

Exploring Ecological Resilience in Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*: A Bioregional Perspective

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Received 12 June 2024; accepted 26 July 2024

Published online 26 August 2024

Abstract

This study presents an eco-critical analysis of Annie Proulx's novel *Barkskins*, leveraging key ecocritical perspectives alongside three pivotal bioregional principles: *dwelling* (inhabiting a place), *sustainability* (preserving natural resources for future generations), and *reinhabitation* (remediating past environmental harm). Through a detailed examination of the depiction of environmental boundaries, landscapes, indigenous flora, industrial practices, local cultures, and fauna within the narrative, this research elucidates the manner in which a novel may signify a profound sense of reverence toward the natural world. By subtly weaving the ecological themes throughout her Pulitzer Prize-winning work, Proulx seems to be able to instigate a subconscious awakening of the reader's environmental consciousness. Amid environmental challenges and disconnection from nature, literary works such as *Barkskins* could serve as powerful tools for promoting ecological awareness. Proulx excels in 'nature writing' by skillfully integrating language and geography in the novel. Through rich ecological terms, she immerses readers in wilderness and prompts reflection on their relationship with the environment. The use of vivid imagery and metaphors enhances the reader's engagement with ecological themes. This analysis hints at a bioregional perspective in the narrative, challenging regionalist views of the author's work.

Key words: Annie Proulx; Bioregionalism; Eco-criticism; Dwelling; Sustainability; Reinhabitation

Jebelli, N., & Doosti, F. (2024). Exploring Ecological Resilience

in Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*: A Bioregional Perspective. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 29(1), 1-11. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13469>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13469>

INTRODUCTION

Written by Annie Proulx, a Pulitzer winning contemporary American writer, *Barkskins* is a 2016 novel about two immigrants, named Rene Sel and Charles Duquet, who are sent to the New France from Paris slums as servants to clear land. It also recounts the story of their descendants' lives in 300 years who witness deforestation of New World since the Europeans' arrival to this contemporary era of global warming. Proulx can be considered as a prominent contemporary writer whose works are chiefly themed on nature and natural landscape, a property which is traceable in all her writings and novels, including *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), *Post Cards* (1992), and *Accordion Crimes* (1996). In an article called "The Ecology of Narrative: Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* as Critical Regionalist Fiction", Alex Hunt emphasizes on this writer's importance in nature writing with ecological perspective:

Returning to the ideas of narrative ecology and critical regionalism, we can now see why Proulx weaves and patches together narratives – regional, national and global – in the way she does: using regional materials and cosmopolitan methods to address both local and global concerns.

By using the phrase 'ecological narrative,' Hunt clearly points to Proulx's main ecological concerns dealing with different parts of the world and inevitable problems which are shared by most nations. These problems cannot be neglected and that is why the author attempts to make them the focus of her narratives.

Contrary to many other nature writers and environmentalists who may radically oppose the modern

lifestyle and insist on keeping technology and industry at a distance – a gesture that is almost doomed to failure – Annie Proulx offers another version of being “green” by her unique narration of natural environments in this novel as well as her other works. *Barkskins* exhibits the presence of cultural regionalism through its form and style, consistently immersing the readers in geographical aspects. Furthermore, Proulx’s narratives appear to critique modern culture and industrialization. This paper, however, attempts to indicate that the persistent emphasis on regions aligns more closely with bioregional concepts rather than traditional regional ones. In order to do this, she posits that this literary work under examination extends beyond its initial regional connotations.

This contention challenges the superficial notion that this work solely conveys regional ideas, as it cleverly employs sophisticated literary techniques to delve into the intricate dynamics between human communities and their surrounding natural environments. Through an extensive analysis of elements such as symbolism, imagery, narrative structure, and character development, the researchers aim to uncover the underlying bioregional implications within this work. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to the scholarly discourse surrounding the profound interplay between literature, environment, and the broader concepts of bioregionalism.

To achieve this objective, the researchers initially engage in an ecocritical examination of the novel before transitioning to a bioregional analysis. This analytical approach aims to explore the novel’s linguistic functions with a specific focus on the portrayal of bioregional concepts, thereby emphasizing a deeper understanding beyond conventional regional considerations.

According to what Glotfelty states in the introduction of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Ecocriticism, as an eclectic approach, has been championed by various writers and critics, including Glotfelty and her colleagues, lending it legitimacy in the realm of literary criticism. Consequently, in Proulx’s novels, the intertwining of setting and plot can be analyzed through a bioregional lens.

In the introduction of *The Biosphere and Bioregion Essential Writing of Peter Berg*, Glotfelty states that “in brief, bioregionalism asks us to become conscious of ourselves and the places where we live in ecological terms and to harmonize human activities with ecological realities.” As the word itself indicates, bioregion means “life-place” which suggests a unique region is definable by natural boundaries with geographic, climatic, ecological features to maintain human communities.

While it is acknowledged that bioregionalism was originally developed by influential figures like Peter Berg, Raymond Dasmann, Gary Snyder, and Stephanie Mills,

Glotfelty has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to exploring, applying, educating, and curating anthologies on this concept. This dedication is shared by fellow advocates like Tom Lynch, Karla Armbruster, and Eve Quesnel.

The term “bioregional” may not find explicit mention or recognition among certain literary figures such as Proulx; nevertheless, a discernible semblance of this concept pervades various aspects of *Barkskins*. This is why it has been selected for the purpose of the study because these views are hoping to support communities in a better future world moving away from political boundaries in favor of biotical natural ones.

It is important to note that in comparison to other literary works, there are less books written about this contemporary author. Karen L. Rood’s *Understanding Annie Proulx* (2001) and *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx* (2009) are perhaps the two full texts which contain revision of her fiction based on ecocriticism. They both will be referred to throughout this research. Revisions of her works are mostly appeared in magazines and newspapers. There are also many articles, papers and essays about her, which the researchers made an attempt to study as much as possible in order to consider the different perspectives and angles in the analysis of her narratives.

The previous analysis covers themes from naturalism to Anthropocene and regionalism in Proulx’s works, addressing different perspectives. Perhaps “Bioregionalism” is the angle which has not been directly regarded in Proulx’s works which will be focused on during the research.

This study aims to figure out to what extent Proulx’s novels are akin to bioregionalism more than regionalism.

METHODOLOGY AND PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, the fields of ecocriticism and bioregionalism have garnered significant attention due to their profound potential in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards the natural world.

The birth of ecocriticism dates back to mid-eighties and in early nineties when it started to flourish. It was not until 1993 that ecological literary turned to recognizable critical school which joined all the disconnected and scattered scholars and graduate students and gathered them as a strong professional group interested in the field of ecocriticism and nature writing (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xvii). As defined in this book:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, just as a feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Eco critics try to explain the way nature is represented in a literary work, the function of setting in a plot of a novel, the amount of value dedicated to ecology, the importance of place in a new critical way, the difference between male and female writers treating nature in their writing, the effect of environmental crisis on contemporary literature, the difference of attitude toward wilderness, the extent to which environmental crisis entered the contemporary literature, the aspect of nature included in advertisement, documentaries, movies and series and so on. Contrary to the wide range and variety in ecological criticism, the interconnectedness of human culture and physical world is the main base of the argument shared by all ecocritics. The main feature of ecocriticism is that it analyses the relationship between authors and their works in the physical world. (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xix)

Another domain of works in this research is focused on "bioregionalism" that could be well related to ecocriticism to find solutions and responses to environmental problems and ecological degradation as well. Perhaps the simpler way to explain bioregionalism is the first sentence of *The Biosphere and the Bioregion: Essential writings of Peter Berg*: "bioregionalism asks us to reimagine ourselves and the places where we live in ecological terms and to harmonize activities with the natural systems that sustains life". This sentence clarifies the role of people in any place to live sustainably.

Living-in-place which is another term to name bioregionalism means using the resources and enjoying life in a particular area following proper ways to guarantee long-term use of that place. It also means to keep balance between the lives of people and other living things and natural processes such as soil, water and weather. This way of life contradicts the societies which destruct and exploit the environment to make a living. Obviously, what is shared by all the definitions mentioned it the emphasis on the harmonious integration of place, culture, nature and peoples' act for sustainability.

Berg defined three goals for bioregionalism: reinhabitation, sustainability and supporting people who follow sustainability. Reinhabitation deals with ecological restoration such as replanting, preventing erosion in the stream banks, taking measures to control air pollution and recreating marshlands. It means learning how to live in a place which was destroyed and exploited and becoming aware of the ecological features of that area. It also means understanding social acts and treatments in that place trying to improve them. The information needed for reinhabitation can be collected from local inhabitants and their experiences of living in a special place and their attempts to make a living. Reinhabitation uses this information to shape new patterns of life in relation to the land and prevent the previous destruction. Bioregional identity is developed by reinhabitation.

The second goal is the necessity of finding ways to meet basic human needs sustainably, relying as much as possible on local materials and resources. Needs like food, energy, shelter, transportation and health care. This is perhaps much more realistic compared to radical environmentalists' view who guard against modern way of life and technology.

Sustainability can be defined as fulfilling the human being's needs in a balanced way so that the natural resources will be kept for future generation as well.

The third one which is related to the other two is providing support for those who try to live sustainably. In fact, Berg redefines human identity based on three questions: "who am I? where am I? and what am I going to do about it?" and the bioregional responses are as follow:

You are a member of *Homo Sapiens*, a mammal species sharing the biosphere interdependently with other species and natural system that support them. You are in a bioregion, an ecological home place that has distinct continuities that affect the way you live and are affected by you. You can reinhabit the place where you live by restoring and maintaining natural systems, finding sustainable ways to satisfy basic human needs such as water, energy, food, materials and culture and [...] support(ing) other people who involved with the process of Reinhabitation. (Glotfelty & Quesnel, 2015, p.4) All the points in the extract will be traced and discussed in the following sections in order to demonstrate how the author tries to set these goals in the readers' mind.

The research could be well indicative of how literary works can make readers aware of their acts and behavior in the environment. Besides, novels such as *Barkskins* might make readers realize the harsh bitter consequences of destroying nature against the short-term benefits.

The novel contains pedagogical aspects that might encourage readers to live sustainably. In *Barkskins*, the consequences of deforestation and the exploitation of natural resources are portrayed through the lives of its characters. This novel also shows how the destruction of forests and ecosystems can lead to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and even the displacement of indigenous communities. By highlighting these issues, the novel raises awareness about the importance of protecting the environment and the need for sustainable practices. Another example of pedagogical aspect of *Barkskins*, could be the way in which the novel depicts the relationship between humans and nature. The novel portrays nature not as a resource to be exploited for profit, but as a complex and interconnected web of life that humans are a part of. By highlighting the interdependence of all living things, this novel encourages readers to view themselves as stewards of the environment, rather than its master.

The researchers also discovered the distinct linguistic

features that contribute to the ecological richness and depth. These features, which include the combination of language and geography through the use of imagery and descriptive language, the integration of the language of ecology, the incorporation of traditional stories from locals, the use of dialects and indigenous language.

Proulx expertly combines language and geography in her novels, utilizing vivid imagery and descriptive language to immerse reads in the physical landscaped of her stories. Through carefully crafted prose, she paints detailed portraits of the environment her characters inhabit, creating a strong sense of place and enhancing the reader's connection to the narrative.

The literary language in *Barkskins* is rich, descriptive, and often poetic. She uses lively descriptions and sensory details to bring the forests and landscapes of North America to life describing the trees, plants, and animals in rich detail, which the following extracts could be an instance:

Violent maples flared against the black spruce. Rivers of birds on their great autumnal journeys filled the skies__ Hudsonian godwits, whole nations of hawks, countless black warblers__ Paruline rayee__ looking like tiny men with their black berets, chalky faces and dark mustache streaks, cranes, longspurs, goldeneyes, loons, sparrows, flycatchers, warblers, geese. The first ice storm came one night in October. Then the world pressed flat, snow hissing in the spruce needles, the sun dimmed by a grisaille wash. The forest clenched into itself as though inhaling a breath. (Proulx,2016,p.39)

As it can be seen, the author uses dramatic and descriptive imagery to paint a picture of natural world. The phrases "violent maples", "rivers of birds" and "snow hissing" are good metaphorical examples. Maples, typically associated with their vibrant colors, during the autumn are described as violent. This metaphorical language suggests a strong, intense and perhaps tumultuous display of color and energy. It can convey a sense of nature exhibiting a powerful and almost aggressive transformation during this time. This metaphor emphasizes the intensity and dynamism of the natural world, capturing the reader's attention and immersing them in the vividness of the scene.

DISCUSSION

The Natural Representation of the Novel

From the moment the readers get informed about this novel and by just facing its title "*Barkskins*," the concern about trees, which are very common natural creatures, reveals itself. Among the recurrent use of different kinds of trees such as pine, willow, oak, cedar, yew, spruce, birch and different parts of trees such as stump, root, branch, log and trunk, the title has the potential to draw

the readers' attention to itself, as "bark" means the outer part of a tree and "skin" as a verb which means to separate the skin of something. However, the "s" at the end of the title changes its part of speech to a plural noun meaning people who work in trees. The author's attentive mind to trees can be shown in an interview by Jennifer Maloney from "The Wall Street Journal", which is updated on June 9, 2016 on its website, and to answer when Proulx first got the idea of *Barkskins*, Proulx said:

One time on Michigan's Upper Peninsula in the 80s or possibly 70s, I came to a highway junction. There was nothing there but a laundromat and a large billboard proclaiming that here, in the 19th century, grew the 'finest stand of white pine in the world.' There were no white pines in sight, only scrub brush. I did find some white pine of considerable size growing in a difficult steep place, probably never logged because of the difficulty in getting those trees out. The whole incident was odd and gave me a mournful sense of the extirpated forest and the lost men who laid it down.

Proulx's response in this interview could be a persuasive feature of her concern about trees as essential parts of nature. There are numerous and repetitive times when this author tries to awaken the reader's minds in order not to take blessings like trees for granted. This is something different with aesthetic and pastoral use of trees and forests in other customary fictions and poems. In addition to the repetitive portraying and naming trees, varied plants are also mentioned specially the medicinal ones. In another article printed in The New York Times on June 17, 2016, William T. Vollmann also refers to this author's care for trees and by pointing to a part of *Barkskins* states that:

"A man_ if he's any good _ makes eight axes a day. If he's no good he can make 10 or 12." Proulx pays admirable attention to the dichotomy between 19th century wasteful American timbering and conservation-oriented German forestry practices, and to the possible symbiosis between Amerindian medicine plants and the healthy trees that surrounded them in pre-logging days. She vivifies these topics through such concisely effective landscape descriptions as this one.

Reading Proulx's novels, one can imagine being on a free tour to different and farfetched destinations. On the route to these places and locations, this author functions as the most proficient tour guide who not only provides the tourists (readers) with a thorough geographical explanation about the spots, but also informs the travelers of a comprehensive historical background of the regions along with detailed description of the changes of landscapes. "In Proulx's fiction, weather, landscape, history and local economy remain vital, factual signposts within a fictional representation." wrote Hunt in *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx* (p.3).

Place, geography and landscape are the most prominent parts of Proulx's novels and she has lived and explored the places before starting to write like her research about

Texas Panhandle which is evident in her acknowledgment section of *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Her description of landscape clearly reveals multidimensional aspects of natural inland scenery. This way of comprehensive and detailed depiction of landscape puts emphasis on the priority of “setting” or simply put “place” in her works.

In a few hours the sodden leaf mold gave way to pine duff. The air was intensely aromatic. Fallen needles muted their passage, the interlaced branches absorbed their panting breaths. Here grew huge oaks of a size not seen in the old country of hundreds for hundreds of years, evergreens taller than cathedrals, cloud-piercing spruce and hemlock. The monstrous deciduous trees stood distant from each other, but overhead their leaf-choked branches merged into a false sky, dark and savage. (Proulx, 2016, p.16)

In the extract above the change of landscape is delicately expressed by the use of precise description of the kind of soil and trees. Besides, the change of the size of trees within hundreds of years could be meant to demonstrate the perpetual impact of the environment. The author’s diction such as “taller than cathedrals” might convey the message that trees worth is not less than cathedrals which is supposedly an indirect way to guard against anthropocentrism. The choice of special trees called “evergreens”, might also refer to the change of landscape in different seasons while the leaves of these trees remain green throughout the year. Additionally, “evergreen” refers to immortality in an ironic way since trees as components of forests might appear to be everlasting whereas in fact it is not true. “Fallen needles muted their passage”, and “the interlace branches absorbed their panting breaths” could imply animism considering the inarticulation of human compared to the power of the forest, which by the use of these phrases seems to suffocate them.

Alex Hunt asserts that “Proulx finds the insistence, the “Real-ness” of geography. In turn her readers are forcefully reminded that the regions and places remain *real*, distinct, different...” (p.1). Hunt argues that this way of insisting on geography in Proulx’s novel addresses her postmodern style which is different with the clichéd use of place and region in regional writing and that is why he calls this method “post-regionalist”. I would add that Proulx’s insistence on writing exact details about places could encompass her ecological care parallel with bioregional attitude since the importance of places as “bioregions” are the main zones to be considered.

The beginning of *Barkskins* starts as: “In twilight they passed bloody Tadoussac Kebec and Trois-Rivieres and near dawn moored at remote riverbank settlement” (p.15). As it is noticed, setting occupies the foreground of this novel as well. Interestingly the places used for the setting in Proulx’s novels have been all observed, researched and experienced by her even before starting to write. This clearly complies with the inquires of bioregionalists. The first step in bioregionalism, is to determine the bioregions

including mountains, rivers, forests, deserts, farmlands and inland sea. However, these sorts of inquiries do not target mere geographical locations and what matters is the ecological importance of the places instead.

Characters in Proulx’s novels are also dominated by geography and place. The existence of large number of characters in *Barkskins* is good example to demonstrate that she does not think much of people in comparison to the places they live in. “geography shapes and limits characters’ lives”, Hunt says in *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx*. In the same book he adds:

The main reason that Proulx’s landscapes go far beyond memorable word pictures is that she foregrounds the geography – land forms, environmental facts, weather and so on – and shows human individuals and communities as subject to the conditions of that geography. While a description of a landscape may, in typical novelistic fashion, reflect characters’ mental states and help to create atmosphere, Proulx’s character psychology is even more powerfully a reflection of that character’s environment. (p.4)

As another instance to indicate the influence of the environment on individuals, Monsieur Trepagny in *Barkskins* draws our attention:

He named the furious Mi’kmaq spirits of the forest – Chepichcaam, hairy Kookwes, frost giant chenoo and unseen creatures who felled trees with their jaws. Rene’s hair bristled and he thought Monseieur Trepagny had fallen too deeply into the world of the savages. (p.29)

As placed in a different environment, Trepagny even received their superstition as a part of their culture. These contrasts the white men’s consideration of the local people as savages which even makes Rene surprised.

Rene himself gradually turned to a Mi’kmaq after marrying Mari. “It seemed both of them were subject to outside forces, powerless to object in matters of marriage or chopping” (p.51). The phrase “outside forces” encompasses the physical environment and its impact on their lives and decision since Rene was first reluctant to marry Mari but Trepagny’s promise to grant him the land made him change his mind.

Proulx’s care for setting and landscape in her works appears to parallel with special ethic of place which moves toward sustainable lifestyle. This way of attachment to place could certify that her novels could promote both environmental and bioregional culture.

UNVEILING DWELLING AND LIFESTYLE IN BARKSKINS

As explained earlier in, “Dwelling” is in fact one of the key terms in Bioregionalism. It has been defined by Kirk Patrick Sale in *Dwellers in Land the Bioregional Vision* as the main and important step to comprehend the surrounding environment in which we reside, including the soil and rocks beneath us, the origin of our water

supply, the significance of various winds, the presence of insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees, as well as the specific patterns of seasons and the appropriate times for planting, harvesting, and foraging. These are the essential things to be knowledgeable about.

Proulx has depicted all the things mentioned by Sale throughout the novel in this research. The lifestyle of people has been described and explained in details. Notably, Proulx delves into the stark dichotomy between urban and rural lifestyles, while also vividly portraying the contrasting aspects of indigenous customs versus those of immigrants and local inhabitants.

In *Barkskins*, the life of Mi'kmaw people is written in detail. There is even one chapter dedicated to Mi'kma'ki in which the kind of cooking, hunting, fishing, Cano making, dish "birch-bark container" and dress making out of natural plants and animals are explained along with the kind of houses "wikuom", the way of trading "trade meat for maize and pumpkins" and even games they play "waltes". In the same chapter the story of a young Mi'kmaw hunter is told who was killed by his neighbor because of using a saucer which he had brought from white settlement. They killed him as a traitor to traditional way and smashed the saucer. However, grandmother Loze refers to the two families who have saucers and nobody kills them and she says: "everything does change" (p.228). The word "change" reveals the uselessness of bias regarding the bioregional fact that people can learn to live mindfully in any place without the limits which have been set by cultural or geographical boundaries.

Environmental Stewardship and Sustainable Practices

As previously discussed, sustainability is another key term in both ecocriticism and bioregionalism which is generally defined as preserving natural resources and energy. It also means proper ways of living in different parts of the world without destroying it as much as possible so that future generation's existence can last and benefit the natural blessings as well. While reading this novel the readers are constantly exposed to the parts which could imply this concept of bioregionalism and provide guidance to live in a sustainable way.

Different characters in *Barkskins* treat the environment variedly. However, Proulx does not seem to write about these people aimlessly or just to make her novel lengthier. She must have a purpose and her purpose seems very close to what has been defined as sustainability in the field of bioregionalism by demonstrating what is being done, what should have been done and what shouldn't, in this regard. For example, Duquet, the greediest protagonist in the novel who was highly ambitious and yearned to become wealthy, started his job with trading fur and ended up in timber business. He was the one who had a thirst for money by counting on the trees in the forests of New France. These forests are constantly described

using adjectives such as endless, everlasting or infinite. However, there is a part in the story that even Duquet himself doubts this infinity of forests and while talking to Captain Verdwijnen he confesses:

...It is my belief that forests are everlasting and can never disappear, for they replenish themselves, but I have seen in France that they are...diminished. And I have noticed that even in New France the forest is drawing back – a little, wherever there are settlements. How far back can a forest withdraw before it replenishes itself? (p.133)

Proulx has delicately indicated Duquet's hesitation about deforestation which brings sustainability up. However, Duquet ignores it and prefers his own benefit. This part of novel will probably draw the readers' attention to the importance of saving forests. Mari, despite lacking literacy skills, exemplifies a mindful character that could aptly be described as an advocate or supporter of sustainable practices in *Barkskins*:

They stood opposed on the nature to the forest. To Mari it was a living entity, as vital as the waterways, filled with the gifts of medicine, food, shelter, tool material, which everyone discovered and remembered. One lived with it harmony and gratitude. She believed the interminable chopping of every tree for the foolish purpose of "clearing the land" was bad. But that thought Rene, was woman's talk. The forest was there enormous and limitless (p.75)

Mari understands and appreciates the blessing of nature; she uses them wisely and logically but cares about saving them and hates wasting for greed. This is what Rene underestimates and does not realize like most so called sophisticated people around the world.

Reinhabitation Dynamics in *Barkskins*

Reinhabitation can be redefined in short as the process of acquiring the knowledge and skills to reside in a region that has experienced previous exploitation, leading to disruption and harm. It entails developing a sense of belonging and familiarity with the specific ecological dynamics that exist within and neighboring the area. Reinhabitation involves cultivating an understanding of the intricate relationships between organisms and their environment, ultimately resulting in the ability to live harmoniously and adaptively within the given place. This concept is fully explained in chapter two and it will be traced in both novels in to answer the third research question.

In the novel *Barkskins*, there are characters who exemplify the concept of reinhabitation, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Mari, an exceptional Mi'kmaw woman, stands out as one such character. Throughout the story, Mari passionately expresses her aversion to deforestation in various ways. She views the notion of clearing the land as foolish and openly criticizes the practice of tree-cutting. She humiliates learning to cut trees "Goose catch learn them, many traps learn, Good mens there hunting, here only gardens, cut tree

learn” (p.32); this quote from the novel reveals how she humiliates cutting trees and even gardening. Possibly due to her belief that proper utilization of natural resources eliminates the need for artificial means of production, Mari harbors a dislike for gardening. It is likely that she understands the intrinsic value of the land, which can be transformed into fertile gardens if managed and utilized responsibly. By expressing her discontent with gardening, Mari underscores the importance of recognizing and appreciating the inherent productivity and sustainability of nature.

As Glotfelty and Quesnel defined, reinhabitation also means: “undertaking activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it...It involves applying for membership in a biotic community and ceasing to be its exploiter” (p.36). Once again, Mari emerges as a prime example aligning with this definition. In her deep familiarity with the flora found in the forest, she possesses profound knowledge of their medicinal properties. Mari skillfully utilizes plants and trees to heal others, demonstrating her understanding of their healing properties. For instance, she treats burning eyes by rinsing them with a tamarack bark solution or administers the use of “alder” for its healing benefits. These instances vividly illustrate Mari’s profound connection with the natural world and her ability to harness its resources for therapeutic purposes: “Mari went to her cupboard and stirred something. She brought it to Duquet. Monsieur Trepagny said perhaps it was a potion made from green alder Catkins, the very alders Duquet had crushed, so then the medicine would not work for him. Mari said, “willow leaf, willow bark good medicine Mali makes” (p.25).

This part of the novel could emphasize once more on Mari’s deep connection and understanding of her bioregion’s natural resources and their medicinal properties. By going to her cupboard and stirring something, she demonstrates her knowledge of the healing potential found within her environment. The mention of green alder Catkins implies Mari’s use of these specific plant parts, which she may have collected from the very alders that Duquet had crushed. This signifies Mari’s awareness of the importance of sourcing medicinal ingredients sustainably, as the medicine may not be effective if it is made from damaged sources. Additionally, Mari’s mention of willow leaf and bark further showcases her expertise in utilizing various parts of plants, emphasizing their value as effective medicine. Furthermore, Duquet’s disregard for nature, is symbolized by his actions of crushing the alders, may have resulted in the medicine not working for him. This is suggested by Monsieur Trepagnay’s comment that the potion made from the alders would not be effective for Duquet due to his destructive actions. It implies that harming or disrespecting nature can potentially hinder or negate the

blessings and healing properties it offers. This observation underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting the interconnectedness of humans and the nature. Besides, it conveys Mari’s embodiment of the reinhabitation concept by actively engaging with and drawing upon the resources of her bioregion for healing purposes, respecting the ecological balance and sustainability of these resources.

Within the story, there are several noteworthy characters that have the potential to inspire readers about sustainable living and reestablishing a harmonious coexistence with the environment. These characters include Dieter, Charley, Sapatisia, Jeanne, and Felix. Dieter, previously a forester in Germany, joins Dukes & Sons to educate Lavinia on the proper techniques for logging and forest management. Through his interactions with her, Dieter aims to raise awareness about the detrimental impact of irresponsible forestry practices on forests and the natural world. He enlightens Lavinia about various potential catastrophes such as landslides, fires, shipwrecks, self-harming loggers, and wood-related accidents that occur within the industry. Furthermore, he elucidates the consequences of tree removals, particularly when mills are placed at the base of steep hills to facilitate the transportation of logs, resulting in soil erosion and the destabilization of hillsides. In other words, Dieter’s character serves as a catalyst for educating readers about the destructive consequences of unsustainable logging practices, emphasizing the importance of responsible forestry and its implications for the environment. For example, he tells Lavinia about what he heard from a Maine timberman who came to Michigan:

Spring came and they all began to thaw. He told me he was standing on a nearby spit of land in a position where he could admire his mill cutting as fast as the saws could run when he saw that entire treeless hill gather itself together like a cat and rush down in a landslide of mud. It buried the mill and the mill hands, sank the ship waiting to be loaded. It made terrible big wave in the harbor. Never found anything that was in its path. A monstrous wet pile of mud and stumps. (p.699)

Dieter informs Lavinia about the possibility of cutting down the replanted trees, and she begins to understand the value of replantation in preventing further tree-cutting. Taking advantage of Lavinia’s fondness for robins, Dieter seizes the moment and mentions the detrimental effects on these birds when their trees are felled: “I wonder if you know how badly the robins are hurt when we cut down their trees” (p.702). He explains that the robins are forced to build their nests amidst the noise and danger of spinning saws. Later on, after shutting down Breitsprecher logging operations and selling it to Duke, Dieter agrees to partner with Duke on the condition that he can retain the cutover lands for ongoing reforestation projects. However, following Lavinia’s passing and his subsequent remarriage, Dieter becomes involved once again in the logging business and entrepreneurship.

Dieter's son, Charley, pursued a forestry education at Yale but held strong opposition towards logging and the involvement of companies like Duke. Instead, he aspired to become a botanist and distanced himself from his parents' business. Charley even disagreed with his father's approach of cutting trees and replanting them after. His belief was that the act of cutting trees and then replanting them was unnecessary. When Dieter sends Charley to South America, Charley diligently documents the various trees he encounters in a notebook. Unfortunately, his written observations are later utilized by his extended family members, who end up destroying the exact same trees he had sought to preserve. This unfortunate outcome demonstrates the paradox of Charley's efforts to sustain trees, as they resulted in the opposite effect. This situation draws a parallel to the plight of the Mi'kmaw people, who were ultimately forced to cut down trees for survival and financial means. It suggests that deforestation is an unavoidable reality, much like how the Mi'kmaw community had to engage in tree-cutting practices to ensure their livelihood. Therefore, the juxtaposition highlights the contrast between Dieter's perspective, which seems aligned with a reinhabitation process, and Charley's more radical environmentalist ideology. This contrast can be inferred from Charley's final entry in his notebook, giving insight into his commitment and dedication to the preservation of trees:

Nothing in the natural world, no forest, no river, no insect nor leaf had any intrinsic value to men. All is worthless, utterly dispensable unless we discover some benefit to ourselves in it—even the most ardent forest lover thinks this way. Men behave as overlords. They decide what will flourish and what will die. I believe that humankind is evolving into a terrible new species and I'm sorry that I am one of them. (p.827)

There is another intriguing character in *Barkskins* who bears a striking resemblance to Mari, and her name is Sapatisia Sel. She is the daughter of Edgar-Jim Sel and shares Mari's passion for nature and activism. Sapatisia resides in a coastal region and has dedicated her research to studying the natural world, particularly in the field of ecology. Just like Mari, she possesses extensive knowledge about medicinal plants. Sapatisia can be seen as a role model, showcasing sustainable reinhabitation practices, especially for Jeanne Sel and Felix, who are descendants of both Sel and Mari. When Jeanne and Felix come across an article in a magazine about Sapatisia, they are deeply impressed and compelled to seek her out. The lecture they attended about protecting the "great boreal forest" further fuels their determination. In the novel's final chapter, Jeanne and Felix manage to have a conversation with Sapatisia and express their desire to be part of the "Breitsprecher Tree Project." After thorough consideration, Sapatisia accepts their request and invites them to join. She explains that the project focuses on replantation efforts and the study of the environment and local ecosystem.

The ending of *Barkskins* encompasses a mixture of fear and hope for the future. Sapatisia experiences anxiety and uncertainty regarding the progress and ultimate success of their project. Alongside these concerns, she also worries about the potential outcomes and implications of their efforts. Her apprehension is intensified as she reflects on the alarming sight of melting polar ice, which serves as a stark reminder of the urgent challenges and consequences the world faces due to environmental changes:

She, Sapatisia Sel, was here now and she hadn't given up, but she had to sleep, had to, had to sleep. "What can I do but keep on trying? But what if it was all for nothing? But what if it was already too late when the first hominid rose up and stared at the world? No!" (p.896)

An Amalgamation of Language and Geography

Proulx expertly combines language and geography in her novels, utilizing vivid imagery and descriptive language to immerse readers in the physical landscapes of her stories. Through carefully crafted prose, she paints detailed portraits of the environment her characters inhabit, creating a strong sense of place and enhancing the reader's connection to the narrative.

The literary language in *Barkskins* is rich, descriptive, and often poetic. She uses lively descriptions and sensory details to bring the forests and landscapes of North America to life describing the trees, plants, and animals in rich detail:

Violent maples flared against the black spruce. Rivers of birds on their great autumnal journeys filled the skies – Hudsonian godwits, whole nations of hawks, countless black warblers – Paruline rayee – looking like tiny men with their black berets, chalky faces and dark mustache streaks, cranes, longspurs, goldeneyes, loons, sparrows, flycatchers, warblers, geese. The first ice storm came one night in October. Then the world pressed flat, snow hissing in the spruce needles, the sun dimmed by a grisaille wash. The forest clenched into itself as though inhaling a breath. (p.39)

As it can be seen, metaphorical phrases like 'violent maples,' 'rivers of birds,' and 'snow hissing' are used to emphasize the intensity and dynamism of the natural world. The migrating birds symbolize the cyclical nature of ecosystems, while the simile comparing black warblers to tiny men highlights the parallel between bird migrations and human journeys. This ecological perspective adds depth to the novel and underscores the interconnectedness between the natural world and human experiences.

Embracing the Language of Ecology for Sustainable Impact

In the beginning of chapter three of *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, Kirkpatrick Sale states that in the language of ecology – a language which it behooves us all to learn – the conditions of an imperiled environment are described in a few short and pungent words: 'drawdown,' 'overshoot,' 'crash,' and 'die-off.'

Drawdown refers to the depletion of resources in

an ecosystem by the dominant species. This process happens when the consumption rate of these resources exceeds their replenishment rate. Additionally, in order to compensate for the shortage, the dominant species may borrow resources from other locations or from the future.

Overshoot is the inescapable and irreversible result of ongoing drawdown. It occurs when the consumption of resources in an ecosystem surpasses its capacity to sustain, with no possibility of restoration or rectification for what has been depleted.

The term “crash” refers to a sudden and significant decrease in the number of species. This decline occurs when a population surpasses the capacity of its environment, leading to a depletion of resources. In such cases, nothing can be done until the population is reduced to a level where the resources can gradually replenish themselves.

The idea of drawdown is illustrated in Proulx’s novel through unsustainable timber practices. Overshoot is depicted in *Barkskins* with examples of unsustainable human interventions in nature. The concept of crash is exemplified by the Irish potato famine and parallels the plight of the Mi’kmaw people in *Barkskins*, whose suffering was caused by European colonizers’ destructive actions.

HARNESSING STORIES, MYTH AND LORE: TOWARDS BIOREGIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In his article called “Interpreting Bioregionalism : A Story from Many Voices”, Doug Aberley refers to “the 1960s social change activists with a number of enticing access routes into bioregional perception and practice” and states that “storytelling, ancient and new ritual, myth-making, theatre, dance, poetry and prose all became the language of bioregional expressions” (p.24).

In *Barkskins*, Mari shares Mi’kmaw stories and wisdom through language and gestures, emphasizing effective communication methods. Trepagny’s mention of mythical forest spirits in the novel adds depth and commentary on human impact on nature. Sosep’s advice to the Mi’kmaw people stresses the importance of preserving their culture and connection to the land amidst colonization. These instances in Proulx’s works demonstrate the significance of traditional knowledge and environmental stewardship.

Bioregional Politics via Dialect and Foreign Vocabulary

Annie Proulx’s research prominently features the portrayal of regional and local speech, making language a noteworthy aspect that sets it apart. In *Lifeplace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Thayer states that “language is one good indicator of life-place boundaries”

(p.168). He exemplifies local dialects among indigenous peoples residing in three distinct areas near the Sacramento River in California where the difference in dialects is so significant that communication between these groups becomes challenging. Thayer further explains that the concept of ‘biogenerative’ pattern language can offer a unique approach to land planning and management. “Just like words, patterns evolve meaning and are modified by associated use in a place overtime” (p.169).

Considering Proulx’s emphasis on geography and environment, her deliberate use of dialects and even other languages such as Mari’s language in *Barkskins* may be intentional. It allows her to shed light on the diverse perspectives and policies that different communities have concerning the treatment of land, which is a significant, integral part of nature.

The Regional Label Revisited: Proulx’s Novels from a Bioregional Perspective

Proulx’s novels are known for their vivid portrayal of specific locations, focusing on customs, history, and landscapes. While initially categorized as regional fiction, a closer look reveals her alignment with bioregionalism over traditional regionalism. In “Contemporary Regionalism”, Michael Kowalewski states:

American Regionalism is steeped, like strong tea, in the details of particular places as they have been filtered through a writer’s imagination. In fact, one of the central impulses in American literature – one shared by Thoreau and Cather, Falkner and Silko, Stevens and Didon, Huston and Welty – has been to evoke what Fredrick Turner echoing D.H. Lawrence calls a “spirit of place.” (p.7)

He explains that in simple terms, the “spirit ‘of place’ goes” beyond just mentioning the color or adding a bit of local flavor. They come from a feeling of belonging and connection to a place. They are influenced by both history of the people there and the long-lasting characteristics of nature, like geology and forests. This creates rich and detailed descriptions that make you feel like you are experiencing the memories and life of that place. This is what we say the writing captures the unique essence of American locations. The best regional American writings are not just about a place, but they fully immerse the writer’s thoughts and feelings in the local environment, the communities, the hidden stories, and the way people talk in that area.

Kowalewski describes that promoting regional identity often involves the “heritage” movement, which is driven more by commercial interests, nostalgia, and economic growth than by genuine community cohesion. Historians and writers are skeptical of the commodification and marketing of regional history and experiences because it tends to present a distorted and oversimplified view. It tends to focus on celebratory aspects, overlook diversity and conflicts, and reduce unique regional characteristics to

cliché symbols. Consequently, it hides rather than reveals the true distinctiveness of each region. (p.10)

Many regional writers strongly disagree with the promotion of regional distinctiveness, viewing it as deceptive and hindering a true understanding of a region. Barry Lopez, as quoted by Kowalewski, also criticizes what he calls “false geographies,” which are romanticized notions that reduce the profound complexity and wildness of the American landscape to mere attractive scenery. He argues that many Americans now perceive their country based on preconceived visual images seen on TV ads, calendars, or computer screensavers, rather than through personal experiences. This leads to a fabricated national geography that is detached from the actual land, treating it as a collection of objects rather than a cohesive fabric. Regional writers struggle with both distorted historical accounts and an abundance of preconceived images and clichéd characters that overshadow more authentic descriptions of a place (p.10).

Kowalewski contrasts Proulx's depiction of Wyoming with stereotypical images, showing a less picturesque and mythical side focused on real landscapes and people, challenging regional stereotypes. He also contrasts Proulx's authentic portrayal of Wyoming with common regional stereotypes, showcasing a gritty reality devoid of typical scenic imagery and mythical elements (p.11). Modern regional authors challenge region stereotypes with humor but may still struggle to fully escape them. While contemporary American regional writing has become more diverse and inclusive, some authors resist modern or postmodern concepts. Viewing urban and suburban America through a regional lens may reveal a focus on consumerism and portrayals of dullness, intolerance, and unhealthiness (p.14). Kowalewski is in fact inspired by bioregionalism, which values understanding places based on natural features rather than political boundaries. This movement emphasizes the connection between human behavior and local ecosystems, viewing healthy communities as closely tied to their natural surroundings and identities.

As noticed, this article by Michael Kowalewski provides valuable insight into the limitations of traditional regionalism, highlighting the advancements made in contemporary regionalism and the emergence of bioregionalism as a more profound and superior approach in literature concerning ‘place’ and ‘landscape’. Within this context, Annie Proulx is acknowledged as an exceptional regional writer, making it crucial for the researchers to emphasize that her works, particularly *Barkskins* strongly align with the principles of the bioregional concept.

CONCLUSION

An ecocritical-bioregional analysis of Annie Proulx's

novel *Barkskins* first delved into the intricate relationship between literary creation and environmental consciousness, highlighting the significant impact literature can have on shaping the reader's attitudes towards nature and natural resources. Then, the author's sustainable practices were highlighted through an examination of the representation of nature, the portrayal of dwelling, themes of sustainability, and the notion of reinhabitation. The analysis also uncovered implicit traces that sensitized readers to environmental issues stemming from human actions, urging them to take responsibility in fostering a more harmonious relationship with the natural world. The most important question of this paper was concerned with Annie Proulx solely being classified as a regional writer, or actually transcending geographical boundaries by way of her literary contributions. To prove the latter argument, the paper dissected the language and literary devices employed in *Barkskins*, unveiling the author's postmodern techniques of writing that defy traditional regional labels, aligning with broader bioregional notions and themes ingrained within the narrative.

In conclusion, the comprehensive examination of *Barkskins* through a bioregional ecocritical approach not only sheds light on the novel's thematic depth and environmental advocacy, but also prompts readers to reflect on their role in preserving and protecting the natural world. Annie Proulx's work stands as a testament to the power of literature in fostering ecological awareness and inspiring individuals to embrace sustainable practices for a more harmonious coexistence with the environment.

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