

"Blown away like apples by the fickle wind of the Twentieth Century": Counterculture Resistance and the Wilderness Condition in Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*

Jill E. Anderson
Tennessee State University

Abstract

Many critics consider Richard Brautigan's 1967 novel *Trout Fishing in America* a coming-of-age account of a wayward, outsider narrator discovering that the pastoral mode is no longer viable in mid-century America. However, these readings often ignore Brautigan's explicit political affinity and his conscious engagement with a specific setting—southern California in the mid- to late-60s. This paper explores Brautigan's Counterculture ethic, which critiques the mindless prevalence of mainstream, middle-class America's habit of consumption, production, and destruction of the natural world. Linking the lack of individual free will with the postwar technology boom, Brautigan engages with the natural landscape and in communities of one's own making. As a result, the novel is peopled with alienated drop-outs, the victims of America's technocracy. The "trout fishing in America" refrain, with its many incarnations, is one of the modes through which these characters' operate within Counterculture principles, namely through their self-imposed poverty and criticism of the way America uses and abuses its citizens and the natural world.

Keywords: 1960s, Richard Brautigan, ecocriticism

Resumen

Muchos críticos consideran la novela de Richard Brautigan *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) un relato iniciático de un narrador forastero y obstinado que descubre que el modo pastoril ya no es viable en los Estados Unidos de mediados de siglo. Sin embargo, estas lecturas a menudo ignoran la afinidad política explícita de Brautigan y su compromiso consciente con un escenario específico - la California sureña de los últimos años de los años 60. Este ensayo explora la ética contracultural de Brautigan, que critica la preponderancia ciega de la clase media de los Estados Unidos y su hábito de consumo, producción y la destrucción del mundo natural. Conectando la falta de voluntad propia con el "boom" tecnológico posterior a la segunda guerra mundial, Brautigan se implica con el paisaje natural y en las comunidades de creación propia. Como resultado, la novela está llena de bohemios alienados, las víctimas de la tecnocracia estadounidense. El refrán "trout fishing in America," con sus muchas encarnaciones, es una de las formas en las que estos personajes actúan dentro de los principios contraculturales, concretamente a través de su pobreza auto-impuesta y del criticismo de la manera en que los Estados Unidos usan y abusan de sus ciudadanos y del mundo natural.

Palabras clave: años 60, Richard Brautigan, ecocrítica

There are doors
that want to be free
from their hinges to
fly with perfect clouds.
There are windows
that want to be
released from their
frames to run with
the deer through
back country meadows.
—"Let's Voyage into the New American Home"
(Brautigan, *Pill*)

Claimed by the counterculture as one of its literary emissaries, Richard Brautigan embodied many countercultural practices: living outside of mainstream society, ignoring common bourgeois imperatives, and seeking methods of living that valued a connection to the natural world. Denizens of the counterculture rallied against, dropped out from, and lived openly in opposition to what mainstream America valued—success, money, institutions, consumerism. Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (herein *TFIA*), published in 1967, opens with a description of people living outside the system in San Francisco. From a description of the cover of the novel (a black-and-white photograph of the author and a female companion in old-timey garb in front of the statue of Benjamin Franklin in San Francisco's Washington Square Park), Brautigan moves to an account of "sandwich time for the poor." Once the signal is given, the indigents, for whom no explanation of their poverty is noticeably given, cross the street to the church to receive their newspaper-wrapped sandwiches. After unwrapping his sandwich one day, a friend of the narrator "looked inside to find just a leaf of spinach. That was all" (2). Conscious of the conditions under which he and other Americans must operate, the novel's unnamed narrator is clearly aware of the irony of Kafka's observation about America, after reading Benjamin Franklin's autobiography: "I like Americans because they are healthy and optimistic," which appears immediately after the meager spinach sandwich (2). Juxtaposed with the poor and Benjamin Franklin's statue is an account of the park itself. Three poplar trees and grass "wet from the rains of early February" are framed by a cypress tree, "almost dark like a room" (1-2). The narrator mentions that the liberals' choice presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson had spoken there in front of 40,000 people. The same park also hosts protestors carrying anti-nuclear, pacifist, and environmentalist signs: "DON'T DROP AN H-BOMB ON THE OLD FISHING HOLE," "ISAAC WALTON WOULD'VE HATED THE BOMB," and "ROYAL COACHMAN, SI! ICBM, NO!" (99). Combining these images, Brautigan brings forth the inconsistencies of an America to which the counterculture was in opposition. The outsider poor, the park's natural setting inside the cityscape, and the politics of the counterculture all contribute to Brautigan's version of a green counterculture.

On the surface, the unnamed narrator of *TFIA* seeks trout fishing and the physicality of wilderness spaces as a distraction from the hostile, outside world as well

as a means of escaping the mainstream (pun intended). But it is not surprising that, insofar as Brautigan is conscious of the inconsistencies inherent in American society in the 60s, that the natural physical world his narrator pursues is finally subsumed by useless metaphor, the shadowy "trout fishing in America." Abounding with the impediments of the modern, mechanized world, the wilderness of twentieth-century America is not idyllic, strangely disorienting, lacking in spiritual renewal, and always marked by consumerism, violence, loss, and overcrowding. Many critics have suggested that even if the material world is lacking in escapist potential, the narrator can still redeem himself by creating a pastoral of the imagination. One critic suggests that *TFIA* "sucks us into the politics of *no politics*—the politics of a subculture alive in *another place*" (Clayton 65; emphasis in original). And while Keneth Seib initially contends that the novel reads like "an autobiography of a societal drop-out, a contemporary hipster's progress from Jack Armstrong to Jerry Rubin," he later connects the narrator with James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking*: "perishing on the virgin land that once offered unbounded possibility, modern man longing for the restoration of the agrarian simplicity of pioneer America. That a life of frontier innocence is no longer possible adds to the desperate tone and comic absurdity of the narrator's frustrated excursions into the American wilderness" (65, 71).

But these readings ignore what I see as Brautigan's pointed countercultural examination of production, consumption, and the destruction of what is left of the wilderness spaces in the U.S. The ecocritical message of the novel is writ large in its non-mainstream connotations: an American mainstream, made up of the middle-class whose foremost concern is fitting within a restrictive consume-produce-reproduce cycle is destructive not just of happiness and individual free will but also to the natural world. The characters' methods of escape from the mainstream are brought forth most distinctly in their interactions with the environment or elements thereof. They refuse most basic consumer habits, embrace poverty and itinerancy, and embark on an intense and conscious affiliation with their environments, acting within a countercultural mode of resistance that critically examines the way Americans in the 1960s cut themselves off from restorative contact with the natural world as well as themselves.

For the narrator, living in alternative systems outside the mainstream does not necessarily posit an imaginative and affirmative community; alternatives are rather sought out of necessity and shared with other alienated drop-outs, victims of America's technocracy, driven by consumers. Put succinctly in his article on alternative technologies of the counterculture, Andrew Kirk summarizes reasons behind their rejection of the modern world: "[...] the grim reality of mechanized death in Vietnam, rivers so polluted they caught fire, smog alerts that sent children and the elderly running for cover, the omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation, and the cold dehumanization of the labor force by industry" (354). Wary of insidious consumer identities and refusing to participate in the technocracy either politically or privately, the narrator and his posse of outsiders reveal the underpinning discrepancies in Cold War America. As Christopher Gair explains, "in the linguistic strategies he deploys in order to reveal the hidden mechanisms of control [...] it is apparent that Brautigan detects narratives and

monuments that limit human freedom everywhere he looks, and that he believes escaping the control they wield requires constant vigilance and imagination" (155, 156). But, at the same time, Brautigan tempers this position by revealing "latent alliance of all the cast-offs, drop-outs, and oddballs in American society, of all those suffering from 'a hundred alienations'," making it ultimately about "why the old pastoral of an America of freedom and tranquility was no longer viable" (Malley 151-52). And the answer to this question, in my estimation, is to remain outside, to embrace counterculture principles as well as the many deployments of trout fishing in America. These alternative communities are often housed within wilderness areas (or what is left of them). They are ambiguous in both form and philosophy. Presumably, they offer a fresh and untouched place in which to exist and contemplate the destructiveness of dominant ideologies, but they are, more often than not, material representations of the Brautigan's ethic and opposition to dominant ideologies.

The counterculture, according to Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, "can't be accurately represented by a straight line, or even a squiggly line" because it "reveled in tangents, metaphors, unresolved contradictions, conscious rupture of logic and reason; it was expressly anti-linear, anti-teleological, rooted in the present, disdainful of thought processes that were circumscribed by causation and consequence" (13). Defeating teleology and refusing linear narratives is an important mode of living in opposition to dominant ideologies. The countercultural mode within Brautigan often comfortably leaves questions about the natural world unanswered as well as allowing seemingly contradictory images to coexist. Brautigan is comfortable with paradox, and these paradoxes are indicative of the living conditions of the American twentieth-century. The "Tom Martin Creek" chapter outlines the narrator's paradoxical attitude toward his mode of escape. Choosing the creek because he likes its name, he finds it "turned out to be a real son-of-a-bitch" (19). It is not just what the creek has to offer naturally—"brush, poison oak and hardly any good places to fish, and sometimes the canyon was so narrow the creek poured out like water from a faucet"—but also its associations with the human world (19). The narrator notes, "[I]t's good to name creeks after people and then later to follow them for a while seeing what they have to offer," but the impossible Tom Martin Creek actually offers the impression that its namesake could be as snarled and unfriendly as the creek itself. At the pointedly named Paradise Creek, the "twelve-foot high marble statue of a young man walking out on a cold morning to a crapper that had the classic half-moon cut above the door" (49).¹ Human presence looms over the restorative pastoral possibilities of either Tom Martin or Paradise Creek. In both instances, the narrator is supremely aware of the wilderness condition in twentieth-century America, a condition that highlights America ambivalence and confusion toward nature.

¹ Brautigan's narrator seems to have a fascination for outhouses and what goes inside of them. The statue at Paradise Creek, commemorating a man on his way to the outhouse, is similar to the outhouse near the Steelhead Creek. The outhouse itself explains it is a monument to "a good ass gone under" and that no one else after its original builder may use it (7). The outhouses are symbolic of human waste, both digestive and productive. They stand as emblems of what may be the only acceptable kind of human-created waste for Brautigan.

With its principle of "cybernetic ecology," Brautigan's 1968 poem "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" is an instance of Brautigan's relationship to ambiguity. The poem's narrator dreams:

of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky. [...]
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms. (Pill 1)

One way of interpreting this poem involves reading Brautigan's juxtaposition of conflicting images—deer and computers, tree and electronics—as his argument for reclaiming natural spaces for the use of men who wish to be "free of our labors/and joined back to nature" (Pill 1). The pastoral setting of pure water and "spinning blossoms" in the narrator's imagination is preferable to the current condition in nature, and it is fully possible. This reading is a little too sentimental to match the narrator's earnest urgency. His exhortations—"and the sooner the better!" "right now, please!"—signal not just wishfulness but also necessity. The landscape is *already* littered, and there is no escaping that. The "cybernetic ecology" requires the ability to adapt, to accept the ambiguities and the "machines of loving grace" that, though benevolent, are still machines.² Brautigan's counterculture ethic is indicative of nature writing in the twentieth-century (whose origins are most succinctly pointed out by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*): elements of the natural world, however the individual author defines it, can no longer be separated from the mechanized and commodified mainstream. The wilderness condition of twentieth-century America and of *TFIA* is embodied by a postmodern but not incongruous pastiche of pastoralism and commodification, serenity and violence, hope and loss, permanence and transience, accomplishment and defeat.

This pastiche is also expressed in Brautigan's response to the political climate of the time. Here, I draw on two classic studies of the countercultural politics from the period, Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* and Adam A. Reich's *The Greening of America*. The counterculture, according to Roszak, driven by the youth in the United States, challenges the primacy and power of the "technocracy." Roszak defines the term thus:

It is the ideal men usually have in mind when they speak of modernizing, up-dating, rationalizing, planning. Drawing upon such unquestionable imperatives as the demand for efficiency, for social security, for large-scale co-ordination of men and resources, for ever higher levels of affluence and ever more impressive manifestations of collective

² Fred Turner's 2006 *Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* provides the history of the clear link between the counterculture, the hippie movement, and the development of electronic and computer networks that led to the modern internet.

human power, the technocracy works to knit together the anachronistic gaps and fissures of the industrial society. (5)

The technocracy breeds a "regime of experts" to which everyone else must defer and further relies on the principle that "the vital needs of man are (contrary to everything the great souls of history have told us) purely technical in character. Meaning: the requirements of our humanity yield wholly to some manner of formal analysis which can be carried out by specialists possessing certain impenetrable skills and which can then be translated by them directly into the congeries of social and economic programs, personal management procedures, merchandise, and mechanical gadgetry" (10). Far from the indigent outsiders populating Brautigan's first chapter, the experts of the technocracy fit neatly into its systems. What Reich labels Consciousness II³ is closely aligned with Roczak's idea of the technocracy, and one of its main concepts is "an acceptance of the priority of institutions, organizations, and society, and a belief that the individual must tie his destiny to something of this sort, larger than himself, and subordinate his will to it" (Reich 71). This leads to the destruction of individual will and a meritocracy that favors how and what the individual can contribute to institutions, with its "ethic of control" determining "that 'real' experience is that which is dominated, not that which comes to the individual who is unguarded and open" (89). The pervasiveness of this "consciousness" is what Reich sees in the late 1960s as the matter of the revolution, the consciousness that has caused "the lost self" and trained its children to be producer and consumers, to establish a "substitute-self" (Reich 143). According to Reich, the driving force behind the social revolution of the 1960s, Consciousness III's "most important *means* of conversion is [...] simply living one's own life according to one's own needs" (319).⁴

"A Walden Pond for Winos" provides such a space for leading a life matched by "one's own needs" as well as being emblematic of the counterculture's encounter with the natural world. Josephine Hendin's suggests that this Walden Pond represents an escape from "the tiger-world,"⁵ and the ability to "shelve themselves away from competitiveness, from the fight for status and money, for self-assertion and success that turns people into tigers" (49). The winos are disaffiliates and hanging in the same park of the disappointing spinach sandwiches, dreaming under three poplar trees in the fresh air. Drinking port and contemplating the future, the winos spout anecdotes dedicated to

³ Reich's Consciousness II is the mode emblematic of 1950s America: a meritocracy or organizational society that rewards people who are promoted and conform to large institutions—the opposite of what Brautigan's characters do.

⁴ Both studies are dependent upon and heavily influenced by Herbert Marcuse's 1964 *One Dimensional Man*, which Marcuse begins with the declaration: "A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress. Indeed, what could be more rational than the suppression of individuality in the mechanization of socially necessary but painful performances; the concentration of individual enterprises in more effective, more productive corporations, the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects; the curtailment of prerogatives and national sovereignties which impede the international organization of resources" (1).

⁵ The reference to tigers is drawn from Brautigan's novel *In Watermelon Sugar*, in which two tigers nonchalantly and soothingly eat the narrator's parents when he's a child.

their only two options: starting a flea circus or committing themselves to the insane asylum. Seemingly taking its cue from Thoreau's classic tome about isolation from the mainstream and the redemptive power of developing one's own worth and consciousness, but a deeper look reveals something a bit more cynical: the retreat from the mainstream and into a more free and natural space is not always redemptive. "The autumn carried along with it, like the roller coaster of a flesh-eating plant," two transient alcoholic poets, "broken-down artists," to San Francisco (17). Huddling together in the park, they are *outside* and exposed to the "cold autumn wind."⁶ The city park in San Francisco, the promise of autumn, and the escape into the redemptive powers of the other-than-human world are not escapes at all. The natural world is merely a reflection of how the US has created this impossible paradox for its citizens. The insane asylum is more appealing than the flea circus to the winos. "[I]t was close to sunset and the earth was beginning to cool off in the correct manner of eternity," making the disaffiliated winos dream of dropping back in: "They talked of how warm it would be in the insane asylum, with television, clean sheets on the soft beds, hamburger gravy over mashed potatoes, a dance once a week with the lady kooks, clean clothes, a locked razor and lovely young students nurses" (18). The juxtaposition between the frigid city park of the artists' free will and the restriction of the insane asylum's comforts illustrates Brautigan's ambivalence toward the potential for full escape and bourgeois values, respectively. Dropping out is essential for Brautigan's characters, even if their attempts are often disrupted by the weight of modern life.

Both ecocritically and counterculturally this ethic of outsidership is also manifest through Brautigan's critique of the Cold War's economic prosperity and its emphasis on the nuclear family. These factors created unprecedented environmental destruction and changed part of Americans' relationship to the environment. Lizabeth Cohen's labels America post-World War II a "consumers' republic" and argues that "the consumer became redefined as a purchaser whose economic behavior also supported the general good, but more than fueling aggregate demand in a mass consumption-dependent economy than through asserting and protecting the rights of the individual consumer in the marketplace" (147). In other words, consumption was a social, political, and personal dictate in the 1950s and 60s, and the counterculture rejected it. To say no to consumerism meant simultaneously leaving behind the values associated with bourgeois society and engaging with an ethic that valued the maintaining natural spaces.

Adam Rome's *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* argues that the people during the Cold War period maintained three reasons for the new for "open spaces": conservation, amenity, and outdoor recreation (123). Interestingly, each line of argument is linked to the way nature and open spaces can be exploited and consumed by people. Consequently, in imitation of the swirling and flowing waters of the trout stream itself, Brautigan intersperses the images from the "ugly" side of American culture—pollution, commercialization, violence—with his doubtful pastoral, thus naturalizing these images

⁶ Brautigan's poem "The Winos of Potrero Hill" offers a similar vision of other alcoholics inhabiting San Francisco. After buying their port wine, "[t]hey go/and sit under/the green bushes" and drink so quietly "[t]hey could almost/be exotic flowers" (*Pill* 15).

of human manipulation. Brautigan's images invoke the deep-seated contradiction of mainstream America: as much as the political and social impetus to consume and destroy dictate individuals, the human still needs and desires what open, wild spaces have to offer.

The episode entitled "In the California Bush" encapsulates the life of Pard, the narrator's friend and fellow dweller in a cabin in Mill Valley, is another instance of deliberate self-poverty and living outside the mainstream system. On the surface, Pard's life follows the typical trajectory of an American man at midcentury—born of Okie parents, Pard fights in WWII, attends college, marries, and has a child. After the "fickle wind of the Twentieth Century," "the fickle wind of all time," carries away his wife and child, Pard is left to reside in a cabin in the California bush with the narrator of the novel and a few others (93). It is this disruption in the normalized narrative of middle-class married life that initiates the move into the wilderness. The California bush is at first described as an idyllic retreat, replete with solitude and deer and birds and blackberry bushes.

Later, however, the issue of waste, that twentieth-century burden and symbol of the human condition, becomes too pressing to ignore. Without garbage service, the residents of the bush seek another solution—dropping it down the hole of an abandoned outhouse. The condition in the outhouse is symbolic of the waste management in the country at large: "This went on for weeks and weeks until it became funny to lift the lid of the toilet and instead of seeing darkness below or maybe the murky abstract outline of garbage, we saw bright, definite, lusty garbage heaped almost to the top" (100). From an "abstract outline" to "definite" waste, the garbage takes the form of an interruption in the narrative. The garbage has always been there, though, and as rubbish and human waste encroaches on the seemingly idyllic California bush, the residents flee "just before it became necessary to stand on the toilet seat and step into that hole, crushing the garbage down like an accordion into the abyss" (101). Thus, a life that begins in the promise of a successful and conventional trajectory ends a garbage-filled abyss, or more pointedly, Pard's journey into the bush, his attempt at dropping out, at forming a self-selected community outside economic systems, is always already interrupted by the unavoidable manner in which Americans live their lives.

Perhaps the best expression of this Cold War contradiction is *TFIA*'s view of camping. The camping fad, symbolized by the brand-named, mass-produced Coleman lantern with "its unholy white light burning in the forests of America," is the emblem of the inevitable yet unwelcome intervention in modern America's misguided pursuit of wilderness space. Mr. Norris, hardly the model of stable family life having been married three times and forgotten all of his children's names, tries camping as a way of reconciling for his lapses. He is told trout fishing can help him remember his children's names. After charging his Coleman stove and Coleman lantern, amongst other camping goods, Mr. Norris is surprised to find the first sixteen campsites, in seemingly isolated spots in the mountains, so crowded with people. Clearly, the message of the spiritual renewal and recreation available through the natural world has seeped into the mainstream. Symbolizing the sheer number and waste of the human population, the

body of a heart attack victim is carted around to various campsites by the "body bringers." First placed outside Mr. Norris's tent, where the "only thing that separated him from the dead body was a thin layer of 6 oz. water resistant and mildew resistant DRY FINISH green AMERIFLEX poplin," the dead body is nothing more than waste that must find its place (75). The victim's body and the remnants of the wilderness share a similar fate here—kept outside, insulated against the sterile, living human population by a thin layer of Ameriflex poplin, both entities are shuffled along without a place to exist. Closed off as he is inside his tent, Mr. Norris cannot fulfill his expectation of recovery in the wilderness. There is nothing sacred here in America's campground: not the luxury of having one's own space in the vast wilderness nor even the staking of one's own property lines nor the supposed sanctity of the deceased human body nor the right and ability of the natural world, as it is interpreted by Brautigan's characters, to survive. Nature is reified and interpreted through the limited scope of the brand named Coleman lantern.

Deliberate human interventions in wilderness spaces are always unavoidable, even in *TFIA*'s accompanying stories. These interventions are a marker of Terry Gifford's "post-pastoral." One feature of the post-pastoral is awe in the face of nature, a humbling that points people away from anthropocentric focus on the natural world toward an ecocentric one (152). But since it is Brautigan's countercultural principle, this ecocentric turn is an ambivalent one. Entitled "Rembrandt Creek" and "Carthage Sink," the two "lost" chapters of *TFIA* appear in Brautigan's short story collection *Revenge of the Lawn*, published eight years after the novel.

The stories illustrate Brautigan's vision for the novel, despite their appearance in another collection—no pristine, idealized, and untouched version of wilderness exists, not historically and certainly not as nature exists in and of itself. Brautigan expresses his bewilderment at why he did not merely rewrite the chapters when he discovered they were lost, but if we believe Brautigan's declaration that these are indeed "lost" chapters and not merely an addendum of sorts, we must acknowledge that the chapters fit into his vision of America in 1961. Both stories involve otherworldly bodies of water that are somehow diminished by the end of the story. "Rembrandt Creek" is a reflective piece about the narrator's relationship to a stream in his childhood, which he fished only once. At the end of the brief piece, the narrator relegates the creek to "the Seventeenth Century where it belonged on the easel of a man named Rembrandt" (39). In "Carthage Sink," an overly boastful, bombastic, and masculinized Carthage River suddenly dries up from its excessive pride—to the delight of other natural entities. Soon, people move in to manipulate the now-waterless Carthage Sink, including many in cars with picnic baskets, there to take advantage of the natural disaster. Water, often a symbol for transformation and changeability, is itself transformed and fixed in time. It is eradicated from its original environment and relegated to inflexible spaces inside the human mind, and given over to the false dichotomy between nature and culture. A creek from childhood and the anthropomorphized river are transformed for various utilities, their only value in how they are reimagined by humanity.

Both parts of "Knock on Wood" represent the formative pre-countercultural birth of the narrator's ethic. We discover that even his childhood attempts at enjoying the natural world are always coupled with the contradictions of mechanized modernity. The narrator's stepfather "had a way of describing trout as if they were precious and intelligent metal," in obvious veneration for the animal (3). The image is mingled in the young narrator's mind with Pittsburgh and "trout steel," a natural resource that immediately gets turned in a "steel that comes from trout, used to make buildings, trains and tunnels. The Andrew Carnegie of Trout!" (3). The invocation of the early industrialist, although spoken in apparent wonder and respect, taints the rawness of the trout steel. Already, the innocence of trout fishing is impinged upon by mechanization, and it is carried into the child's first opportunity to go trout fishing in "Knock on Wood, Part Two." The trout stream he thinks he sees from a distance "did not act right" and "was just a flight of white wooden stairs leading up to a house in the trees" (5). After anticipating the excitement of fishing in this "trout stream," the disappointed narrator "ended up by being my own trout and eating the slice of bread myself" (5). The mistake is common. One can become confused and make trout streams from anything. In fact, Trout Fishing In America the person, confuses an old lady with a trout stream in Vermont. "Excuse me," I said. "I thought you were a trout stream." "I'm not," she simply replies (5). The failure comes not of the narrator's or even Trout Fishing in America's imagination; rather, the greater disappointment is apparently the inherent human need to reach outside of oneself but ultimately being disillusioned in the way America represents itself.

In the 1971 short story "The Gathering of a Californian" from *Revenge of the Lawn*, Brautigan expresses this blending in his description of California:

Like most Californians, I come from someplace else and was gathered to the purpose of California like a metal-eating flower gathers the sunshine, the rain, and then to the freeway beckons its petals and lets the cars drive in, millions of cars into but a single flower, the scent choked with congestion and room for millions more" (*Revenge* 25).⁷

By mingling the freeway, obstructed with cars and people, and the seductive, scent-filled flower Brautigan explicitly illustrates the collusion of entrapment of the two modes. The hope and draw of California's golden land is tinged with the pressure of "millions more," Brautigan's reference in the postwar housing and population boom. Open space cannot contain the pressure of population growth and the full complement of consumer goods. The narrator's emphasis of human's interaction with the natural or other-than-human world is often on economic exchange or at the very least, a naturalized human intervention and interpretation into "natural" spaces. Also, more often than not, one's individual experience of wilderness spaces must have a capitalist component, something that can be packaged and purchased often by the most desperate or privileged. In fact, one's experience with nature often cannot be separated from capitalistic interests. Being

⁷ Earlier in the story, Brautigan marvels, "It's strange that California likes to get her people from every place else and leave what we knew behind and here to California we are gathered as if energy itself, the shadow of that metal-eating flower, had summoned us away from other lives and now to do the California until the very end like the Taj Mahal in the shape of a parking meter" (25). Again, Brautigan links the flower that is California with its inevitable connection to the automobile.

a part of these interests is part of what makes us human in this modern world, suggests Brautigan.

Another way that Brautigan discounts nature's inherent and idealized worth is by assigning it a commodified value and allocating to the same realm as the name brand products that proliferated during the postwar boom. The ravenous and predatory Cobra Lily, which is to become "a ballet for Trout Fishing in America, a ballet to be performed at the University of California at Los Angeles," is a good example of this. Bought at Woolworth's only to die a few days later "during the presidential election of nineteen hundred and sixty," the Cobra Lily gets buried in a Metrecal can, itself now only a phantom of its former function (15). From predatory plant "endowed by nature" with a proverbial "forked tongue" that can be bought at a department store to a dead body interred in the Metrecal can with a Nixon campaign button repurposed as a "funeral wreath" to a ballet inspired by the its ability to digest hamburger meat, the Cobra Lily is any and all of these things simultaneously. Contrary to David Vanderwerken's assertion that the novel's "main theme of ideal America versus real America" in which Trout Fishing is symbolic of "the continuing historical appeal that America has [*sic*] for the human imagination as a place where all good things are possible," I suggest that Brautigan is not invested in setting up America as an model, even if it is passed (35). America, according to Brautigan, is no place for the idealized forms of Nature because the systems are already in place (i.e., Nixon's presidential campaign) that destroy these ideals.

Additionally, as the novel's pivotal chapter "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard" suggests, the environment is marketed, something to parcel out and sell. Even though the environment is never damaged beyond recognition, it is just plopped into the store and ready to be purchased by anyone who simply wants a piece of it. The trout stream is priced at \$6.50 a foot (waterfalls are \$19.00 per foot), and the animals are caged and ready for purchase. They are sights that "MUST BE SEEN TO BE APPRECIATED" (104). The fact is, however altered, it can still be *seen* and one can still participate in that aspect of American culture, even if it comes at a monetary price for those interested. Nature is now salvaged material. Birds are "used," not guaranteed, and priced at 25 cents a piece, and the salesman explains it is no murky trout stream, that "we always make sure they're running crystal clear before we even think about moving them" (105). Amongst the normal supply at a wrecking yard, the discarded remnants of a postwar housing boom—lumber, windows, doors, and toilets—the narrator locates the few animals left for sale. In perhaps the most obvious metaphor of the novel, each species is neatly sorted and labeled, ready for purchase and to accessorize one's trout stream. Taking a piece of the natural world home with the you is easy, the sale suggests, and put it alongside your swingset or driveway. It is important that the chapter ends before the narrator makes his purchases. Is it because he does not have enough money to pay? Is he sickened by the crass commercialism of the whole transaction, or is he just there to browse? It is hard to tell. Brautigan's narrator does not give away many of his emotions in the novel, but a good indication of his attitude comes in an earlier chapter. After losing the guarantee for free replacement socks, the narrator fatalistically declares: "That was a

shame. I've had to face the fact that new socks are not going to be a family heirloom. Losing the guarantee took care of that. All future generations are on their own" (59). Brautigan's ominous and ironic lamentation reverses the environmental movement's popular appeal to preserving the environment for the sake of the future. Forget the future; our American products (along with the pristine wilderness) are not even meant to last one lifetime—a critique one could easily imagine coming from a counterculture outsider.

Brautigan's adoption of "trout fishing in America" as a refrain as well as the switch-and-bait among various forms of insidious growth and consumption and the manipulation or maintenance of "virgin" landscapes indicate that a straightforward and well-defined division between the two is often impossible. The semantic and epistemological division is fraught. Trout fishing in America is represented and reinterpreted in a number of ways, only a few of which I will mention here, illustrating the pressure of people on idyllic openness, both as a space and as a concept: as a verb, one used by the narrator both as a child, in all his wonder and innocence, and as a cynical adult, to simply describe the activity of catching fish; as the novel itself and specifically its cover, which the narrator repeatedly references in order to draw the reader's attention to the metafictional possibilities of consuming the novel as a "rich gourmet" who methodically prepares walnut catsup and has Maria Callas as a girlfriend; as Lord Byron whose body, after autopsy, is "preserved in a cask holding one hundred-eighty gallons of spirits" (33); as a group of sixth-grade terrorists who scrawl the phrase on the backs of first-graders; as a hotel which houses a cat named 208 who thinks "itself to be the last cat in the world, not having seen another cat in such a long time, totally unafraid" (70); and perhaps most bizarrely, as a gold pen nib that "takes on the personality of the writer. Nobody else can write with it. This pen becomes like a person's shadow," which the narrator imagines as "a stroke of cool green trees along the river's shore, wild flowers and dark fins pressed against the paper" (110).

Clearly, Brautigan's trout fishing refrain signals there is no division between the natural world and human interaction with it, however fraught that interaction might be. As Marc Chenetier, among others, explains, "the desertion of nature by America" is "compensated by the germinative effect of images whose function goes beyond mere referentiality" (51). That is to say, previous critics are hopeful of the redemptive power of Brautigan's trout fishing in America refrain, locating it as a germ in the narrator's imagination and a helpful way to reroute expectation about the natural world's power to redeem. However, the "Prelude to the Mayonnaise Chapter," the novel's penultimate, reinforces the idea that any countercultural ethic that involves this sort of linguistic play is already flawed and not compensatory. The chapter includes quotes from books on early mankind or "Man in Nature," including the various theories about how early human developed language. "We have no way of knowing" one author explains about how acquired words, but "[l]anguage does not leave fossils, at least not until it has become written" (111). *TFIA* is, then, a fossilized testament to the limitations of the human imagination and their methods of valuing the natural world. Brautigan's green counterculture attitude obstructs any idealized version of the wilderness. The aims of

dropping out, living outside of mainstream systems in order to combat dominant ideologies, embracing a more justifiable way of life by forming alternative communities, and participating directly in nature are permanently marred and influenced by the systems which they oppose. The trout fishing counterculture narrator finds his outsidership is only temporarily effective. The way he imagines wilderness is always ambiguous, apparently just up the creek, like the ever-changing, slippery nature of trout fishing in America itself.

Received 3 July 2012

Revised version accepted 12 February 2013

Works Cited

- Braunstein, Peter and Michael William Doyle. "Historicizing the American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s." *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*. Ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle. New York: Routledge, 2002. 5-14. Print.
- Brautigan, Richard. *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*. 1968. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. Print.
- . *Revenge of the Lawn*. 1963. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. Print.
- . *Trout Fishing in America*. 1967. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. Print.
- Chenetier, Marc. *Richard Brautigan*. New York: Methuen & Co, 1983. Print.
- Clayton, John. *Richard Brautigan: The Politics of Woodstock*. *New American Review* 11 (1971): 56-68. Print.
- Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Vintage, 2003. Print.
- Gair, Christopher. *The American Counterculture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. Print.
- Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral: The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 1999. EBSCOhost. Web. 24 January 2013.
- Hendin, Josephine. *Vulnerable People: American Fiction since 1945*. New York: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Kirk, Andrew. "'Machines of Loving Grace': Alternative Technologies, Environment, and the Counterculture." Ed. Braunstein and Doyle. 353-78. Print.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. 1964. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.
- Malley, Terence. *Richard Brautigan*. Boston: Warner Books, 1972. Print.
- Reich, Charles A. *The Greening of America*. New York: Random House, 1971. Print.
- Rome, Adam. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Roszak, Theodore. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. New York: Anchor Books, 1969. Print.

*Author: Anderson, Jill E.; Title: "Blown away like apples by the fickle wind of the Twentieth Century":
Counterculture Resistance and the Wilderness Condition in Richard Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America*

Seib, Kenneth. "Trout Fishing in America: Brautigan's Funky Fishing Yarn." *Critique* 13.2 (1971): 63-71. Print.

Vanderwerken, David L. "Trout Fishing in America and the American Tradition." *Critique* 16.1 (1974): 32-40. Print.

The logo for Ecozon, featuring the word "Ecozon" in a stylized, bold, sans-serif font. The letter "o" is replaced by a circular symbol containing a stylized fish or bird-like shape. The logo is oriented vertically.

Vol 4, No 1