the narrative's plot, such that readers come away with a deeper conviction that their region is worth protecting.

| Scholar    | Standard for Bioregional Literature                                                                      |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Austin     | “Reflects the essential qualities of the physical landscape;” landscape intervenes in the plot           |
| Buell      | Promotes an ecological worldview and a sustainable environmental ethic                                   |
| Lynch      | Local authorship and readership                                                                          |
| Kowalewski | Local themes are not deprioritized by attempts to broaden a work’s scope to national or universal themes |

The table above serves as a reference for the four criteria that support this project’s working definition of bioregional literature. For the purposes of this paper, I will first prove that the works I discuss meet these standards for bioregional literature before examining the impacts of those works on citizen-policymakers and the public agenda.

### *Criticisms of Bioregionalism*

Even ardent bioregionalists like Tom Lynch acknowledge that bioregional literature may not have the policymaking impact that its supporters claim. Lynch asks, without a clear or convincing answer: “Are words enough?” (Lynch 232). He feels unsteady and skeptical about making the claim that literature has real influence on policymaking, despite dedicating his academic career to exploring bioregional literature. To assuage Lynch’s skepticism, this project makes a novel argument by supplementing literary criticism with concepts from public policy studies. Answering Lynch’s question, this paper takes the stance that words are, in fact, enough to influence the values of citizen-policymakers and policy provisions themselves.

Literary theorist Ursula Heise issues a robust critique of bioregionalism, arguing that its localist approach is inadequate for a globalized world experiencing planetary-scale environmental problems like climate change (Heise 38-39; Lynch et al 8-9). She is skeptical that an “ethic of proximity”, especially as it manifests in pedagogy and organizing, actually affects

environmental policy (Heise 33). For Heise, the bioregionalist project of reinhabitation does not “guarantee its connection with the grassroots-democratic and egalitarian politics that many environmentalists envision when they advocate place-based communities” (21).

Most importantly, Heise defines a gap in literary studies that guides this project: bioregionalists have not been able to explain how local and regional environmental awareness, the elusive “sense of place”, actually leads to practical environmental policymaking (46). Heise is skeptical that traditional bioregionalist projects, like pedagogy and academic convenings, move the needle towards reinhabitation among the general public. Responding to Heise’s skepticism requires looking beyond the traditional strategies by which bioregionalists aim to influence politics; instead of focusing on education and events, this project asks whether literature directly activates an environmental politics in its readers (Aberley 16). I argue that literature introduced bioregional ideas to influential citizen-policymakers in California, thereby affecting policy outcomes.

### *Citizen Mobilization through Agenda-Setting*

To fill the gap between bioregional literary culture and environmental policy documents, I reference public policy scholarship on agenda-setting. Coined in the 1970s, *agenda-setting theory* posits that mass media – particularly the news media, but also publishing and social media – determines which political issues are most salient among the public (McCombs & Shaw 177). Founding agenda-setting scholars argue that voters experience a “need for orientation” that motivates curiosity about one’s environment: the mass media steps in to fulfill this need for orientation (McCombs & Weaver 1). Already, bioregional literature, by addressing curiosities about one’s physical environment directly, seems well-suited for an agenda-setting framework.

Early agenda-setting studies were quantitative in nature, correlating news mentions of issues with surveyed voters' perceptions of those issues' salience (McCombs & Shaw). This quantitative approach works well to study traditional news media and social media, where audience reach is immediate and quantifiable. However, it falters in the longer timescales of impact that literature operates within. Agenda-setting scholars subsequently identified a qualitative framework that is more directly applicable to this literary project because it functions for mass media generally, including publishing. Communications scholar Maxwell McCombs claims that media becomes agenda-setting when it creates first an *awareness* of a political issue, then a *prioritization* of that issue. Together, the first- and second-order impacts of media mobilize citizens towards corresponding political convictions, compelling policymakers to respond to citizens' burgeoning politics (McCombs 8).

This paper analyzes the extent to which bioregional works have achieved awareness and prioritization among their local readership. In doing so, McCombs' agenda-setting model becomes a guide to locate the subtle influence of environmental words on environmental wins. Agenda-setting scholarship has primarily concerned news media and social media, and its application to literary media in this paper is a novel and productive intervention in both literary and policy scholarship.

### *Prefiguring Case Studies in the Central Coast and Owens Valley*

I have selected two regions in California to examine the relationship between bioregional literature and environmental policymaking: the Central Coast and Owens Valley. Both regions have been the subject of robust literary analysis and policy histories which bear mentioning here.

## The Central Coast

Regional literary analyses of the Central Coast often define the literary region around its literary icons, including novelist John Steinbeck and poets Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder. The “Continent’s End”, as Jeffers called the region, suits itself to literary depictions that tend towards the apocalyptic, cosmic, and mystic (Jeffers 24-25, Everson). According to literary scholar David Wyatt, Central Coast authors typically imbue their works with an “apocalyptic significance” that matches the “ended world” they observe at the California coastline. Characters in these writers’ environmental narratives meet elemental deaths, paralleling the death of the frontier at the California cliffs and rugged Pacific (Everson). The association between the West Coast and violence animates writer William Everson’s notable study of the region: *Archetype West*. According to Wyatt and Everson, the realization that the United States’ new land had “run out” pushed local writers towards more sustainable modes of thinking (Everson, Beegel et al 21). In Steinbeck’s novels, characters’ destinies parallel their perspective on the environment: “the most redemptive sense that humans have is a kind of consciousness of the ecological web, a sense of their interdependence on one another” (Beegel et al 19). The Central Coast is a strong candidate for a case study of bioregional literature because its authors seem especially committed to exploring how the environment determines human destinies.

On the policy history side, David Vogel’s account of California environmental policy argues that “citizen mobilization” drove the state’s innovative coastal protection policy. Entire volumes also exist on California coastal policy, including Thomas J. Osborne’s 2018 biography of notable California Coastal Commission director Peter Douglas and Shelley Alden Brooks 2017 history of Big Sur. Brooks’ work prefigures my own by attributing strides in Central Coast protection in part to the local literary legacy of Jeffers, Steinbeck, and Henry Miller. I source

evidence from these three histories to prove that these literary figures influenced local policy documents.

### **Owens Valley**

The Owens Valley has an equally robust body of applicable literary theory scholarship. Wyatt devotes a chapter of *The Fall into Eden*, his exploration of California environmental literature, to Mary Austin's depiction of the arid Owens Valley. Wyatt argues that Austin's abiding literary interest – isolated desert landscapes – emerged from her itinerant childhood. Critics have also written general treatises on literary depictions of arid lands. For example, Tom Lynch's *Xerophilia* discusses how bioregional approaches might open new lines of inquiry in Southwestern literary studies. The aridity of the region, according to Lynch, creates a unique regional literary tradition that yielded different environmental priorities than elsewhere in the United States.

Owens Valley water management has been the subject of several policy histories, most notably Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* and William Kahrl's *Water and Power*. Vogel's *California Greenin'* also dedicates a chapter to the state's management of the Valley's water resources. I draw upon these works to guide my examination of the influence of Austin's work on local watershed management policy.

### **Analytical Plan**

Bioregional projects pursue goals that are especially well-matched with agenda-setting theory: they aim to build *awareness* of the local environment and *prioritization* of ways of life that fit within a sustainable local ecology. To make the interdisciplinary connection between



regional literary theory and agenda-setting, I examine my two case studies using the following analytical plan.

For each case study region, I first choose a few notable bioregional writers and their most representative works. Acknowledging that most regional writers did not publish with explicitly bioregionalist goals, I construct a group of works using the definitions introduced in the literature review (see table above). This combination of definitions allows me to justify the inclusion of the works under discussion, but it also justifies the exclusion of regional works that fail these standards for bioregionalism. By assembling my own collection of each region's literature, reduced in scope by the stringent definition I have chosen, I assert that a narrow corpus of bioregional literature has compelling applications for the historical study of environmental policymaking.

Considering each assembled collection, I analyze specific narrative archetypes that evince the texts' perspective on local human-landscape interaction. For example, I consider how writers often explicitly delineated their regions's boundaries within these bioregional texts, mirroring the bioregionalist practice of mapping as a tool for reinhabitation and reterritorialization (Aberley, *Boundaries of Home*; Lynch et al 6). In exploring the relationship between literary depictions and environmental imaginations of California places, my literary analysis emulates the work of Wyatt and bioregionalist critics (Wyatt 133; Lynch et al 12). Next, I theorize how each of these literary patterns parallels the agenda-setting mechanisms of awareness and prioritization (McCombs 8). By understanding the secondary literature around these archetypes of local literature, I'm able to trace a path by which each collection's characteristics foster awareness and prioritization in local readership.

Finally, I search for evidence that these pieces of literature have reached broader recognition within local policymaking circles (Everson 76). I examine local governing bodies' environmental planning documents, like the 1962 Monterey Coast Master Plan, for indications that bioregional literary archetypes achieved awareness and prioritization among local citizen-policymakers. My investigation reveals the influence of literary patterns on policy documents' core values, specific policy provisions, and advocates' courses of action.

Of the many bioregions within California, I selected the Central Coast and Owens Valley for two primary reasons. First, these regions have both a robust literary scene and comprehensive histories of local environmental activism and policymaking. As I build the bridge from literary archetypes to policy documents, these bodies of literature are strong abutments on either end. Second, these regions are more geographically isolated than many other bioregions within California, making it more straightforward to observe the emergence of an autonomous environmental politics from bioregional literature. These regions' local electorates have unique characteristics which increased their leverage in local environmental planning debates. Along the Central Coast, for example, concentrated wealth enabled impassioned residents to have an outsized voice in local governing bodies (Vogel 107; Brooks 7). Likewise, the affronted libertarian attitude of agitators in the Owens Valley caught the attention of, and forced a response from, water management authorities (Reisner 93).

A final caveat before beginning my case study of the region of the Central Coast: though bioregionalists ardently defend small regions as the ideal scale for environmental thinking, they also argue that bioregions nest within each other to form a mosaic. Notable bioregionalist poet Gary Snyder writes that "a place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics—the land is all small spaces, all precise tiny realms replicating larger and smaller patterns" (27). In other words, it is

not inconsistent with a bioregionalist perspective to analyze the Central Coast as a single literary culture, knowing that it could be alternatively subdivided into smaller bioregions like Big Sur, the Monterey Peninsula, and the Salinas River watershed. My analysis of the combined Central Coast region aligns with accounts of the literary culture of the area, in which writers like Robinson Jeffers, John Steinbeck, Henry Miller exchanged ideas and inspiration often (Beegel et al 11; Everson 83; Brooks 39).

### **Grandeur and Humility: Literary Archetypes of the Central Coast**

*“In the purple light, heavy with redwood, the slopes drop seaward.  
Headlong convexities of forest, drawn in together to the steep ravine.  
Below, on the sea-cliff,  
A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside; a roof under  
spared trees. Then the ocean  
Like a great stone someone has cut to a sharp edge and polished to shining.  
Beyond it, the fountain  
And furnace of incredible light flowing up from the sunk sun.” (Jeffers 141)*

*“The wild oats moved in silver waves under a little wind... the patches of blue lupins lay like shadows in a clear lucent night, and the poppies on the side hills were broad rays of sun... clumps of live oaks stood like perpetual senates ruling over the land.” (Steinbeck 10)*

Situated south of San Francisco, the rugged Central Coast of California has long appeared a wilderness in contrast to its urban northern neighbor. In the mid-twentieth century, the region built a reputation for its scenic beauty and free artistic environment, attracting wealthy homeowners and reclusive artists. The Central Coast is anchored by Monterey County, which containing its largest heritage city (Monterey) and some of its most famous literary landscapes. The coastline of Monterey County is relatively undeveloped, studded with steep cliffs, secluded coves, and redwood glades (Brooks, *Big Sur*, 3). Poet Robinson Jeffers and novelist Henry Miller

made this coastal realm their primary area of focus. The interior of Monterey County, lies inland of Big Sur and comprises the grassy Santa Lucia Mountains and fertile Salinas Valley. John Steinbeck's pastoral novels gave voice to this region for local and national audiences. Works of the cliffside and the interior valleys both consistently orient themselves around the ocean expanse in the distance; the Pacific Ocean anchors depictions of the Central Coast region (Brooks, *Big Sur*, 5). This special "Continent's End" was an isolated, scenic "paradise" that attracted artists and environmentalists throughout the twentieth century (Jeffers 24; Miller 36).

### *Assembling a Bioregional Corpus*

The Central Coast's most famous writers are poet Robinson Jeffers and novelist John Steinbeck, who achieved national and international renown for their work (Brophy 14-15; Everson 93). Though these two authors are most strongly associated with this bioregion outside of California, several other authors round out the lively literary scene of the mid-20th century Central Coast, like novelist Henry Miller.

Robinson Jeffers' biography and approach to his craft places him squarely within Lynch and Kowalewski's specifications for a bioregional writer. Jeffers moved to Carmel-by-the-Sea in 1914 to find refuge from the purposelessness of his twenties. He lived out the remainder of his life in the coastal town and turned to his immediate surroundings for almost all poetic inspiration (Brophy 5-6). By his own admission, Jeffers was content to represent a specific environment to a local audience (Lynch) and did not moderate his lyrics to communicate a more universal message (Kowalewski) (Brophy 12-14). Committed to portraying the landscape, his muse, in its violent entirety, Jeffers chose to "sacrifice himself and his characters to the fatal demands of place" (Wyatt 184). Jeffers became a fixture in his Carmel community and wrote about coastal

landscapes for esoteric rather than broad appeal. With this background, Jeffers satisfies the standards of bioregional literature that I adopt from Lynch and Kowalewski.

Jeffers' lyric poetry itself engaged deeply, often spiritually, with the Central Coast landscape, clearing the standards for bioregional literature taken from Austin and Buell. His work consistently elevated the beauty of the Central Coast region and illuminated its topography and biota in detail (Jeffers 25, 141, 676). Jeffers scholars insist on his deep engagement with setting: "his narratives do not merely seek a backdrop in Western landscape, but they give the landscape voice so it may speak" (Brophy 21). Additionally, Jeffers imbued his poems with his personal philosophy of "inhumanism," an ecological worldview that aligns with Buell's standard for an environmentally-oriented work. Inhumanism was inspired by the beauty and extremity of the coastal environment. In one expression of inhumanism, Jeffers reprimanded humans for their ignorance to the "astonishing beauty of things" around them (Jeffers 652). With this philosophy in mind, Jeffers wrote lyrics that advocated a deep ecological consciousness, one where a person's attunement to vast, primordial natural beauty ought to humble them. Overall, Jeffers clears each standard for bioregional literature used in this project; and, as the "apotheosis" of Central Coast literature (Everson), his work anchors the corpus of literature for this case study.

Steinbeck's earlier works are the second major component of this project's Central Coast bioregional corpus. These were produced at time in which he was consistently living in Monterey County and engaging with its literary community, including reading Jeffers's poetry (Beegel et al 11). Immersed in the Central Coast literary culture, early Steinbeck fits Lynch's definition of a bioregional writer. Steinbeck's early California literature also circulated less widely than his more work from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) onwards. Correspondingly, novels like *To a God Unknown* (1933) and story collections like *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *The*

*Long Valley* (1938) contributed more directly to an insular regional literary culture and are stronger sources to include in this analysis (Wyatt 132).

*To a God Unknown* intertwines regional specificity with depictions of apotheosized violence, leading Everson to categorize it as Steinbeck's "first significant novel" (Everson 83). The novel follows Joseph Wayne, an Easterner who moves to inland Monterey County and develops an intimate attachment to his ranchland. He becomes infatuated with a live oak tree, a secluded pine glade, and the promise of winter rain. When these natural features inevitably die or fail to materialize, Joseph is driven mad (Steinbeck; Timmerman 315). Joseph had obsessively built a huge ranching operation in wet years without planning for impending drought, failing to heed the advice of his more climatologically knowledgeable forebears in the area. The novel concludes with Joseph, despondent at a crippling drought, sacrificing himself to bring rain to his lands. Joseph's sacrifice makes nature, in the form of rain, "the real hero of the novel" (Timmerman 315). *To a God Unknown* meets the bioregional standards taken from Buell and Austin. The California Coast Ranges' cyclical precipitation patterns direct the plot, and *To a God Unknown* ultimately becomes "a book about the inability of California's interior valleys to sustain continuous life" (Wyatt 133). Steinbeck demonstrates the hazard of making a living out-of-step with local ecology, and the plot violently interjects itself into the Wayne family's story to prove it. Steinbeck's early story collections *The Pastures of Heaven* and *The Long Valley* also fit under the umbrella of bioregional literature. Nevertheless, *To a God Unknown* has a larger scope and more consistent ethical stance than these fragmented collections. Thus, it will be Steinbeck's primary entry into the corpus of literature that I consider in this project.

Though Steinbeck achieved more national recognition after these early works, his later works do not merit inclusion in the bioregional literary culture of the Central Coast. Several

literary scholars argue that his writing “abandoned” its engagement with his home region after he became personally disillusioned with his California home, developed national ambitions, and moved to New York (Everson 79; Wyatt 126). Steinbeck “defected” from the regional tradition at this juncture; his work became “effortful” and highly choreographed rather than raw and organically Western (Everson 85). With physical distance from the Central Coast and the corresponding “imposition of aesthetic distance” in his novels, Steinbeck could not fully access the violent archetype that characterizes literature of the Pacific Coast. Later works like *East of Eden*, aiming to be universal epics, minimized the violent interplay between their ruthless, unforgiving Central Coast setting and the characters (Everson 91). Wyatt explains that although California landscapes inspired Steinbeck as a writer, “they proved less a place than a stage” in his later works (126). Steinbeck’s most famous works chronicle their characters’ “westerling” as the fulfillment of a *national* destiny, where “the unique features and history of a place can be discreetly raised up toward the status of [universal] myth” (Wyatt 132). Though Wyatt characterizes Steinbeck’s universal appeal as an admirable “raising up” of the literary form, it does mean that these works markedly fail Austin’s standard for a legitimate regional work. Steinbeck’s desire to produce a national epic, then, reflects a retreat from the apotheosis of the coastal literature archetype that Jeffers was able to deliver (Everson 79). Accordingly, Steinbeck’s later major novels fail to clear the standards set by Austin, Lynch and Kowalewski.

I supplement the selections from Jeffers’ and Steinbeck’s bibliography with a memoir by novelist Henry Miller: *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Following friends and fellow writers, the otherwise peripatetic Miller settled in the region in 1944 and lived there until 1963 (Miller 1). Published in 1957, his memoir cements Miller in the bioregional canon of the Central Coast. Miller devotes the first section of his memoir to scene-setting, describing the Big

Sur landscape in lush detail (4–37). *Big Sur* meets Austin’s standard for inclusion in this project by describing how the landscape deterministically influences the lives of its “characters” (i.e. real-world residents). Miller also structures *Big Sur* to begin with a chapter on the coastal environment before several chapters on its human inhabitants. By foregrounding the landscape, this structure orients the work environmentally, to use Buell’s definition. At the time of writing, Miller had established himself in the Big Sur artists’ community, cultivating both a local readership and his own status as a Central Coast author (Lynch; Wyatt). Finally, while *Big Sur* comments on universal patterns of place-making, it also devotes concentrated attention to the characteristics of local landscape-human interaction, such that it clears Kowalewski’s threshold as well.

#### *Archetypes of Central Coast Literature*

Literary scholars of the Central Coast insist on the region’s unique literary characteristics (Everson, Wyatt). A few characteristics of the Central Coast bioregional literature have been particularly conducive to the development of awareness and prioritization among local readership. Each of these characteristics corresponds to a component of the agenda-setting process and appears in contemporaneous policymaking documents:

| Literary Archetype                   | Component of Agenda-Setting |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mapping the bioregion                | Awareness                   |
| Grandeur, extremity, and humility    | Prioritization              |
| Purity, elementality, and permanence | Prioritization              |
| Reinhabitation in narrative          | Awareness & prioritization  |



## Mapping the bioregion

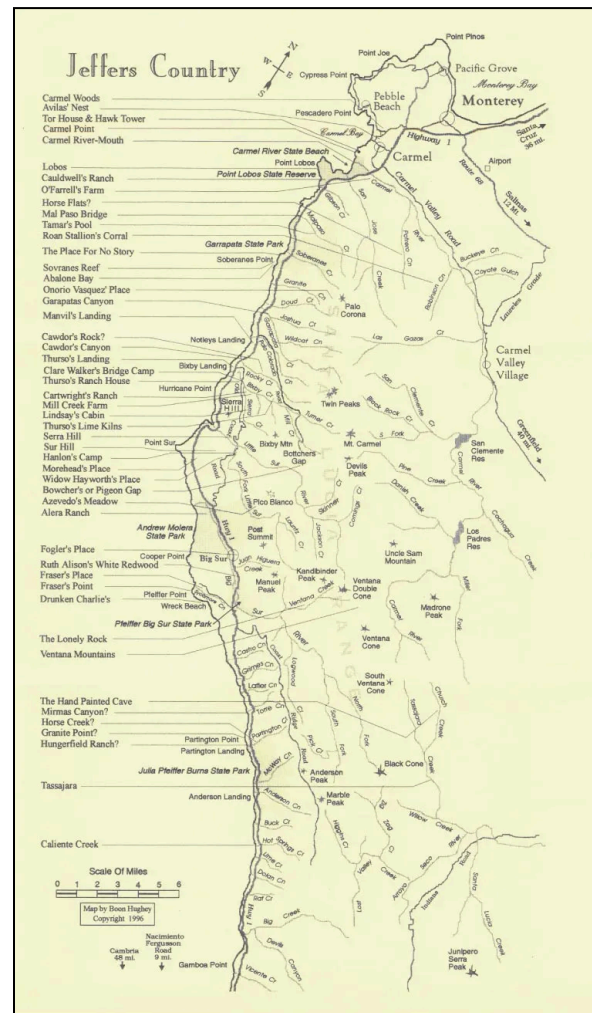
The realization that ecological boundaries are better bounds for environmental thinking than political borders is at the foundation of bioregionalism. Accordingly, bioregionalists have frequently utilized mapping to subvert expectations, reorienting regions around topographic features like rivers and mountain ridges (Aberley, *Boundaries of Home*). These cartographers argue that bioregional mapping creates regions that are internally coherent rather than externally dictated. These bioregions are more intuitive for people to understand than arbitrary political jurisdictions. Therefore, people often find it more straightforward to construct their environmental politics around the bioregion compared to the political region (Aberley, *Boundaries of Home*).

Jeffers and Steinbeck often map their Central Coast setting using bioregional terms, where topography trumps political geography. As opposed to mapping the region for a national audience, these authors often use specific placenames that have extra meaning for a local readership. In doing so, their knowledgeable local reader is introduced to a bioregional perspective on their region. Central Coast authors also plot their narratives to attach importance to topographic and biotic borders instead of political boundaries, reinforcing an awareness of bioregional mapping among their readers.

In many of his short poems, Jeffers establishes a precise geographic position with specific canyon and creek names. One biographer of Jeffers, Robert Brophy, remarked that “it is as though Jeffers must first locate his true geographic and astronomic position in order to write a poem, any poem” (35). For example, in one of his more famous poems, “Apology for Bad Dreams”, Jeffers lyricizes a wildfire that spans from “Point Pinos down to the Sur Rivers” (143). This fire creates “hills like pointed flames beyond Soberanes” (Jeffers 143). Other poems take

their titles directly from the landmarks of Jeffers' cliffside region: "Bixby's Landing", "Carmel Point", and "Point Joe" form a northward itinerary of placenames along the coast. Ultimately, reading for specific placenames in Jeffers' work, it becomes possible to assemble a map of "Jeffers Country" that faithfully represents the Central Coast bioregion of this project (see image) (Hughey). Jeffers provides readers with a set of geographic anchor points, which reorient readers' environmental thinking to scale of the bioregion rather than the political jurisdiction. By mapping a tightly defined, internally coherent bioregion within his work, Jeffers demonstrates the conduciveness of bioregional literature to cultivating regional environmental thinking.

Jeffers also maps the Central Coast bioregion's borders and its location in relation to other regions. He positions his poems by including first, general physical bounds that match bioregionalist boundary-drawing projects; and second, articulations of the region's place at the edge of the North American continent. Setting the scene in two of his lyrics, "Continent's End" and "Margrave", Jeffers writes:



|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>Continent's End</u><br/>         "I gazing at the boundaries of<br/>         granite and spray, the<br/>         established sea-marks, felt<br/>         behind me /<br/>         Mountain and plain, the<br/>         immense breadth of the<br/>         continent" (24)</p> | <p><u>Margrave</u><br/>         "I feel the rock-edge of the continent<br/>         Reel eastward with me below the broad stars,<br/>         I lean on the broad worn stones of the parapet-top<br/>         And the stones and my hands that touch them reel<br/>         eastward.<br/>         The inland mountains go down and new lights<br/>         Glow over the sinking east rim of the earth.<br/>         The dark ocean comes up,<br/>         And reddens that western stars with its fog-breath<br/>         And hides them with its mounded darkness." (382)</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

First, in these lyrics, Jeffers references "boundaries of granite and spray" and "the inland mountains" that constitute the "sinking east rim of the earth". These lines are bioregional—they create a local setting for the poems that is bounded by water and ridges rather than arbitrary human-created borders. Secondly, Jeffers plots the poems' locations on a continental scale (Wyatt 179). He defines the local bioregion against the image of the massive continent. Jeffers' invocation of the continent in line with bioregionalist Gary Snyder's idea that bioregions form a nested mosaic, ranging from the smallest creek watershed to biomes that span the continent (Snyder 27). By utilizing topographic boundaries topographically and situating the bioregion as one part of a much larger ecological mosaic, Jeffers espouses a bioregional conceptualization of the area.

Though *East of Eden* is not bioregional literature, I reintroduce it to this project as a foil against which the bioregional qualities of Steinbeck's mapping in *To a God Unknown* become more clear. *East of Eden* begins by orienting the reader to a beautifully rendered Salinas Valley, starting with its political geography: its location in Northern California and its relation to the area's most recognizable city, Monterey. Steinbeck lays out the novel's setting as if his reader, like his characters, must undertake their own westering journey from the East to the California Coast. Like a westward settler, the reader is apprised of the region's political geography before

Steinbeck directs their attention to more granular physical landscape features (Steinbeck, *East of Eden* 3-4). *East of Eden*'s mapping at the onset assumes a national audience rather than a local one, contrasting with the regional specificity of *To a God Unknown*.

By contrast, *To a God Unknown* places the reader more immediately in a specific Central California locale, only minimally discussing the Wayne family's origins in Vermont and (Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown* 5). Unlike the nationwide scale of *East of Eden*, *To a God Unknown*'s characters map their surroundings at a local scale. Steinbeck's writing aligns with bioregional mapping because he sets major plot points of at topographic boundaries in the landscape. For example, Joseph Wayne's wife Elizabeth nervously passes through the mountain pass into the Wayne's home valley, crossing the threshold from her seaside upbringing to her new ranching life (Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 80). At this juncture, Elizabeth reconceptualizes her relationship between herself and the land— she acquiesces to her transition from girlhood to womanhood and accepts her responsibility to contribute to Joseph's vision of entwined earthly and human fertility (81). Another recurring boundary of the novel is a nearby ridge that divides the Waynes' grassy valley and the coastal redwood forest beyond, a physical rather than political boundary. As the valley's drought worsens, Joseph and Elizabeth ride to the ridge to glimpse the forest and ocean beyond. At this topographic boundary, the couple gazes upon the dry grass and verdant forest simultaneously, and Elizabeth comes to realize that she still feels uncomfortable and foreign living in the Waynes' drier inland environment (186). For Elizabeth, standing at the bioregional boundary makes her aware of her dormant discomfort towards the inland environment. Later in the novel, Joseph and his brother Thomas venture over the same ridge before leaving the ranch. Seeing the "scorched" valley behind him, Joseph realizes that he "resents" the nearby forest for its moisture, tantalizingly close but out of reach

(210). Viewing the land from the ridgeline, Joseph's perspective on his own dry home environment emerges in opposition to the moist forest below. At each of these topographic boundary points, Steinbeck's characters recognize their body's position in their local surroundings and thus come to new understandings of their bioregion.

Jeffers and Steinbeck demonstrate that literary mapping communicates a bioregional awareness to the citizen-policymakers that set the public agenda. The final section of this case study will discuss, in more detail, how Central Coast residents' awareness of their bioregion's extent manifested in policy documents in the years after Jeffers' and Steinbeck's careers.

### **Grandeur, extremity, and humility**

Another recurring archetype within the Central Coast bioregional corpus is the idea that the coastline is a uniquely grandiose and extreme environment. Bioregional authors regularly invoke the region's towering cliffs, crashing waves, and extreme seasonal variation, contraposing the aesthetic abundance and natural power of this environment with the smallness of its human inhabitants. In literature, the Central Coast landscape often inflicts violence on its residents as a measure of its grandeur and extremity. The Central Coast landscape, in its extremes, teaches writers a humility that encourages them to deprioritize the human and thus encourages readers to approach the public agenda with an ecological mode of thinking (Beegel et al 21).

In *Big Sur*, Henry Miller elucidates this dynamic explicitly. The first chapter of Miller's memoir details the eclectic, colorful mix of sights that a Big Sur resident encounters each day. His writing paints the landscape as "seductive and hypnotic", immersive and grand, visually accosting (Miller 36). In *Big Sur*, a dazzle of landscape features "is all thrown at you pell-mell" (36), and the extremity of the Central Coast landscape overwhelms its human inhabitants. This overwhelm plausibly residents like Miller to ask the question: "Is there too much... too much

sunshine, too much fog, too much peace and contentment?” (13). As the end of the quotation suggests, Miller derives more enjoyment than intimidation from the bioregion’s extremity. Miller observes that living in this extreme landscape has a clear psychological effect on its inhabitants:

I have the very definite impression that the people of this vicinity are striving to live up to the *grandeur and nobility* which is such an integral part of the setting. They behave as if it were a privilege to live here... the place itself is so overwhelmingly bigger, greater, than anyone could hope to make it that it *engenders a humility* and reverence not frequently met with in Americans. (emphasis added, Miller 26)

As Miller articulates, daily encounters with the intense Central Coast landscape create a humility among its awed residents. The argument that Miller establishes here, connecting grandeur and humility, appears in Jeffers’ and Steinbeck’s bioregional works as well.

Jeffers’ and Steinbeck’s narratives enact a humbling of their characters less harmonious than the process Miller observes. In their works, the Central Coast’s extremity acts violently upon its characters, reminding readers of the individual’s smallness against the landscape’s grandeur. As critic William Everson argues, Jeffers’ narratives construct violent character interactions to match the violence of the landscape (Everson 75-76). In his narrative’s climatic moments, Jeffers creates a “point of view of the isolated consciousness subsumed in the Western landscape” (Everson 103). Only an expansive, extreme landscape can humble, or subsume, its characters so fully (Everson 74-75). In sum, Jeffers makes the case for the humbling force of the landscape’s grandeur by inflicting violence on his characters.

In *To a God Unknown*, Steinbeck conveys a similar theme: that the extremity of the Central Coast’s volatile landscape should prompt a humility among its human inhabitants. The Waynes arrive in Nuestra Señora in a season of abundance. The livestock are boundlessly fertile, the grass is a vibrant green, and the nearby mountain spring releases a steady stream of water

into the ranch. Joseph revels in the grandeur of the landscape, unaware that this age of abundance will yield to a time of crippling drought (Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 40). His stance towards the landscape is arrogant and rapacious, and he quickly takes its bounty for granted. When drought finally descends on the Waynes, the family and their livestock wither away in its extreme heat, bearing the consequences of overextending themselves. Joseph's folly instructs the reader that even as the Central Coast landscape surges with growth, humans should curtail their egos and prioritize responsible environmental management. It is painfully clear that the Waynes could have weathered the drought with a more tempered cultivation of the land, one that respected humans' powerlessness against the extremity of the landscape.

Though *To a God Unknown* conveys the weighty realization that humans must live humbly within the land's constraints, it cautions against being so crippled by this humbling that readers are unable to act. When Joseph and his brother Thomas take their brief journey over the ridge to the coastline, they trek through the verdant coast and contemplate an alternate life in this more lush environment (Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 207). Surrounded by fog, the pair come across a hermit whose home overlooks the endless Pacific Ocean. The hermit faces a distilled, quintessential version of the quandary that all Central Coast residents are confronted with: how to cope with his smallness in the face of the grandeur around him. The man's solution is a ritual of performing daily animal sacrifices to the setting sun. He has cobbled together a mystical version of fulfillment befitting his grandiose environment. For the hermit, it has taken a pagan break from normalcy and from civilization to even approximate the humility that this extreme landscape demands. Like Jeffers' work, this episode portrays humility taking an undesirable course. The hermit's story demonstrates that readers should try to cope with their insignificance

and express reverence for the landscape in more measured ways, perhaps prioritizing civic engagement rather than freakish ritualism.

### **Purity, elementality, and permanence**

Not yet marred by dense human habitation and tourism, the landscape's virginal purity and durability are common themes in early- and mid-20th century bioregional literature of the coast. The connecting tissue is elementality— the landscape remains pure and permanent, if nowhere else, in foundational elemental components like rock and water. Depictions of the land's elemental purity and permanence helped set the environmental agenda by encouraging residents to prioritize issues they were already aware of.

Jeffers' lyrics often invoke the elementality of the present coastal landscape and its connections to the distant past, which encourages prioritization of a measured bioregional politics among its readers. In "Continent's End", Jeffers writes about the ancient rocky origins of the region's cliffs, even prior to the ocean that presently defines the continent's edge (24-25). In this lyric, Jeffers roots his portrayal of the bioregion in the elements: durable rock, "tides of fire", and ever-flowing water. He argues that the elementality of the Central Coast still finds its way into the cyclical rhythm of human "veins" and "songs." Jeffers' lyrics propose that this awareness makes the poem's readers more conscious of their small role in a vast elemental system. "Apology for Bad Dreams" culminates in a dream scene in which the speaker achieves a kind of self-actualization by recognizing, painfully and violently, that the pure force of wildfire and the stars lives within them (Jeffers 144). After acknowledging their fleeting role in a pure, permanent landscape, the speaker moves on from their episode and draws comfort from "the ever-returning roses of dawn" (Jeffers 144). The poem's speaker recognizes that the landscape



has a past and future beyond themselves, a new kind of environmental thinking. When the speaker comes to prioritize this understanding of the bioregion, they come closer to self-actualization.

Jeffers often returns to the subject of elementality and permanence in his work. In a later lyric, “Carmel Point,” Jeffers writes that:

... It [this place] knows the people are a tide  
That swells and in time will ebb, and all  
Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty  
Lives in the very grain of the granite  
Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff... (676)

In “Carmel Point,” the essential quality of the landscape (its “pristine beauty”) is stored safely in its most elemental aspects—the rock and water.

Jeffers himself explicitly makes the case that his enduringly beautiful environment ought to be prioritized in the arts and beyond. In “Point Joe,” Jeffers opines that “permanent things are what is needful in a poem, things temporally of great dimension, things continually renewed or always present” (Jeffers 98). Jeffers’s eye is drawn to these permanent features of the landscape rather than “fashionable and momentary things” (98). The Central Coast is not the place for human fads to take hold—its landscape is too pure and too everlasting. In his poetry, then, Jeffers argues that humans should prioritize protections for this pure and permanent bioregion over efforts that might degrade its beauty.

Henry Miller articulates a similar worldview in *Big Sur*, writing explicitly about protecting the “eternal background” of Big Sur for future generations. Miller writes that:

When I watch the youngsters playing in our front yard, when I see them  
silhouetted against the blue white-capped Pacific, when I stare at the huge,  
frightening buzzards swirling lazily above, circling, dipping, forever circling,  
when I observe the willow gently swaying, its long fragile branches drooping ever  
lower, every greener and tenderer, when I hear the frog croaking in the pool or a  
bird calling from the bush, when I suddenly turn and espy a lemon ripening on a

dwarfish tree or notice that the camellia has just begun to bloom, *I see my children set against an eternal background* (21).

Here, Miller hints at one way in which the persistence of the landscape might motivate prioritization by the area's policymaking class. It matters to citizen-policymakers that their children are able to experience the same untouched landscape as they do, that the eternal background of the coast continues to persist in its most pure form. Both the persistence of the land and the need to protect one's children are equally inevitable; correspondingly, they both merit prioritization. Generally, Miller often repeats the word "pure" when describing the landscape, sometimes multiple times within a single sentence (22). He explains that this pure landscape "will be here forever," that the escarpment overlooking the ocean is "nature smiling at itself in the mirror of eternity" (Miller 5, 8). Miller also hints at local residents' response to their pure landscape, explaining that the region's propertied inhabitants "are all for preserving its virginal aspect" (5). Similar rhetoric about the landscape's purity—and the prioritization that ought to motivate—also appears in policymaking documents at the time.

*To a God Unknown* also portrays the Central Coast bioregion as permanent and inexorable. From the scene-setting passages at the beginning of the novel, Steinbeck depicts landscape features as permanent fixtures of the landscape. For example, coastal California's endemic live oaks "stand like *perpetual* senates ruling over the land" (Steinbeck 10). By insisting on the oak tree's perpetuity in the landscape, Steinbeck attaches importance to this iconic and characteristic plant of the bioregion. The inevitability of the landscape's climate also figures prominently in the plot, especially in the Central Coast's cycle of drought that catches the Waynes off-guard (39–40). Longtime residents of these interior valleys, more in tune with the realities of their bioregion, always "know it [the drought] will come again" (Steinbeck 204). The permanent qualities of the landscape, then, dictate a sustainable way to live on the land in this

region. *To a God Unknown* conveys that water is an elemental need for the landscape and demands its readers to prioritize responsible water management. Steinbeck sees the circulation of water, its cycles of abundance and scarcity, as a permanent characteristic of the landscape that residents ought to respect. Planning documents reveal that policymakers prioritized measured water withdrawals, in alignment with Steinbeck.

### **Reinhabitation in narrative**

This project's Central Coast corpus also cautions readers against an environmental ethic that is not responsive to the bioregion's unique characteristics. Characters who impose unsustainable ways of life on their bioregion are duly punished for their unharmonious relationships with the land. Central Coast authors promote an ethic of reinhabitation by narrating utopian posthuman fantasies and tragic parables of natural disaster. In doing so, they cultivate readers' awareness of what reinhabitant lifestyles could look like in their bioregion and enable readers to prioritize policies in line with those lifestyles.

*To a God Unknown* defines Central Coast reinhabitation in the negation, as illustrated by Joseph's and the Mexican-Americans' tragic relationships with their environment. Joseph feels connected with the earth, but that does not mean he models a reinhabitant life. Joseph's folly is expecting too much of the land. His toxic obsession with fertility makes him behave at times like an animal, part of the wilderness, rather than a human living in harmony with the wild (Steinbeck 34). Bioregional reinhabitation does not promote living *as* the earth but instead living alongside it. Secondary literature on the novel echoes the analysis that Joseph lives out a failed reinhabitant ethic: "the failure of the ethic... is that Wayne himself fails to achieve the harmonious relationship with the land" (316). A pastoral life does not equate to a sustainable one. The Mexican-Californian population of the valley is a second foil, also defining a responsible

reinhabitant relationship with the land in the negation. Their community interacts with the landscape rashly, even though they expect the cycle of drought in the region. At the close of the novel, when Joseph's sacrifice brings a torrent of rain back to the dry valley, the Mexican-Californian population stirs up into a frenzy (Steinbeck 262-264). They dance and sing frenetically, wear pagan costumes, and have an orgy in the mud. The moral core of the village, Father Angelo, condemns this animalistic response and plans penance for the next Sunday service (Steinbeck 264). Though the village is undeniably attuned to their environment, this intemperate response is also at odds with the bioregionalists' more measured mission of reinhabitation. The novel's moral stance, most closely embodied by Father Angelo, criticizes both of these extreme, primal relationships to the land. Joseph's ill-fated obsession with the land's fecundity and Mexican-Californians' orgiastic response to rain represent two *failures* to live out reinhabitation in the region.

Only one character in *To a God Unknown* approximates a real ethic of reinhabitation: Juanito, a local Native American who explains to Joseph his ancestors' relationship to the land. Juanito believes that the earth is a maternal figure, from whom humans are born and to whom they return (Steinbeck 26). His cyclical perspective on human life can be described as an ecological worldview, because it envisions humans as one part of an interconnected web of organisms, all equal in nature. Juanito's religious beliefs embody this worldview: he venerates the valley's secluded spring for the water it provides to the dry landscape's many organisms (Steinbeck 45). Even as Juanito joins the Waynes' ranching operation, he retains his understanding of Central Coast ecology. In contrast to Joseph's failed mission and the village's intemperate response to rain, Juanito models a successful reinhabitation of the interior valleys for the reader. In this way, the novel encourages awareness and prioritization of a land management

regime appropriate for this bioregion, lest readers face the same consequences as Joseph or the village.

Jeffers' lyrics also advocate reinhabitation, most often through dystopian/utopian fantasies that pare back settlement and leave, in the aftermath, a landscape that better resembles what the bioregion "ought to" look like. His poem "Return" falls on the utopian side: it is a call to action for the reader to reconnect with the local landscape (Jeffers 499). Using regionally specific geography and imagery, "Return" sets out a plan for reinhabitation specific to the Central Coast:

### Return

A little too abstract, a little too wise,  
 It is time for us to kiss the earth again,  
 It is time to let the leaves rain from the skies,  
 Let the rich life run to the roots again.  
 I will go to the lovely Sur Rivers  
 And dip my arms in them up to the shoulders.  
 I will find my accounting where the alder leaf quivers  
 In the ocean wind over the river boulders.  
 I will touch things and things and no more thoughts,  
 That breed like mouthless May-flies darkening the sky,  
 The insect clouds that blind our passionate hawks  
 So that they cannot strike, hardly can fly.  
 Things are the hawk's food and noble is the mountain, Oh noble  
 Pico Blanco, steep sea-wave of marble. (499)

In this lyric, Jeffers portrays reinhabitation as natural and intuitive, a process that is accessible to all. He encourages his audience to let the ecological cycles of the Central Coast take place without human interference. Modeling reinhabitant environmental practice, Jeffers brings awareness to the form that a "return" to living with nature would look like.

Not every Jeffers lyric is so optimistic about how humans will achieve the ultimate end of reinhabitation. "November Surf" leans dystopian:

### November Surf

Some lucky day each November great waves awake and are drawn  
 Like smoking mountains bright from the west  
 And come and cover the cliff with white violent cleanness: then suddenly  
 The old granite forgets half a year's filth:  
 The orange-peel, egg-shells, papers, pieces of clothing, the clots  
 Of dung in corners of the rock, and used  
 Sheaths that make light love safe in the evenings: all the droppings of the summer  
 Idlers washed off in a winter ecstasy:  
 I think this cumbered continent envies its cliff then....But all seasons  
 The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep,  
 Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm that prepares up the long coast  
 Of the future to scour more than her sea-lines:  
 The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous,  
 The rivers mouth to source pure; when the two-footed  
 Mammal, being someways one of the nobler animals, regains  
 The dignity of room, the value of rareness. (Jeffers 381)

When the tidal wave crashes into the Western coast, washing away human refuse “with white violent cleanness,” the cliff experiences a relieving purification. The poem continues to narrate one of the earth’s dreams, a dream of a great flood that wipes out human cities, populations, and the pollution that comes with them. In this tragedy is a return to a balanced ecological equilibrium: “When the two-footed / Mammal, being someways one of the nobler animals, regains / The dignity of room, the value of rareness” (381). While recognizing that humans are unique among the natural world, Jeffers also claims that they must live in balance with other citizens of the local ecosystem. The poem visualizes the hazards of continuing on the path in opposition to reinhabitation. Environmentally-minded readers are encouraged, then, to prioritize policies that embody a reinhabitant, unencumbering environmental ethic.

In *Big Sur*, Miller also displays a common reinhabitant drive for “rootedness” in his local landscape. Miller asserts that he has spent enough time in the region, strengthening his regional environmental thinking, such that he is no longer captured only by the surface aesthetics of the

region. Instead, he writes that “I can now offer something of root as well as flower,” that is, that he finally feels a deep connection to a place as opposed to a superficial one (Miller 33).

Citizen-policymakers in Miller’s 1960s Big Sur also display this rootedness, reflecting that reinhabitant ethic has pierced their environmental imagination.

Altogether, these bioregional writers each define—whether affirmatively or by foil—a version of reinhabitation suited for their Central Coast environs. Texts like Jeffers’ “Return” bring awareness to what reinhabitation might look like. Cautionary tales from Steinbeck and Jeffers compel readers to prioritize an environmental politics consistent with reinhabitation.

### **Literary Influences on the 1962 Monterey Coast Master Plan**

These four literary characteristics are reflected in mid-20th century policymaking documents, particularly those produced by local planning bodies. This project reads for these characteristics’ influence on the writers of the 1962 Monterey Coast Master Plan (MCMP). Published in 1960 and ratified by local planning authorities two years later, the MCMP emerged during a time in which the Central Coast’s literary scene was solidifying around influential writers like Steinbeck, Jeffers, and Miller (Brooks 39). As Big Sur historian Kelly Alden Brooks writes, “the popularity of [these writers’] works beckoned the mass culture to Big Sur while their writings also helped to justify aesthetic zoning for this prized landscape” (39). In other words, historians of the region argue that Central Coast writers transmitted their environmental ideas onto local citizen-policymakers’ agendas. The writers of the MCMP were certainly readers of Jeffers’ poetry: they even quote his verse in the report’s epigraph (County of Monterey 7; quoted in Brooks, *Big Sur*, 103). However, the influence of Jeffers and other Central Coast writers on the plan extends beyond direct quotations. Literary archetypes from Central Coast literature appear throughout the plan, providing insight into the influences on citizen-policymakers in Big

Sur. The MCMP demonstrates an awareness and prioritization of bioregional ideas, revealed in the values that animate the plan and the zoning policies that it includes.

The MCMP begins with a foreword in the form of a bioregional vignette that details the local topography, plant life, and wildlife:

Seventy-two miles of broken shoreline. Deer, browsing on the slopes above, sea-lions, diving in the waves below and the red-tailed hawk riding the up-drafts of the tradewinds. Deep shadowed redwood canyons tumbling down through the folds of the Santa Lucia range, the nation's termination (County of Monterey 7).

This vignette sets the tone for a policymaking document that will touch upon each of the four Central Coast literary characteristics: mapping the bioregion; grandeur, extremity, and humility; purity, elementality, and permanence; and reinhabitation in narrative. First, the vignette uses familiar language that maps the region's location in the context of the continent. Echoing Jeffers, the vignette explains that the region lies at "the nation's termination" (7). Fittingly, the excerpt of Jeffers' "Continent's End" comes directly afterwards. The plan's study area is also bounded by topographical features like Malpas Creek (County of Monterey 3). This boundary-drawing suggests that environmental planning is a policymaking process in which bioregional mapping sees real application. Second, the opening vignette also cites Rachel Carson's pre-*Silent Spring* works to attest to the longevity and the permanence of the natural landscape generally. Quoting Carson, the authors write: "But within a few short years the precarious harmony of this rugged shore was threatened. 'Man often forgets... the true nature of his planet and the long vistas of its history in which the existence of the race of man occupied but a mere moment of time'" (County of Monterey 7). Finally, the foreword declares a reinhabitant goal, emphasizing a balance between human uses and environmental protection. The plan recognizes that environmental protection has a value in and of itself, regardless of human benefit (7).



Beyond the foreword, the zoning and planning policies set forth in the MCMP also demonstrate an awareness and prioritization of the region's literary archetypes. The authors lay out an animating value and high priority of the plan: the county ought to preserve the purity of its landscape by ensuring access to its elemental characteristics (namely, views of the ocean and mountains) for future generations (11). Accordingly, the plan proposes to preserve the "inherent beautiful character" of the region with "low densities and wise conservation planning controls" (12). These foundational values reflect the influence of that literary depictions of purity and beauty had on the plan's writers. The MCMP also responds to the grandeur and extremity of the bioregion's landscape with strict building limits. The plan disincentivized development along Highway 1 in the coastal zone and recommended a sparse 1 house to 20 acre ratio for higher up the cliffside. These policy interventions produced a pristine natural environment and align with local writers' bioregional idea that humans should build with humility in such a grand and extreme landscape.

Finally, the MCMP makes no provision for the expansion of water services to the region. The plan operates under the assumption that population growth will be kept to a minimum, that the area's water needs will never grow beyond that which local streams can provide (County of Monterey 23). By eschewing new water infrastructure, the plan reveals its caution about new development that might overburden natural resources. The MCMP's caution here aligns with the literary motif that the extreme Central Coast landscape demands humility among its inhabitants.

## Literary Archetypes of the Owens Valley

*“It is the proper destiny of every considerable stream in the West to become an irrigating ditch. It would seem the streams are willing. They go as far as they can, or dare, toward the tillable lands in their own boulder-fenced gullies... It is difficult to come into intimate relations with appropriated waters; like very busy people they have no time to reveal themselves. One needs to have known an irrigating ditch when it was a brook, and to have lived by it, to mark the morning and evening tone of its crooning, rising and falling to the excess of snow water.” (Austin 81)*

The Owens Valley lies at the easternmost edge of California, an arid landscape in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada’s highest peaks. The east side of the range is wall of peaks that looms over the wide, flat valley (Austin 85). Snaking through the desert valley is the Owens River, a narrow band of green with willows and rushes lining its banks. A few small towns— Bishop, Big Pine, Independence, and Lone Pine— run parallel to the river on its southward journey.

Located 250 miles from Los Angeles, the Owens Valley is isolated from the major population centers of the state yet is a famous site of political conflict. In the first decades of the 1900s, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) recognized the potential for gravity to carry the high-altitude river into the booming Los Angeles region. LADWP then organized a scheme to expropriate land and water rights in the Owens Valley and channel water southward (Reisner 61). The Los Angeles Aqueduct was completed in 1913, but 15 years of violence in the Owens Valley followed, including gunfights and nighttime bombings of LA-owned water infrastructure (Reisner 93-96). This resistance was mostly futile: by the mid-1930s, the city of Los Angeles owned 95 percent of Owens Valley farmland (Reisner 100). Policy debates in the Owens Valley have, however, evolved over time, and recent policymaking has tended toward restoration of the landscape. In 2001,

LADWP began flooding the dried-up Owens Lake to address soil salinization and dust pollution. The Department released water to flow uninterrupted through 62 miles of the lower Owens River in 2006 and started tilling the lakebed to reduce dust pollution in 2013 (Kahn, Vogel). This project examines the Valley's literary culture around the start of these "water wars," built on the premise that the origins of this policy debate inform all inquiries into its modern-day manifestations.

### *Mary Austin's Owens Valley*

The enduring face of Owens Valley literature is Mary Hunter Austin, who lived full-time in the area from 1891 to 1906 and visited occasionally until her death in 1934 (Wyatt 67-69). Like Jeffers and Steinbeck, Austin emerged from a small-scale regional literary scene before achieving national prominence. Notably, policy histories of Owens Valley often cite Austin's work as the literary articulation of Valley residents' sentiment towards the aqueduct. While I referenced her work as a literary scholar earlier, I now turn to her nonfiction as the primary focus of this section. The 1903 essay collection *The Land of Little Rain* represents her bioregional oeuvre because it satisfies this project's four standards for bioregional literature and exemplifies two local literary archetypes. Several other genres also take place in the Owens Valley—Austin's nationally-circulating essays, sentimental frontier literature, and literature of Manzanar internment camp—but fail the four standards for inclusion in this project's bioregional corpus.

In assembling a bioregional collection for the region, Austin's works are the first obvious candidates. *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) is cited frequently among the pinnacles of American nature writing (Buell 252). This work comprises 14 short sketches of the Owens Valley's alpine and high desert landscapes, as well as interactions between its Indigenous, Mexican, and white inhabitants (Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*). In these stories, Austin meets her own and Buell's

standard for bioregional literature. Her essays foreground the “presence of the California desert landscape and its influence on the people who inhabited it” (Langlois 31). These essays are technically written in first-person, but the observer figures very minimally into most stories. The lack of an observer gives Austin space to describe Owens Valley biota and topography in extreme detail, naming individual landforms and illustrating individual species (Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*). As landscape sketches, the landscape necessarily lies in the foreground. The narrator, when she enters, only exists in the context of direct sensorial interaction with the environment or observations of other Valley residents’ relationships with their environment. The simple plots of these short sketches are inevitably influenced by landscape, and thus meet Austin’s criteria for bioregional literature. By situating the subject inside the natural world, small and overcome with wonder, the ethical orientation of the work supports an understanding of humans as part of a wider ecology and implies that they should avoid tainting the richly rendered landscapes (Buell).

*The Land of Little Rain* brought Austin new levels of national recognition, and thus marked the end of her early career, in which her audience was more regional. By 1908, Austin was regularly publishing stories in mainstream literary magazines with large nationwide circulations, like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic Monthly* (Langlois 33). Her later output fails to meet Lynch’s standard that bioregional literature should appeal, first and foremost, to a local readership. For these reasons, *The Land of Little Rain* presents the last best opportunity to capture Austin’s locally-minded work, produced within the Owens Valley and written with a level of geographic specificity that grants local readers an “inside” understanding of the bioregion that less informed outside readers cannot access (Lynch 29-30). Biographies of Austin also indicate that she conceived of her writing as part of her political advocacy against the

expropriation of water rights in the Owens Valley (Wyatt 69). Writing to speak for the landscape and leveraging her local popularity to drum up opposition to the Los Angeles Aqueduct, Austin becomes a bioregional figure per Lynch and Kowalewski's standards.

A few other media are part of the mythology of the Owens Valley but do not so neatly meet this project's bioregional standards so are excluded from this project's working corpus. Literature of the "Wild West" romanticizes the very type of environmental exploitation that reinhabitation aims to reverse (Lynch, *Xerophilia* 26-27). Works of literature about Japanese internment in the Valley's Manzanar camp, like Hisaye Yamamoto's short story collection *Seventeen Syllables*, also feature the landscape prominently. *Seventeen Syllables* makes much of the Valley's constant wind, dust, and heat, but its stories fundamentally concern interpersonal relationships rather than relationships with the landscape (Yamamoto). Additionally, because its characters are held captive in the camp rather than settling in the Valley long term, *Seventeen Syllables* cannot promote reinhabitation projects and should be saved for other literary scholarship. Above all other cultural objects, Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown* has done the most to elevate the water wars to a wider audience (Vogel 127). This fictionalization of the conflict, unlike some contemporary literature, is impossible to construe as bioregional: all action takes place in urban Los Angeles, and the Owens Valley landscape is merely a faraway conversation device that supports the story's interpersonal drama. With the Owens Valley corpus both positively and negatively defined, I proceed to discuss the archetypes of local literary culture present in *The Land of Little Rain*.

#### *Archetypes of Owens Valley Literature*

Austin's bioregional literature, as represented by *The Land of Little Rain*, demonstrates two characteristics that were conducive to the development of awareness and prioritization

among a local readership. These characteristics correspond to both psychological components of the agenda-setting process and appear in the policy debates within the Owens Valley water conflict:

| <b>Literary Archetype</b> | <b>Component of Agenda-Setting</b> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Watershed consciousness   | Awareness & prioritization         |
| Re-sensing the desert     | Awareness                          |

### **Watershed consciousness**

In an area as water-stressed as the Owens Valley, characters' understandings of the environment often revolve around its watercourses. Reliant on irrigation for their ranching and farming livelihoods, Austin and her characters consistently center water in their conceptions of their region. Austin's bioregional literature, namely *The Land of Little Rain*, consistently demonstrates what literary critic Lawrence Buell terms "watershed consciousness". The Owens Valley watershed is defined as the area where rain- and snowfall flows into the Owens River and eventually the Owens Lake. The watershed includes alpine streams, the rushing Owens River, animals' watering holes, and irrigation ditches. In the Owens Valley, watershed consciousness entails an awareness of these topographic regional boundaries and a prioritization of maintaining natural flow within the watershed.

Buell identifies that watersheds have "become the most popular defining gestalt in contemporary bioregionalism" because the river organizes demographic and economic activity (Buell 243). Watershed consciousness acknowledges centrality of the river to patterns of settlement and commerce, which creates skepticism towards political boundaries and achieves a core bioregionalist mission. When residents develop a watershed consciousness, they become more aware of the natural foundation of their region's identity and are better able to prioritize its

protection. Befitting his position as a literary scholar, Buell claims that narratives are powerful tools to build watershed consciousness in their readers (249, 252).

The narrator of *The Land of Little Rain* expresses a watershed consciousness. She appreciates her relationship to several types of waterway in the region—streams, rivers, and ditches—and expresses an understanding of their vitality in the landscape. Like a bioregional scholar, the narrator believes water is a main force binding the region together and conceptualizes her home region as an internally coherent watershed rather than by an externally dictated political jurisdiction.

Several sketches in the collection demonstrate watershed consciousness by homing in on this all-important landscape feature, namely “Water Trails of the Ceriso” and the paired “Water Borders” and “Other Water Borders”. The explicit focus of the latter two essays is illustrating the hydrology of the Owens Valley region. The title of “Water Borders” itself suggests a bioregional orientation: water borders, after all, are a favorite subject of bioregional thinkers (Austin 74). In this sketch, Austin richly imagines the austere mountain watershed, emphasizing how streams and lakes eventually feed into the larger Owens River (74). The narrator believes that these hydrological dynamics are “patent to the understanding but mysterious to the sense” (74). This is exactly what watershed consciousness looks like: water’s centrality to the region is intuitive to understand, even when its movements remain opaque to the senses.

While “Water Borders” deals with a solitary narrator in an untouched natural environment, “Other Water Borders” depicts the appropriation of water by Owens Valley’s human residents (81-88). Austin traces irrigation channels as they narrow from roaring channels to saline trickles. She describes the diversion of water into irrigation ditches as follows: “It would seem the streams are willing. They go as far as they can, or dare, toward the tillable lands

in their own boulder-fenced gullies— but how much farther in the man-made waterways” (81). Human constructions extend the watershed, reinforcing an environmental imagination where water is central and humans are inextricably linked with the water in their environment. “Other Water Borders” also follows the movement of natural plants into the human-constructed waterways. The ecological succession of local plants into these ditches demonstrates that the bioregion is totalizing; the plants native to the bioregion inevitably grow over human alterations to the environment (84). By describing the course of local irrigation ditches, and the life that springs up around them, this sketch suggests that small-scale human architecture figures into the circulating ecology of the bioregion. In other words, watershed consciousness enables readers to conceive of their human water infrastructure as part of a regional ecology.

Austin’s stories also fashion a form of watershed consciousness that acknowledges the importance of the watershed to nonhuman life. “Water Trails of the Ceriso” describes animal trails to water sources in the Valley, trails that are conduits of life even when the landscape is at its driest (Austin 9). Austin writes:

By the end of the dry season the water trails of the Ceriso are worn to a white ribbon in the leaning grass, spread out faint and fanwise toward the homes of gopher and ground rat and squirrel. But however faint to mansight, they are sufficiently plain to the furred and feathered folk who travel them... To the little people the water trails are as country roads, with scents as signboards (Austin 9).

This sketch reflects the depth of awareness that a bioregional imagination can unlock: rather than focusing purely on humans’ moves through the landscape, the watershed perspective demonstrates that animals also subtly orient their livelihoods around water sources. By accessing this additional perspective, the reader emerges with an awareness of the vitality of water to all inhabitants of the region and can better prioritize environmental planning that protects the region’s water interests.



## Re-sensing the desert

Noted bioregional literary scholar of the Southwest, Tom Lynch, coins another literary topos that can be observed in Austin's work: "re-sensing the desert." Lynch laments that classic literature of the desert Southwest tends towards the overly aestheticized and Romantic, prioritizing a birds-eye, sanitized visual beauty (183). These classics, often written by Easterners who have never lived in the region, do not fully represent humans' complex sensory interactions with the desert environment. Lynch's criticism of the outsider's view of the desert resembles Austin's own critique of Western regional literature, in which she often observes a shallow engagement with the landscape.

Lynch asserts that bioregional literature must not fall into the trap of purely visual depictions and should instead engage with all five senses, even when that means including harsher sensory realities (177-180). He calls this "re-sensing" the desert (Lynch 37-38). The Southwest's howling wind and overwhelming dust and baking heat are realities of the region, yet they are obscured in exclusively visual, idealized renderings of the desert. Without an "an ecologically embodied aesthetic sensitive to the ways [the] senses are solicited by the flesh of the world," Lynch argues, desert literature cannot achieve its full impact on the reader (177). Though produced contemporaneously with much exclusively visual literature, *The Land of Little Rain* hints at the multisensory experience of being in the Owens Valley. Austin's stories describe the landscape's tactile and auditory characteristics, crafting a sensorially immersive picture of the desert landscape.

The desert heat infiltrates the narrative of "The Land of Little Rain", the titular story of the collection (6-7). The heat permeates Owens Valley dwellers' lives, driving them into bouts of anger but always luring them back. Austin writes of "the palpable sense of mystery in the desert

air,” describing a regional environmental ethos in direct association with its ability to be grasped (7). The desert’s tactility constitutes a re-sensing of the desert, conveying more closely the full, embodied experience of living in the Owens Valley heat.

In addition to tactile sensations, Austin also incorporates sounds of Owens Valley bioregion into her descriptions. In “Water Borders,” she describes the motion of an ear listening for snow-covered streams during the spring thaw: “[the mountain streams] tinkle all nigh thinly under ice. An ear laid to the snow catches a muffled hint of their eternal busyness fifteen or twenty feet under the canyon drifts” (Austin 74). Austin continues charting an auditory landscape and anchors the titular sketch with the haunting sound of a coyote:

It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured. They look large and near and palpitant; as if they moved on some stately service not needful to declare. Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out there watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls (Austin 8).

The coyote’s howl punctures an otherwise uncomplicated, albeit beautiful, visualization of the desert night. By re-sensing the desert, Austin’s literature better communicates the embodied experience of living in the Owens Valley. Her multisensory descriptions immerse readers in the reality of inhabiting the Owens Valley bioregion, rather than offering a look in from a faraway vantage point. Following Lynch’s arguments, readers of Austin’s work reach greater awareness of their local environments through these immersive, multisensory descriptions.

### **Applying Literary Patterns to Analyze Owens Valley Stakeholders**

During the Owens Valley water wars, Austin’s two regional literary archetypes resurface in the actions of its policymakers. Examining the policy history through the lenses of literary

archetypes sheds light onto stakeholders' behavior in the conflict. Stakeholders on both sides of the policy debate were aware of the vitality of water to the Owens Valley, but they approached water management differently depending on whether they prioritized watershed consciousness.

Los Angeles' lead water planner, William Mulholland, demonstrated an acute knowledge of the watershed throughout the planning process (Reisner 69, Vogel 235). However, his technical knowledge of the Valley's web of waterways did not translate into a conscientious watershed consciousness. Without a consciousness of the Owens Valley watershed, Mulholland had no qualms about draining the watershed and diverting most of its water to the growing city of Los Angeles. Mulholland's actions reflect the harmful policymaking that occurs in the absence of a robust watershed consciousness. His story confirms the importance of bioregional writers like Austin, whose prose has the ability to cultivate a watershed consciousness in citizen-policymakers.

Local anti-aqueduct activists, by contrast, embodied ideas of watershed consciousness in their campaigns for resource autonomy. Armed with a conviction that local water should remain within the watershed, activists reacted violently to LADWP's water grab in their home valley. After the building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, Owens Valley residents organized an impassioned opposition: they brought legal challenges, carried guns to construction sites, and even set explosives under newly built water infrastructure (Reisner 93). Their regional environmental thinking dictated that the removal of water from the Owens Valley watershed was a terrible violation to the region's environmental integrity. These agitators' behavior is consistent with watershed consciousness.

Perspectives on the water theft also hinged on whether observers were familiar with the embodied experience of desert living. Applying Lynch's concept of re-sensing the desert here,

those familiar with the harsh realities of desert farming understood the sensory experience of being without water. Their outrage emerged from a real-world knowledge of the desiccating heat and choking dust that arrived during the Valley's dry season. Stakeholders in the Owens Valley could reference Austin's work to articulate their embodied experience in the desert and emphasize the transgression that removing water from the sensory environment had created. By contrast, Austin's writing likely did not directly reach LADWP water planners immediately. Their disregard for the harm they caused to Owens Valley farmers reflects a lack of consideration for the embodied experience of desert life, more harsh than idealized visual depictions might suggest.

By auditing Owens Valley stakeholders for the region's two literary archetypes, the motivating incentives for each side of water policy debate become more clear. Local activists, immersed in the literary culture that Austin helped establish, demonstrate an awareness of watershed consciousness and the embodied experience of desert life. By contrast, planners in Los Angeles approach the policy debate from a perspective less influenced by Austin's literary output. Correspondingly, they fail to advocate water management regimes that respect the principles of watershed consciousness and overlook the danger that dryness poses to the residents of the Owens Valley.

## **Conclusion**

By assembling and analyzing bioregional literature from the Central Coast and Owens Valley, this project posits a novel connection between California's literary cultures and its nation-leading environmental policymaking. In the Central Coast, Steinbeck's, Jeffers', and Miller's writing demonstrates archetypes of a landscape that is topographically bounded, extreme, grand, pure, and permanent. These authors also model the bioregional project of

reinhabitation in narrative, orienting their readers towards more sustainable environmental thinking. In the Owens Valley, Austin's writing depicts a landscape of watershed geographies, where sensing the desert goes beyond the visual. Each of these constellations of literary archetypes supports an awareness and prioritization of local environmental concerns. Reading policy documents for these literary archetypes deepens our understanding of literature's influence on citizen-policymakers.

My bioregional analysis of literary archetypes fits into a larger tradition of bioregional literary criticism beyond California, as found in collections like *The Bioregional Imagination* (Lynch et al). These works read for markers of bioregional thought in environmental novels across the world, and my readings of Steinbeck, Jeffers, and Austin follow in their footsteps. This project is innovative, however, in connecting those markers of bioregional thought to the agenda-setting components of awareness and prioritization.

Though this project constructs this connection in the Central Coast and Owens Valley specifically, the dynamic presents a potential for application and scaling across different bioregions, domestically and internationally. In subsequent work, bioregional critics could explore whether the connection between bioregional literature and agenda-setting holds up in other geographies and at other time periods. This project has also constructed a foundation for future studies of regional environmental thinking in California. Future scholars could explore the literary cultures of other California regions or dive deeper into primary sources to study the consequences of awareness and prioritization on California policymaking.

Following Gary Snyder's concept that bioregions are a nested mosaic, scholars could further explore the scales of analysis at which bioregional literature is most operative. Perhaps collecting a few small regions into a combined bioregion like the Central Coast is more

analytically fruitful than exploring a single region like the Owens Valley, but more studies are needed to adjudicate this debate. Another inquiry into the scale of this dynamic could be on the policymaking side: for example, how might individual bioregionalist discourses across California accumulate and interact with the policymaking process in Sacramento?

As a case study project, this paper has limitations that come with its geographic narrowness and the demographics of its case study regions. The project does not explore the intersections of bioregional literature with indigeneity or environmental justice, nor how literature of historically oppressed populations might promote or undermine equity-focused environmental policymaking. Especially in regions of California with more diverse populations, like the Central Valley and Indigenous communities of the far north, bioregional literary criticism could evince new environmental justice genealogies. Even in the Owens Valley, there are further avenues for research into differing environmental imaginations within Indigenous, Mexican, and white communities.

Additionally, this is an interpretive and interdisciplinary study, and it asserts a claim that is difficult to prove in a direct causal sense. Literary influence on policy may be mediated, after all, by a variety of other cultural forces. Instead of following a direct causal path from publications to policymaking, this project traces plausible pathways of agenda-setting through public discourse, planning documents, and historical context. This methodological posture may limit the strength of the causal claims that can be made, but it nevertheless equips scholars of California policy with a novel analytic for future historical studies.

By arguing for the alignment of bioregional literary characteristics and agenda-setting processes in California, this project ultimately is an intervention in both literary theory and policy historiography. Environmental writing has wielded unique influence in California's

environmentalist discourse, especially in fights for coastal protection and watershed management policy. This paper shows that California's bioregional literature plausibly functioned as an agenda-setting force by fostering awareness and prioritization of regional environmental issues. It does not prove that literature alone caused specific policy outcomes, because those outcomes depended on broader cultural and institutional forces. Its importance lies in showing that literary culture was not merely reflective of environmental politics, but also part of the process by which environmental concerns became politically salient. If literary cultures helped create salience historically, then contemporary environmental politics also ought to take narrative-based environmental mobilization more seriously. By understanding California's regional literary culture in the past, we can imagine how literature might inspire sustainable, reinhabitant environmental policymaking today.

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