



Ecosomatic Paradigm Through Disability Studies in John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*

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The writings of the environmentalist John Muir have been an integral component in both the establishment of environmental protection laws and the field of literary ecocriticism. Muir's original fascination with nature created in him a desire to ultimately remove himself from the realm of human civilization. Although, his passive approach shifted dramatically after having observed humankind's intense commodification of nature, which José Anazagasty-Rodríguez describes as resulting from "...the dominant valuation of nature [being] precisely the capitalist valuation, one that stresses nature's exchange-value" (Rodríguez 101). Muir devoted himself to establishing laws for environmental protection, and writing about his voyages through nature in an attempt to facilitate in others the same connection toward nature that he felt. These actions not only sought to protect the fragile environment of North America, they also functioned as an attempt to thwart the United States' ideological obsession with conquest (Gifford 3). Muir's interest in destabilizing certain dominant ideologies of power along with his fundamental focus on the environment prompts an investigation as to how his writings can be viewed through the intersection of ecocriticism and other branches of literary studies that criticize power structures, which along with Lawrence Buell's conception that "[e]cocriticism gathers itself around a commitment to environmental..." (Buell 11), allows for a juncture of ecocriticism and disability studies. The central argument of this paper focuses on the intersection between ecocriticism and disability studies through a study of John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* exploring it as a literary basis for engaging Matthew J. C. Cella's "ecosomatic paradigm," while simultaneously complicating it through an analysis of Muir's passages regarding the broken tree and the "mad" shepherd. A critique of the ecosomatic paradigm is undertaken in this paper to expose its potential applicability not only to physical disability but also to mental disability.

There has been limited scholarly attention paid to the budding field of ecosomatics,¹ much of which is contained within *Disability and the Environment in American Literature: Toward an Ecosomatic Paradigm*,² edited by Cella. Through literary analysis, this book of collected essays develops a definition of ecosomatics as a field that considers the body, with particular attention on the disabled body, as being inherently connected to and shaped by its immediate environment. In his introduction to the volume, Cella observes that "...the body is a pivotal component of the place-making process, to the point that embodiment and emplacement are practically synonymous" (Cella 4). Although the existing scholarship regarding ecosomatics in literature reaffirms Cella's conception of ecosomatics, it focuses on the connection between the physically disabled body and its environment, leaving out a discussion on mental disabilities. This paper aims to debate a consideration of the mind within the ecosomatic paradigm.

Cella begins his article titled "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature: Merging Disability Studies and Ecocriticism" with a critique of Edward S. Casey's *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* that prompted him to merge ecocriticism and disability studies through the construction of what he refers to as the "ecosomatic paradigm." Cella is particularly concerned with one of Casey's central arguments for a cohesive bond between the human body and the natural environment. Casey states, "If I am to get oriented in a landscape or seascape [...] I must bring my body into conformity with the configurations of the land or the sea [...] The conjoining of the surface of my body with the surface of the earth of sea—their common integumentation—generates the interspace in which I become oriented" (Casey 28). This "conformity" and "conjoining" of the natural space and the human body seems to exist in coordination with the beliefs of Romantic authors like Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as Naturalists like Thoreau and Muir. Casey's argument is a serviceable theory to incorporate an ecocritical view of

¹Ecosomatics and Literature: "Retrofitting Rurality: Embodiment and Emplacement in Disability Narratives" by Matthew J.C. Cella; "Ecosomatic and Ethnological Pathologies: Ethnicity, Disability, and Capabilities in Meridel Le Sueur's 'Women on the Breadlines'" by Lina Geriguis; and "Forced Excursion: Walking as Disability in Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed*" by Chingshun J. Sheu. Ecosomatics and Dance Theory: "Focusing on the Natural World: An Ecosomatic Approach to Attunement with an Ecological Facilitating Environment" by Jennifer Beauvais; "Embodiment and embedment: Integrating Dance/Movement Therapy, Body Psychotherapy, and Ecopsychology" by Cheryl Amelia Burns; and "The Quest for an Ecosomatic Approach to Dance Pedagogy" by Rebecca GoseEnghauser.

²Contains essays on ecosomatics by Jill E. Anderson, Elizabeth S. Callaway, Matthew J.C. Cella, Phoebe Chen, James J. Donahue, Barbara George, Katherine Lashley, and Amanda Stuckey.

humanity's unavoidable connection with nature. Cella, however, critiques Casey's description of humankind's association with the natural world for its exclusion of the disabled body's place within the argument. Cella states, "[i]t is important here to call attention to the fact that Casey's phenomenology of place more or less presumes a compulsory able-bodiness..." (Cella 576). He thereby strives to create room for the inclusion of the disabled body into Casey's framework. Cella's utilization of the phrase "compulsory able-bodiness" in his assessment of Casey's work highlights one of the central focuses of disability studies. Through an analysis of literary works, disability studies seeks to expose a harmful ableist ideological construction which states that the "normative" mind-body is the only conception of the mind-body that is worth considering. In this way, Cella roots his theoretical implications within the larger objectives of disability studies.

As a theoretical answer to the problem of Casey's work, Cella established the notion of "ecosomatic paradigm" which "...recognizes the variety of somatic experience and seeks to nullify the able-bodied/disabled dyad by emphasizing the metaphorical power of considering the impaired body in relation to its environmental situatedness" (Cella 587). In other words, Cella's establishment of the ecosomatic paradigm allows to perceive the natural world as a place where the separation between able and disabled body diffuses, allowing for an equal representation of 'ableness' for both the groups. Cella goes on to explain how the ecosomatic paradigm can be applied to literature through a combined lens of ecocriticism and disability studies, "[m]y primary contention is that the scrutiny of literary representations of the ecosomatic paradigm, particularly those focused on people with disabilities, provides a key method through which to deconstruct norms of embodiment while simultaneously promoting ethical treatment of the natural world" (Cella 575). It is important to note that Cella's use of the word "scrutiny" merely refers to an analysis of the type of literary works in question, as opposed to condemning them. In this way, Cella allows for the consideration of positive portrayal of the ecosomatic paradigm within literature. The remainder of Cella's article works to establish a presence of the ecosomatic paradigm within Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Linda Hogen's *Solar Storms*, thereby providing two examples of evidence for its validity. This essay seeks to analyze John Muir's influential text *My First Summer in the Sierra*—a work of nonfiction based on Muir's first major exploration into the natural world of California—in a manner that diverges from Cella's conception of the ecosomatic paradigm as shown through McCarthy and Hogen's works. It aims to analyze the ways in which

My First Summer simultaneously reinforces and complicates the ecosomatic paradigm. It explores ecosomatic paradigm's versatility as a theoretical framework, while also highlighting its limited inclusiveness in relation to mental disabilities.

Since the ecosomatic paradigm views body in terms of its "environmental-situatedness," it is imperative to first develop a conception of how Muir views the environment in *My First Summer*. The context for the political and economic atmosphere in which Muir was writing was complex. In the late 1800's, after the Mexican Cession of land has provided the United States with most of its western body, people were conflicted in their judgement of the resourcefulness of this newly acquired landscape. Cella states that "...for much of the nineteenth century, surveyors and settlers characterized the arid American West as essentially disabled, defined by what it supposedly lacked: water and trees" (Cella 591). Muir sought to counter this notion of the western landscape as "essentially disabled" through the process of representing the environment as aesthetically-abled, thereby refusing its supposed disability as a land that was not economically viable. In this effort, Muir consistently describes the land as regenerative. One example of this is when he describes how a certain flower "...grows on sun-beaten slopes, and like grass is often swept away by running fires, but it is quickly renewed from the roots" (19). The ability for the grass and flowers to regrow after being nearly destroyed by something as catastrophic as a fire exemplifies nature's powerful regenerative properties. Muir highlights the extreme competence of this renewal by remarking how the entire body of a flower can be completely regenerated just from its roots. Later in the text, Muir likens the environment to an immortal being, where there is "[n]o stagnation, no death. Everything kept in joyful rhythmic motion in the pulses of Nature's big heart" (73). This and the above quote work effectively to establish his conception of nature as something that is entirely abled, even if it is "essentially disabled" from a capitalistic perspective. A hint of the ecosomatic paradigm exists in the bodily descriptors of "motion," "pulses," and "heart." Through the lens of disability studies, the above passage can be interpreted as Muir glorifying the land not for its visible motion—characteristic of able-bodied people—but in the inner motion of its metaphorical heart, which does work to include the disabled. Finally, Muir solidifies his connection between nature and humanity through his constant personification of natural surroundings. This literary technique is described by John Leighly in "John Muir's Image of the West," where he observes how "[t]his God, who in Muir's writings presides over the universe, is often replaced, in a neighboring sentence or paragraph, by a more or less personified, maternally solicitous Nature" (312). The notion that nature is not only

personified but is also depicted as “maternally solicitous” further propels an ecosomatic argument. Muir argues that nature exists as a place where the disabled person feels nurtured in a manner that conceives them in an equal manner to able-bodied people. This argument is thoroughly expanded upon in the next section.

Once Muir describes the environment in a regenerative manner, he then discusses body’s relation to nature in an ecosomatic fashion. Early on, Muir exuberantly states, “[o]ur flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal” (Muir 16). Describing the body as “transparent” allows for it to become indistinguishable from nature, as Casey views it in his theory. Muir takes it forward with the image of body’s cohesion with nature, describing the physical human form as being an “inseparable” part of nature. While these details set the foundation for the ecosomatic approach, with a focus on human contiguity with the environment, Cella also defines his theoretical term as necessarily creating a space where able and disabled bodies are represented equally. The two parts of the above quote seem to relate to this component of the ecosomatic paradigm. The first can be observed in how Muir relates the “body” to “glass” which seems to suggest an equalizing implying an ultimate sense of fragility between all human bodies whether they are able or disabled. The second, more obvious, connection to disability can be interpreted in his insistence that bodies in nature shed their “old” and “sick” qualities, which can be considered disabled descriptors. In place of these adjectives denoting disability, Muir claims that people experience the “immortal” sensation of nature within themselves (established in the previous section). Within this single sentence, Muir seems to address Cella’s central question regarding the utilization of an ecosomatic paradigm to account for the disabled body (Cella 577). Muir’s perception of nature seems to do exactly that. He creates it as a space that accounts for a wide variety of disabled bodies.

As further evidence of Muir’s application of an ecosomatic paradigm, he also describes nature as a place where “...worldly cares are cast out, and freedom and beauty and peace come in” (41), where there is “[n]o pain... , no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future” (131), and as a place where, “...under its spell one’s body seems to go where it likes with a will over which we seem to have scarce any control” (118). While the dissipation of “worldly cares” and the notion of “no pain” speak directly to an ecosomatic

conception of disability, Muir's last quote assumes a different approach at designing nature as a great equalizer of bodies. The quote suggests that nature has metaphorical and seemingly magical ability to lull a person into an out-of-body experience by animating their body for them. The rhetoric employed here by Muir is crucial in developing an ecosomatic depiction of the environment as a place where variously disabled persons may experience an able-bodied sensation. Though at some places in the text, Muir begins to sound as if he is describing the saturating bliss of nature from an ableist point of view, he immediately opens up his statement to a variety of bodies in a particularly ecosomatic fashion. He states that "...every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh...One's body then seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal" (Muir 131). The initial association of "limbs" and "pleasure" can be considered inaccessible to people with limb disabilities. However, Muir immediately expands this pleasure to the entire body, through "all one's flesh," suggesting that any person's body can experience the intense sensation that results from an immersion in nature. Muir also adds to the inclusivity of nature's grandeur to those inflicted with blindness. Although he focuses on how the pleasure of nature can be witnessed with one's eyes, it does not enter one's being "by the eyes alone," but "equally through all one's flesh." The images that Muir provides within this passage describe the body in nature as "homogeneous throughout" and "sound as a crystal." Muir's concept of experiencing bodily homogeneity while immersed in nature is getting at the heart of the ecosomatic paradigm, in that it "... (nullifies) the able-bodied/ disabled dyad..." by creating a sense of uniformity to all parts of the body within every person (Cella 587). Comparing the body to a "crystal" relates to this homogeneity of the body, but also works alongside Muir's earlier descriptor of the body as "glass." Functioning together, these two metaphors establish an idea that the body of any person in nature is simultaneously fragile as glass and "sound" as a crystal. This establishes that both able-bodied and disabled persons exist in a position of equality in nature. All of the passages in this section work collectively to exhibit how Muir—although not typically a name to be found in literary disability studies—constructs an arguably clear sense of the ecosomatic paradigm in *My First Summer*. This allows his text to not only be read as a strong force in ecocriticism, but also as an early conception of disability rhetoric. Having established this argument in promotion of ecosomatic paradigm, Muir's work can also be seen to be operating in a fascinating way to effectively complicate and challenges Cella's theoretical framework. The clearest instances of this

appear in Muir's passages regarding the regenerated tree and the "insane" shepherd.

The moments in Muir's text where he describes the shepherd and the tree originally stood out from the traditional pattern of *My First Summer* due to an observation made about Muir's writing style in Chris Powici's article, "What Is Wilderness? John Muir and the Question of the Wild." Powici notices how "Muir leavens his account with the occasional 'subjective' adjective and adverb ('fine,' 'picturesquely') but his main objective here is precision" (77, parenthesis added). While much of Muir's observations of nature follow a pattern of scientific descriptions, these "subjective" moments stand out as instances where Muir directly inserts his opinionated perspective into the text, resulting in a variety of interesting speculations and metaphors. One of the strangest of these metaphorical observations in *My First Summer* occurs when Muir happens upon a tree that, after having been broken during a storm, has begun to regenerate its trunk, "[t]he storm came from the north while it was young and broke it down nearly to the ground [...] Wonderful that a side branch forming a portion of one of the level collars that encircle the trunk of this species (*Abiesmagnifica*) should bend upward, grow erect, and take the place of the lost axis to form a new tree" (143-144, parenthesis added). At first, this reads as simply another one of Muir's descriptions of nature possessing regenerative properties—similar to the flowers growing back after a wildfire—which aids in constructing the ecosomatic paradigm in Muir's text. However, it is in Muir's comparison of the tree to a man with a broken back where the regenerative aspect of ecosomatic paradigm comes into question in terms of its rhetoric of disability. When contemplating the tree, Muir imagines, "[i]t is as if a man, whose back was broken or nearly so and who was compelled to go bent, should find a branch backbone sprouting straight up from below the break and should gradually develop new arms and shoulders and head, while the old damaged portion of his body died" (144). The tree's comparison to a man acts as a direct connection to Casey's conception of humanity's connection to nature, which is the basis for Cella's ecosomatic paradigm. Muir's act of likening the tree to a disabled man seems as if Muir is constructing another relation to the ecosomatic paradigm, as he has done within the previously mentioned quotes about regeneration, homogeneity of the body, and the disappearance of pain. Instead, the reader is given an image of regenerating limbs followed by a description of the damaged "human" torso dying. The latter portion of this quote works directly against one of the central tenets of disability studies which is to claim the disabled body as abled and valid in its own right, even without the process of physical

healing. This image of the disabled body as “defunct” is also hinted at in the previous quote—occurring right before Muir metaphorically compares the tree to a disabled person—where Muir describes the tree’s new trunk as “(taking) the place of the lost axis” (Muir 144).

Muir’s other instances of the celebration of body in nature establish a “...contiguity between mind-body and its social and natural environments...” which promote “...the work of negotiating a ‘habitable body’ and ‘habitable world’ [that] go hand in hand” (Cella 575). Alternately, Muir’s description of the disabled body as “damaged” and “lost” implies an entirely separate theoretical conception of nature’s relationship to the disabled body. Instead of nature providing an ecosomatic space that situates all varieties of bodies on an equal plane, the description of the regenerated tree embeds a sense of inferiority within disabled bodies, visualizing them as something that must be discarded in favor of an abled body. This goes against what Cella describes as the mission of disability activists, “...rather than focus on treating ‘the condition and the person with the condition,’ disability activists instead spotlight ‘treating’ the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people’s lives’ (11)” (Cella 578). This exposes an unfortunate angle which the ecosomatic paradigm can take in literature, where the environment’s regenerative properties are likened to the ableist human notion that “normative” is best. While the example of Muir’s tree complicates the ecosomatic paradigm’s representation of the body, Muir’s description of the shepherd’s mental state (Muir 147) poses a problem as to how the ecosomatic perspective does not apply to mental disabilities as it does to the realm of somatic disabilities.

Although *My First Summer* reads as though he is exploring the wilderness by himself, there are in fact a few rotating companions who travel alongside him as they all work to move the sheep to better feeding grounds. The only one of these characters that Muir spends more than a few sentences ruminating on is the shepherd. In Muir’s conception of the shepherd, he identifies him as a prime example of all California shepherds, who are described in the following way, “[o]f course his health suffers, reacting on his mind; and seeing nobody for weeks or months, he finally becomes semi-insane or wholly so [...] The California shepherd, as far as I’ve seen or heard, is never quite sane for any considerable time” (Muir 24). Muir’s decision to diagnose the shepherd with the generalized mental disability referred to as “insanity” is problematic in its own right. However, as the text continues, Muir’s ableist rendering of the shepherd interferes with the previous argument of his tendency to establish an ecosomatic paradigm. As the text continues, the reader is given evidence that Muir’s

diagnosis of the shepherd is at least partially based on the shepherd's inability to feel a great sensation of pleasure or any enjoyment from his immersion in nature. The primary example of this is when Muir records the shepherd's opinion of Yosemite, "[w]hat," says he, "is Yosemite but a cañon—a lot of rocks—a hole in the ground—a place dangerous about falling into—a d—d good place to keep away from" (Muir 147). Wholly unlike Muir's conception of nature, the shepherd views exploration of environment merely as a way of getting oneself injured. In an attempt at processing this way of thinking about the natural environment, Muir writes, "[s]uch souls, I suppose, are asleep, or smothered and befogged beneath mean pleasure and cares" (Muir 147). There begins to emerge a connection between Muir's conception of the shepherd's "insanity" and his inability to experience nature in the exuberant, rehabilitating way that Muir himself does.

The shepherd's function in Muir's text is comparable to how Lennard J. Davis' "Introduction: Normality, Power, and Culture" relates the typical role of the disabled minor character in literature as a literary device to arouse pity in the reader (9). This pity is not the same type of sympathy that Charles Dickens was hoping to conjure up with the inclusion of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*. Instead, Muir seems to be trying to elicit pity for the shepherd as someone who has gone mad due to his inability to comprehend the magnificence of nature. In "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," Douglas C. Baynton provides some form of explanation for Muir's ableist conception of the shepherd, explaining, "...not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination by other groups by attributing disability to them" (17, author's emphasis). In other words, Muir views the shepherd's disability as a justification for the judgmental manner in which he writes about the shepherd, perceiving the disability as partially a result of the shepherd's apathy toward natural environments. Davis provides further insight into this phenomenon when arguing that "[t]he 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (1). Muir's love for nature acts as a signifier for "normalcy" with regard to the functioning of the psyche, while the shepherd is depicted as mentally disabled in his "insanity," due to his disinterest in nature. Overall, Muir seems to approach mental disability—with his rumination on the shepherd's uneasy mental state being the only representation of mental disability in *My Summer in the Sierra*—in a manner that is entirely unlike the optimistic, ecosomatic view in which he approaches disabilities of the body. The question then becomes, how does Muir's tendency to de-

velop an ecosomatic paradigm, while simultaneously approaching mental disability from an ableist point of view, critiques and complicates the conception of the ecosomatic paradigm? The root of this issue seems tucked within Matthew Cella's article. Although Cella continuously focuses on the disabled body in relation to the ecosomatic paradigm, he rarely mentions how the ecosomatic paradigm conceives nature in terms of the disabled mind. He only addresses the mind in an offhand way, occasionally switching out the term "body" for "mind-body" (Cella 575). Even in the instances where he incorporates the "mind-body," it seems as if the phrase loses its consideration of the mind almost immediately after he uses the term. Such as when he says, "[t]he ecosomatic paradigm assumes contiguity between the *mind-body* and its social and natural environments; thus, under this scheme, the work of negotiating a "*habitable body*" and "*habitable world*" go *hand in hand*" (Cella 575, emphasis added). Cella immediately discards the notion of the "mind" when referring to the "habitable body," as well as within the body-oriented phrase "hand in hand." Ultimately, Cella's lack of focus on the disabled mind is evident even within the word "ecosomatic," where the root "soma" refers directly to the body. If Cella had theorized more about the disabled mind's position in relation to nature, he would have named his term something along the lines of "the ecopsychosomatic paradigm." But ultimately, he solely tends to conceptualize how nature develops a positive construction of the human body, while ignoring its relationship to the mind. This seems to be echoed in how Muir writes off the shepherd's "insanity" as a product of his disinterest with nature, instead of theorizing how the natural environment might have potentially negative impact on the mental state of an individual like the shepherd, whose job forces him to live within a natural world that is secluding and alienating for him. This critique of the ecosomatic paradigm through the lens of Muir's text is an imperative argument to consider. It calls for necessary attention to the discussion of mental disability, which is often overlooked due to its inability to manifest itself as a noticeable bodily formation as addressed by Margaret Price in "Defining Mental Disability" (305).

The overarching purpose of an analysis such as this is not to condemn Cella's work for providing more attention to the somatic perspective of disability studies than it does to the arena of mental disability. Instead, it highlights an idea of how his theoretical framework can be expanded, similarly to how he saw room for the expansion of Edward S. Casey's text. The difference here is that, while Cella reworked Casey's theories to incorporate both able and disabled bodies in an ecocritical perspective of literature, this paper seeks to rework Cella's theory of the ecosomatic paradigm to incorporate men-

tal disabilities within the ecosomatic paradigm's conception of humanity's situatedness in nature. The arguments within this paper are also not intended to negatively alter the image of John Muir, thereby condemning him as a writer who sometimes incorporated conflicting and presumptuous representations of nature's relationship to the disabled mind and body. Rather, one of its central functions is to celebrate how incredibly progressive Muir's thoughts regarding the environment and the body were for his time period, as well as to emphasize how Muir's literary accomplishments can continue to be viable sources for nuanced theoretical analyses within the fields—and the intersection—of ecocriticism and disability studies.



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