

RAYMOND FEDERMAN'S *TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN*: READING METAFICTION ECOCRITICALLY

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to bring metafiction into dialogue with ecocriticism in order to enable a fruitful cross-fertilization between postmodern and ecological perceptions of reality. It explores ecocritical encounters with metafiction by primarily focusing on Raymond Federman's novel, *To Whom It May Concern* (1990). The article presents what may seem controversial at first glance, an ecocritical reading of this characteristic example of metafiction. Although the novel is marked by linguistic playfulness, to seek environmentality in it would not exactly run counter to Federman's postmodern conceptions of reality, identity, history, and nature as discursive constructs. The essential point I make in the article is that the landscape as a textual construct here is not a senseless abstraction. On the contrary, by blending with history it evokes a powerful place-bonding to constitute meaningful identities, and stands out as the only hope for meaning in life.

KEY WORDS: Raymond Federman, metafiction, postmodernism, ecocriticism, place-consciousness, place-attachment.

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende establecer un diálogo entre la metaficción y la ecocrítica con el objeto de hacer posible una fructífera crossfertilización entre las percepciones posmodernas y ecocríticas de la realidad. Se explora el encuentro entre la ecocrítica y la metaficción centrándose principalmente en *To Whom It May Concern* (1990), de Raymond Federman. Este ensayo presenta algo que a primera vista puede resultar controvertido, una lectura ecocrítica de un ejemplo característico de la metaficción, como lo es dicha novela. Aunque marcada por el juego lingüístico, la obra intenta encontrar referencias a lo medioambiental, aunque en ella esto no va precisamente contra las concepciones posmodernas de Federman sobre la realidad, la identidad, la historia y la naturaleza como constructos discursivos. El argumento principal que se ofrece es que el paisaje como constructo textual no es en ella una abstracción carente de sentido. Más bien al contrario, al fundirse éste con la historia permite evocar un poderoso vínculo con el lugar, para así constituir identidades significadoras, y destacar como la única esperanza de encontrar un sentido de la vida.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Raymond Federman, metaficción, postmodernismo, ecocrítica, conciencia del lugar, apego al lugar.



Although ecocriticism was initially unreceptive to postmodernism because of its anti-realism and foregrounding of language, over the last few years there has been a growing interest in addressing postmodern thought and fiction in ecocritical studies. Dana Phillips, for example, has vigorously argued that “ecocriticism should be *more* antirepresentational than other forms of criticism, not *less*” (18); and admittedly, the ecocritical resistance to postmodernism is not as pronounced today as it was in ecocriticism’s earlier phase. Currently, a more in depth engagement with postmodern literature is making its entryway into ecocriticism. Thomas Murray Wilson’s “Post-Pastoral in John Fowles’ *Daniel Martin*” (2005), Julie Gerck Hernandez’s “Fertile Theoretical Ground: An Ecocritical Reading of Nicole Brossard’s *Mauve Desert*” (2008), my essay “Seeking Environmental Awareness in Postmodern Fictions” (2008), and Karla Armbruster’s “Ecocriticism and the Postmodern Novel: The Case of *Waterland*” (2009), are some of the recent examples of the fruitful ways in which ecocriticism responds appreciatively to postmodernism’s playfulness, its disruption of conventions, and its emphasis on the constructed nature of all narratives. These studies have taken a step toward establishing connections between postmodern fictions and ecocriticism, bringing postmodern texts into dialogue with ecocritical thought, and enabling a potent cross-fertilization between postmodern and ecological perceptions of reality. This renewed interest in the interface between ecocriticism and postmodernism also encourages ecocritical readings of more overtly metafictional texts.¹ This essay specifically explores the interrelations and interchanges between ecological and postmodern awareness of place bonding, by attending to the metafictional accounts of human and nonhuman worlds. It must be noted, however, that since metafiction is predominantly concerned with its own process of writing, and self-consciously reflects upon the operations of language in a playful manner, it poses quite a challenge to ecocriticism that has traditionally focused on realist literary texts with ecological literacy. What then happens when ecocriticism encounters a truly metafictional text which is not ostensibly ecological? Raymond Federman’s 6th novel, *To Whom It May Concern* (1990) offers an opportunity to explore this question. To put this text into a comprehensible ecocritical perspective, it is necessary to have a short review of Federman’s life and fiction.

As a prominent first generation American postmodern writer, Raymond Federman’s writing provides the best examples of the most experimental form of postmodern novel known as metafiction, or “surfiction” as Federman has preferred to call it. He defines it as “the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man’s intelligence and imagination rather than man’s distorted vision of reality [...] This I call SURFICTION. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality” (*Critifiction* 37). According to Federman, life

¹ Metafiction is a more experimental form of postmodern novel that draws attention to its process of writing with its explicit self-reflexivity and literary self-consciousness. Not all postmodern fictions, for example, embody a formal self-exploration displaying the process of their construction as metafictions do, and exclusively reveal reality “as a construct explored through textual self-reference” (Waugh 54).

gains meaning only in its narrative form, in the fiction-making process of writing. In all of his novels, Federman focuses on the concrete dimension of language, as it appears visually on the printed page in which, he posits, “syntax integrates itself to the constraints of the paper, its format, its dimensions, its margins, its edges, its consistency, its whiteness” (“Playgiarism” 109). He does not, however, perceive the concrete (visual) and the abstract (semantic) separately; rather for him both the concrete and the abstract aspects of language are united in typography. By drawing upon his own personal experience as a saxophone player to invent new strategies of narrative improvisation, Federeman shows that writing fiction is a process of invention of both the material of fiction and the act of writing that material. For Federman language is an embedded activity. It is grounded in the very fabric of life itself. Life, by the same token, is inseparable from the reality of language. In his words: “Everything (life, history, experience, even death) is contained in language” (*Critifiction* 89). For him fiction writing is a part of being: “fiction is above all an effort to apprehend and comprehend human existence played on the level of words” (*Critifiction* 38). Such an understanding of existence signifies the most intimate entanglements of life and its expressions. In other words, Federman’s understanding of language implies not a disembodied human sign system, but a continuum between language and the material world. This is important for ecocriticism that, as Stacy Alaimo maintains, “seeks to account for the ways in which nature and environment, as material forces, act, interact, and profoundly affect cultural systems, texts, and artifacts” (“Material” 71). In Federman’s case, the environment is life in its totality that is inseparable from his writing.

Federman’s concern with language grew out of his tragic life story as a survivor of the Holocaust. He writes in his “Autobiography” that on July 16, 1942 his father, mother, and two sisters were “arrested and eventually deported to Auschwitz where they died in gas chambers. There are records of this. I escaped and survived by being hidden in a closet. I consider that traumatic day of July 16, 1942, to be my real birthdate, for that day I was given an excess of life” (“A Version” 64). This is the story to which Federman would repeatedly return, re-writing and re-inventing the details of his survival. As he reveals it in *The Twofold Vibration* (1982): “Well you invent yourself as you go along, re-invent what you think really happened, this way you can survive anything” (51). This process is evident in all of Federman’s surfictions. His first novel, *Double or Nothing* (1971) is the story of a nameless writer who comes to America after losing his family in the death camps and struggles to write the story of the boy who survived. *Take It or Leave It* (1976), told by a nameless voice, is also the story of a survivor who is drafted into the U.S Army in the early 1950s. His third novel, *The Voice in the Closet* (1979) is a painful re-writing of the day when he hid in the closet while his family was taken away. The boy wants to tell the truth of what happened, but the story is too painful to be told in coherent language, so the entire text is one uninterrupted sentence that constitutes the novel. Similarly, in *Smiles on Washington Square* (1985), *To Whom It May Concern* (1990), *Aunt Rachel’s Fur* (1996), *Loose Shoes: A Life Story of Sorts* (2001), *The Twilight of the Bums* (2002), *My Body in Nine Parts* (2005), *Return to Manure* (2006), and *The Carcasses* (2009), Federman not only explores the story of his survival, but also disc-

loses the writing process of how he constantly re-invents that story. He reinterprets its particulars and questions language's ability to fully represent experience without abandoning his passion to tell stories in new and inventive ways. Interestingly, several of Federman's overtly metafictional novels offer a postmodern vision of reality that goes beyond linguistic constructionism.

Contrary to standard postmodern analyses of Federman's metafiction in terms of their linguistic playfulness, I will argue that, far from emphasizing pure textuality to the exclusion of the physical reality, these novels are resolutely focused on the interactions between life and language. The fact that they predominantly expose their writing process cannot be denied, but in playing with language in the storytelling process Federman does not lose sight of the interdependence between the discursive and the non-discursive. For him, they are inextricably intertwined. Federman's concern in his novels is the nonseparability of language and reality, that enables him to unite linguistic constructionism and his bodily engagement with language. "I write with my entire body," he says in an interview. "My body, is I hope, in the text too [...] I am very tired when I am finished writing because I have used my body" ("Discussion" 383). In fact, this movement across Federman's body and the writing process opens up a path to a fruitful ecocritical analysis that, to use Stacy Alaimo's words, "travels through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual" ("Trans-Corporeal" 238). Federman's insistence on the affinity between language and coporeality exemplifies how the discursive construction is intimately related to the material world, and perhaps more specifically to the environmental aspects of materiality, such as Federman's bodily engagement with the manure-filled, rain-drenched fields, farm animals, gardens and flowers, with earthly organisms as well as with debris and dirt that often appear in his accounts of his life. Therefore, it is possible to read his metafiction from an ecocritical perspective, which offer interesting insights about the problematic categories of the natural and the literary worlds.

Let me state as a preliminary note that, on a theoretical ground both metafiction and ecology entail processes of writing about the world we inhabit, albeit in different discursive strategies. They reject fundamental dichotomies in all areas of inquiry and foster relational thought. As such, both acknowledge the need to surpass all forms of duality. Federman had emphatically underlined this point in his prophetic words about the future of fiction in 1975: "All forms of duplicity will disappear. And above all, all forms of duality will be negated—especially duality—that double-headed monster which, for centuries now, has subjected us to a system of values, an ethical and aesthetical system based on the principle of good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly" ("Surfiction" 8). This statement highlights the logic of the postmodern approach to life where every dichotomy is disrupted. It is also the logic of ecology² and the basic principle in ecocritical theory. Both logics converge

² Logic of ecology refers to the ecological relationships and interdependence among human and nonhuman natures, bodies an organisms, organic and inorganic matter, that are defined with *not*

in a multifaceted rethinking of the boundaries of logocentric discourses. They are premised on relational rather than binary viewpoints, because in this perspective both the textual and the natural, the real and the fictive, are equally acknowledged. This is what characterizes Federman's work from the outset. His distinctive approach brings the discursive and the real-world properties together in his novels' relation to both fact and fiction. In this way he foregrounds the existential connections between the condition of being and its expressions in writing. His metafictional narratives highlight an overt postmodern sensibility that projects his life as narrative. Viewed from ecocritical lenses they redefine the postmodern condition that lays bare the ambivalence of human relations to the more-than-human world.

Two of his novels stand out, in this regard, as exemplary cases in which ecological concerns are given more than implicit consideration. *The Twofold Vibration*, for example, radically questions the ways in which western logocentric-humanist tradition has dealt with ecological and social problems, parodying their unresolved paradoxes. Federman's remark here, that "[t]he order of the world conceals intolerable disorders" (85), highlights the novel's postmodern contestation of the mechanisms of representation of ecological, social, ethical, and political issues. *The Twofold Vibration* is a dark postmodern parody of an invented future state of the world in which Federman's future self appears as a nameless old man who has three friends, Namredef (Federman's mirror image, spelled backwards), Moinous (in French, me/we), and Federman who are trying to find out why he is being deported to space colonies. This is a version of the future world that anticipates the present environmental crisis with its polluted atmosphere, rivers, oceans, and soil, depleted ozone layer, deforestation, toxic waste, and political oppression. Hence, this disturbing view of the future world Federman imagined in 1982 shows quite an uncanny resemblance to ours. As Moinous reminds Federman, "the political crisis of our evasive bureaucratic powers reflects a general crisis in Western culture" (124), and cultural radicalism legitimizes "its own critique of injustice, exploitation, and of course realism" (124). Then, as Moinous says, "what we need now is a solution beyond the final solution of realism" (125). A similar postmodern critique of realism in its logocentric and anthropocentric forms also constitutes the framework of *Return to Manure* (2006), which recounts Federman's experiences at age 13 in a farm near Montflanquin in France, where he spent three years shovelling manure, plowing the earth, cutting wood, killing pigs, chickens, and rabbits for dinner, and washing the cows and the bull. He narrates his experiences as a form of "embodied activity" in farm work. Here Federman draws attention to the striking parallelism between the difficult lives of the farm animals and his own suffering. The line between the human and the nonhuman animal disappears when he recognizes this similarity. "I didn't suffer from

sharply defined boundaries, and thus reflect better the heterogeneous character of nature's ecosystems. Ecological phenomena, in other words, manifest a dynamic, interconnected reality, not a static one with independently existing objects and beings. It is in this sense the logic of ecology is per definition non-dualistic.



hunger,” he writes, “[b]ut I suffered watching how the animals suffered in order to become food for us” (121). With such blurred boundaries, the farm is a postmodern landscape where the non-human coexists with human as well as *inhuman* elements. These two texts are also important in the way they refashion Federman’s traumatic survival story and thematize his problematic relationship to the notion of place both as a physical site and as a textual re-construction in fiction writing. Although they radically subvert the mimetic assumptions about representing the ontology of place, they offer the writer a chance, as he tells Larry McCaffery, “to make sense out of my life” (291), through “the mixing of the reflexively fictional with the verifiably historical” (Hutcheon 36).

But the most palpable examples of Federman’s understanding of place can be found in *To Whom It May Concern*, where the author strategically undercuts the line between the discursive and the physical sense of place. What complicates his understanding of place (the world he lost as a boy) is the fact that, since its referent has been lost forever he could only retain a sense of place in his imagination, which he struggles to reinstate in writing. The search for the lost connections with the land, that *To Whom It May Concern* specifically highlights, is rendered in a metafictional mode which challenges not only the dualism between the world and the word, but also the forced separation between the land (as the local physical site) and the self. It is in this sense that *To Whom It May Concern* lends itself to a meaningful ecocritical analysis, and thus it would not be self-contradictory to read it from an ecological stance. No matter what the level at which one analyzes such a metafictional text within the parameters of ecocriticism, the context of the terms Federman lists (i.e. place, memory, self, life) figure prominently in the language of each discourse. Hence, the “shared premises” (Campbell 126), between ecology and metafiction bolster a successful ecocritical reading of this novel. Despite its pronounced self-reflexivity, metafiction, then, is not exactly counteractive to ecocriticism which is marked by its overt emphasis on the ontological materiality of the world. Metafiction questions the assumed accuracy of language to represent its referent, and yet it acknowledges how both the discursive and the real matter. It may generate “ambivalence of opposites” as Federman notes in this novel (41), but the “ambivalence of opposites” in his case does not become a disjunctive experience of nature, especially at the end of the novel when the writer becomes more deeply aware of the effects of nature’s healing powers. The obvious appeal of this approach from an ecocritical perspective lies in its contention that the natural world³ always functions as a site of remedy for past wounds, and from a postmodern perspective this can be grasped through its narrative models, that is through a fictionalization process which is primarily symbolic and affective. By bringing these two perspectives together Federman shows that the natural world is not merely a verbal construct, but a deeply felt and appreciated material site of

³ Nature, or the natural world, in this novel designates the physical world of biological entities and forces, such as trees, grass, flowers, rocks, insects, wind, clouds, water, etc, that have a healing effect on the main character.

meaning both in life and in fiction. He wants to describe a world in which language and life interact in complex ways. What characterizes his approach is, above all, its non-dualist stance. In his surfictionings the real and the discursive become *eco*-extensive. They are, in other words, mutually constituted. As such, he reinvigorates the post-modern field by providing an integrative understanding of the role of natural and discursive factors in making sense of this world. As he tells Larry McCaffery, “it’s this act of fictionalizing my life which has given me the chance to make sense out of my life [...] my life is not the story, the story is my life” (291). The “distinction between the real and the fictitious, the imaginary and the factual,” he also adds, “disappears when I contemplate my life and when I write” (291-292). This understanding is a direct result of Federman’s relocation of himself in the very land of stories, or “Literatureland” as he calls it, which is symbolically both real and fictive at the same time. It provides a map of the moral space through which Federman can articulate his fractured life in a meaningful way, and in particular his ambivalent relationship to place (in its geographical and cultural sense) in both ethical and literary terms. Therefore, “the tone and of the shape of the story... its geometry” (TWC18) is of existential importance for him, for it is that very geometry, its physicality, its very shape, that enacts and evokes the sense of place he has relentlessly sought all his life.

To Whom It May Concern evinces a highly existential narrative ontology that highlights the felt absence of an embodied connection to place, giving an intensity of meaning to what happens when one feels displaced. Referring to himself in the third person, Federman writes that “one must accept the fact that what makes up his fiction is not necessarily what is there [...] but what is not there [...] In other words, what is important to notice in Federman’s fiction is what is absent. And indeed, the fundamental aspect, the central theme of his fiction is ABSENCE” (*Critifiction* 86). It is absence, then, that characterizes Federman’s search for a solid sense of emplacement as he tries to make sense of his own feeling of displacement. In other words, the sense of being emplaced and/or feeling displaced constitutes the major narrative question in *To Whom It May Concern*. Federman’s emphatic search for the meaning of absence appears “in one great quality, the ambivalence of opposites” (41), and is carved into the portrayal of his main characters: Sarah, her nameless cousin, and Federman as the nameless writer. Lawrence Buell’s conceptualization of the sense of being envired concerning place in the ecological context, can be applied to Federman’s novel which highlights a “self-conscious sense of an inevitable but uncertain and shifting relation between being and physical context” (Buell, *The Future* 62). The shifting relations between being and place take on a deeper and a more complex meaning in the self-reflexive medium of the novel as the intimate connections between imagination, memory, and place fuse with the logic and problematics of metafiction. The words of the writer at the end of the novel actually provide a symbolic understanding of bringing metafiction and ecocriticism on a common ground: “the world in which we live at best offers a truncated and fallacious existence, it requires that either we close our eyes and forget or compromise” (184). Federman does neither, however. Instead he confronts this world in the terms of a materially engaged metafictional analysis, which pertains as much to the real as it does to the fictional. Thus, in this novel fiction and world existentially interpenetrate.



Though it cannot be said that *To Whom It May Concern* makes an explicit plea for ecological awareness, it does create a strong sense of significance for land-bonding, and asserts the importance of place consciousness in human self-development. This is the existential meaning that emerges out of the novel's metafictional structure in which mind, memory, history, language, and place are intermingled in a self-reflexive encounter with the reader. *To Whom It May Concern* self-consciously plays with the borderline between the past associated with the lost homeland, and the present which is marked by absence. Since this is Federman's own story, he invents himself as a writer who is struggling to write the story of Sarah and her cousin who, as children, miraculously escaped the round up of Jews in Paris when their families were sent to the Nazi death camps in the Second World War.

During the second year of the invasion, on July 16—to make it more authentic—the bleak day of the great round-up, when their parents, brothers and sisters, and more than 20,000 others who had been declared stateless by the government were arrested, Sarah was nine and her cousin twelve. Since they lived in different sections of the city, neither knew that the other had escaped the round-up, and that day they were thrown into the vast incoherent group of potential survivors. For the next three years Sarah and her cousin wandered separately until they found each other at the end of the war. Both were deeply marked by what they experienced, and even today their survival does not make sense to them, even though they are reconciled to the excess of life they were given by fate. (21)

After the war, the writer tells us, the cousins found each other and lived together in the cellar of a demolished building where they “whispered to each other fragments of their story” (127) until they were separated again and went into different directions. Sarah went East, to “a land of false promises, a piece of desert full of mirages,” while the cousin went West across the ocean to “a land of misrepresentation” (10). The land in between, “the country where the two cousins were born, and where an unforgivable enormity was committed during the war,” will “remain parenthetical” says the writer. “It will linger in the depth of the cousins’ background” (10). The cousin is a fictional version of the writer who decides to make him a famous sculptor. “Yes I have decided to make him a sculptor. A mad chiseler of wood, stone, and metal” (15). The sculptor cousin's refusal to give realistic shapes to the raw material is both a symbolic act of rejecting the fashioning of nature as a cultural construct, and a psychological end-result of the incoherence, horror, and chaos he had experienced as the only reality when he was a little boy. The shapeless figures he creates symbolize such a reality which remains quite nonsensical to him. The cousin's sculptures “often reach into abstraction,” the writer says. “They do not reflect reality but the crumbling of reality in the mind” (92). Arguing with himself the cousin realizes that “reality did not exist because truth could not be reproduced” (93).

The writer repeatedly emphasizes “The Great War, central to this story since it affected its characters so dramatically... and traumatically” (20). The cousin is now invited by the Cultural Ministry in Sarah's country to exhibit his work, and is about to see Sarah after thirty-five years of separation. On his way to Sarah's land his plane is delayed for two hours at the airport of the country where they were born. While

waiting there the cousin remembers the traumatic past which, the writer says, will be crucial “to the shape of the story” (20). Although the references are pretty obvious, Federman never names the places as Israel, France, and America where the cousin settled. He simply defines the US. as a place which “perpetuates itself on the basis of its own desultory image,” and Israel as a land that “constantly vacillates between a dream of utopia and a nightmare of destruction” (14). France is referred to as the country in between, the country in brackets. Exiled from his home, Federman’s life has collapsed into fragments, and restoring meaning onto life becomes a continuous struggle to resinscribe it in the fictional terrain. Moreover, he gives no dates about the events. “What difference does it make when and where it happened,” he writes, “since none of it is verifiable... A war is a war, doesn’t matter where and when it happened. And suffering is timeless” (39). He also prefers not to name Sarah’s sculptor cousin. Their story of how they survived the holocaust, and how their lives were affected by the loss of their homeland and families afterwards constitutes the metafictional plotline of the novel which Sarah reads in a book entitled *To Whom It May Concern*.

The plot revolves around Federman’s metafictional quest to understand the meaning of loss. Writing the story becomes vital to the retention of a sense of place that is forever lost, but it refuses to be told in a realistic order. It “would stop, disintegrate, dissipate into incomprehension as if refused to be spoken” (49), and as such its form resembles the cousin’s statues that “do not reflect reality but the crumbling of reality in the mind” (92). Federman also tells the reader: “I refuse to submit to the paralyzing holiness of realism” (106). He says that he wants to rid himself “of the imposture of realism,” because “Sarah’s story should not be touched by the banality of realism. It’s too fragile” (106). For him, “What matters is the account and not the reality of events” (38). This is because reality has lost its assumed common-sense naturalness, and thus there cannot be a realist representation of absence. That is why Federman makes a strong point about the impossibility of a faithful representation of reality. Similar to the cousin’s statues, which are “huge boulders, untouched and uncut, representing nothing but themselves, as if the stone refused to let forms come out” (93), the story resists referential realism. It shows that language is a slippery ground on which every linguistic representation dissipates. Since the boundaries between fact and fiction are thus blurred, neither the writer nor the reader to whom the novel is addressed can know where fiction begins and reality ends. Halfway through the story the writer still ponders where to begin: “Do I start with the cousin in the fertile land of misrepresentation, or do I start with Sarah in the barren desert? Or should it be the place in between where they were born?” (102-103). Metafiction, for this reason, is the only appropriate form to narrate the cousins’ experience of displacement. The digressive, discontinuous style of the story in which Federman presents the details of his tragic past in fragments, becomes a replica of the arbitrariness of his memory. It is associated with the loss of his homeland and thus with the loss of a fixed reference point and of perspectives. Consequently, the writer constantly interferes with Sarah’s story, digresses into other stories, includes anxieties of writing, talks about the construction process, stops the narrative many times to address the reader, and shifts perspectives. Alluding to Diderot he writes, “one must digress. Skip around. Improvise. Leave blanks that cannot be filled in.



Offer multiple choices. Deviate from facts, from where and when, in order to reach the truth” (104). Those blanks signify places that can only be re-imagined and reinvented in language on the basis of his somewhat unreliable memory. This explains his refusal to frame his story in a realistic form. In fact, every time the writer makes an attempt to give a realistic account of the cousins’ story he returns exclusively to language and becomes an inhabitant of “Literatureland,” which is a “storied residence” (Cheney 92) mediating the writer’s experience. So, he chooses to exist in the ambivalent space between the world and the word.

Having lost his connection with his homeland the writer has relocated himself in language which functions both as a “fertile land of misrepresentation,” where the cousin has been living for the past 35 years, and also as “the barren desert” (102) where Sarah had settled. Although he tells his readers that “Sarah and her cousin need to be situated in the proper frame —a place of perfect certainty” (39), such a place does not exist, neither in his memory, nor in fiction writing:

The only stable fact is that exactly thirty-five years ago the two cousins were separated and went into different directions ... What they are now seeking in this reunion is the meaning of that separation —the meaning of their absence from each other. Therefore, instead of questioning the when and where of their story, you should ask how absence has marked their lives and shaped their personalities. (40)

Since at the core of his self is the feeling of absence, the search for its meaning in fiction writing for Federman becomes “an act of self-reflection” (*Critifiction* 10). This is related to the significance of land in the story which is central to Federman’s understanding of his past. The repeated references to the lost homeland as the great absence, to the “beauty and seductiveness” of the barren desert, and finally to the transformation of the desert into a promising garden, show that the physical environment carries an existential meaning for the writer as it functions as a realm of shared language and culture in one’s self-development. As Federman tells the reader, “What the cousins are seeking is not the meaning of what happened, but the meaning of an absence” (108). It is the determining force in their life “and they have made a lifetime occasion of it” (108). Evidently, the lost homeland is more than a physical landscape; it conveys a sense of belonging, a sense of familiarity, that has become ontologically irreclaimable. It may not denote an explicit ecological understanding of the environment, but it does reflect the importance of cultural-ecological idea of place in defining the boundaries of one’s relations to the world. Along with such absence comes the collapse of the index of referentiality in fiction writing. Hence, both the past as history and homeland where the cousins lost their families in the 1942 arrest have to be reinvented as fictional constructs, in search of the existential meaning embodied in one’s relationship to the land. Federman treats the concept of place as a site which is inextricably bound up with notions of loss, memory, and imagination, as well as with the physical dimensionality of what Jeff Malpas calls “environing situation” (25). In Federman’s case, since place consciousness as something that is geographically determined is eroded, it is evoked as a landscape of memory and writing that fuses material practices, social relations, and imagination.



Federman's fictive reinvention of place is not restricted only to the frame of a physical location, nor should it be understood as a mere verbal construct. His concept of place implies a narrative rehabilitation of a sense of physical locale as an attempt to map it back onto his life through writing.

The writer's emphasis on the living environment can, thus, be read as an attempt to realign memory with reality, fiction with fact, and self with place. The living environment, however, invades the fictional almost every time the writer returns to narrate the land: in the form of the farm where Sarah hides during the war, the farm where the cousin collects manure in the French farm and learns to adapt to "the crude and vulgar mode of existence of the people and animals" (46), the camp farm on the border in Israel where Sarah arrives with a group of people after the war to build a new country which looks like "a dead volcano" (178), and the desert she now calls home, all suggest the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging in one's life. Even though they are fragments in the text resembling the cousin's thoughts that are "like waves breaking on a rock... as they splatter and dissipate before him" (21), these references indicate the link between place and identity, or delineate what Buell prefers to call "the imagination of place-connectedness" (*Writing* 56). The very idea of place bonding in the novel, then, encompasses the problematized frame of reference that marks the borderline between its absence and presence both linked to self-identification. Federman communicates the connection of landscape and self by exposing how places are, in part, constructed through narratives of belonging that correspond to the writer's imagination.

To Whom It May Concern especially highlights the idea that human imagination is always land-related. The writer's fragmentary memory as a metafictional mapping of the past and the land, that is now an insurmountable absence, navigates through the loopholes of language to reinvent place consciousness. For the writer land does not exist apart from language. It becomes essential to an integral understanding of self located in Literatureland. In this context, "developing a 'sense of place,'" as Ursula Heise points out, "cannot mean a return to the natural in and of itself, but at best an approach to the natural," not only as she concedes "from within a different cultural framework" (45), but also from within language as Federman shows it. The novel makes it clear that we belong not only to networks of language and culture but also to the networks of land. As Sueellen Campbell puts it: "we are part of vast networks, texts written by larger and stronger forces. But surely one of the most important of these forces is the rest of the natural world. How close we are to the land... how we learn to see our relationship with it—these things matter enormously" (134). If this connection is unnaturally broken, and if one experiences a lifelong displacement like Federman did, place always becomes an absent presence in our memory. This is what Federman conveys in his metafictional quest to give meaning to his life. Read in this light, the lost homeland for the writer designates "the natural" as that which has become absent. Its meaning can only be created "by giving verbal performance" of his "experience—hence the self-reflexiveness of fiction" (Kutnik 172). As Federman himself maintains, "[t]he act of speaking or writing is what produces meaning;" and that [t]he great silence in us must be decoded into words in order to be and to mean" (*Critifiction* 89).



Discussing the relationship between life and fiction in this sense, Federman offers a radical approach to the understanding of place, or the world in the wider scope. He claims that “fiction adds itself to the world thus creating a meaningful relation that did not previously exist” (*Critifiction* 38). This is particularly important in an analogous way. Since “the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place” (Evernden 101), fiction writing fills this gap by making the act of writing a process of emplacement. In other words, writing the story of Sarah and her cousin implicates a mental and discursive mapping of the past and of place. Since the lost homeland is continually sought in writing and language, the storytelling process illustrates the obvious role of place in the cousins’ self-definition. It can only manifest in textual re-constructions. It is in storytelling that Federman re-territorializes what has become ontologically indeterminate and unavailable for him. This concern is accented in response to the effects of displacement which has led to the writer’s metafictional textualist strategies. While he continues his search for the retention of place in a wholly discursive space to relocate its meaning, the narrative begins to correlate metafictional and ecological perspectives on a contextual basis. In this way the story reflects an ecological postmodern awareness of place bonding, showing how the knowledge of the past and of place gets conditioned by language. Language here should be understood in the sense Ira Livingston defines it: “If language *is of the world*, like galaxies and ecosystems, this means *it participates in what it represents*” (11). Federman’s language participates in being. To reconcile himself to life he chooses to exist in language which has become the only natural place for him to make sense of “the ultimate destruction” in his past. For Federman “life and fiction, fact and fiction, language and fiction... history and story are interchangeable” (*Critifiction* 89). His meanings are produced in the interplay between place-history, and memory-language. Like the sculptor cousin’s carving and molding, the writer’s metafictional story with all its digressions are “attempts to bring back that which was absented” (157).

Similarly, Sarah’s creation of a garden in the desert has a crucial significance in bringing back that which was absented. Just as the cousin creates statues to “render that absence present” (118), Sarah creates a garden where “the flowers and the plants deemed to defy the barren sand next to them” (181). The desert here holds a double meaning, signifying absence with its boundlessness, and presence with Sarah’s garden on its edge. The garden, as a symbolic gesture to recreate that which was absented in Sarah’s case, “represents the human aspiration to harmoniously live *inside* nature and, at the same time, to morally and culturally step *outside* her” (Iovino 278). Serenella Iovino’s contention that the garden “represents a coincidence of nature and imagination” (278) is precisely what characterizes Sarah’s garden.

The garden consolidates Sarah’s life. In the evenings she meditates about life in her garden: “What she experienced as a child during the war, and later as a young woman when she came here, taught her the supreme value not of art but of life... The time she spent in her garden meditating while her hands were busy with flowers was an essential part of the day” (179-180). The transformative power of absence has marked Sarah’s life in such a way as to enable her to gain a greater appreciation of life’s fragility and its resilience as symbolized by the flowers. Sarah’s garden that

points to the necessity of reinventing a homeland for a healthy self, which she manages to accomplish, is similar to the writer's fiction writing process to make peace with the past in this story that crosses the boundaries between reality and imagination. In this way, the retention of place becomes a psychologically inflected process in which the word and the world become interdependent categories. Central to the novel's metafictional rendering of place consciousness is the depiction of Sarah's garden and its therapeutic meaning for the cousin, for it finally becomes the only meaningful way to understand his place in the world. The garden signifies a healing of the feeling of loss that dominated the cousins' entire existence. In fact the ecological focus on the significance of reconnecting with natural environments for a healthy self seems to fit well into the construction of these characters. In Campbell's words: "Ecologists also see an experience of lost unity and a desire to regain it as central to our human nature" (134). Whether it signifies unity is of course questionable in a metafictional novel, but Sarah's garden carries this potential in terms of self-place relationship. The garden functions as a self-conscious construct of belonging to the land. It also denotes the significance of what we can call environmental situatedness. It implies "adaptation" pointing to the role of place construction as an inseparable aspect of self-construction. Lawrence Buell defines the idea of such place construction as having "both an objective and subjective face, pointing outward toward the tangible world and inward to the perceptions one brings to it" (*Writing* 59). In this perspective, Sarah's garden evokes environmental imagination that is vital for creating a sense of belonging, as Buell contends, "to some sort of place-based community" (*Writing* 56), which accordingly activates environmental awareness. The metafictional attempts to construct a verbal link to the absent land cannot properly be understood, to quote Buell again, "without a closer look at how imagination of place-connectedness itself works: its multiple dimensions, its cultural significance" (*Writing* 56). Sarah's garden can also be read as a testimony to the human desire for meaningful emplacement which signals life-energies. Attending to the garden, then, creates an emplaced self that becomes part of life around us. As the Australian ecophilosopher Freya Mathews reminds us, "[t]he place that constellates through this cohering becomes ours and we in turn become it" (55). Indeed Sarah achieves this state by developing a partnership with her new land in her garden by caring for it and devoting herself to it.

Evidently, place construction in the novel is made similar to fictive creation of the past. Just as Sarah's garden functions as a metaphor of emplaced self, Federman's metafictional storytelling functions as a means of self-discovery and making peace with absence. They both imply the process of relocation both in language and the land. When the cousin meets Sarah upon his arrival he tells her that he failed, "because I have not been able to give shape to what can never be recovered," because he says, it is "absence that's what can never be recovered" (176). He also listens to her story of how she and her husband Elie built a new life and how she fashioned her garden out of the desert. The writer's first encounter with the story of Sarah's garden occurs through a dream vision in which he sees the garden "in the back of Sarah's house, on the edge of the desert" (173). He writes that he "could see the sand stretching to the horizon where the blue gray line of day was fading" (173).



As he watches the scene of two cousins sitting in lawn chairs and asking each other questions, the story begins to reflect environmental implications of the discursive representation of the land. In this context Sarah's garden indicates a route to a new postmodern approach to life, namely an ecocentric postmodern understanding of the environment both as a text and as an ontological reality. The garden symbolizes the indivisibility of place and self, a correlated space where, as Jim Cheney has argued, "life is lived out and in which an understanding of place is an understanding of self and community" (91). Although Sarah tells her cousin that when they first came here "this place looked like a dead volcano. It was empty place" (178), she underlines the importance of creating a sense of emplacement: "We tried to make it full, but the desert is stubborn, it refuses to progress. The desert does not give, it takes. One becomes a lizard here, one starts resembling the desert sand" (178). It is here, however that Sarah finds self-grounding, and ironically enough the garden is given more meaning than the destabilizing effects of textuality in the novel, for it creates a more authentic relationship to the environment as the writer finally realizes. He writes:

Sarah was now describing how she had extorted her garden from the desert. She loved this garden with its flowers, its bit of grass and stubborn plants. In the evening, after the long hours in the fields of the camp farm, she spent time in her garden until it was too dark to see. She pulled weeds from the flower beds, watered the plants, cut the dry leaves, or just sat meditating while her fingers played with a leaf or the petal of a flower... In the evenings in her garden Sarah meditated about life. What she experienced as a child during the war, and later as a young woman when she came here, taught her the supreme value not of art but life. Here in the desert Sarah learned to eliminate all emotional luxuries. (179).

Significantly, Sarah's garden becomes a place of felt value, and it is her solution for defying her childhood displacement from her homeland. Therefore she tells her cousin: "These flowers are not a luxury... they are a necessity" (180). Finally the cousin realizes that "while he wrestled alone with his pieces of metal and stone, they had wrestled with the desert to carve out these fields, and he will understand that theirs was the greater struggle, and the greater success" (182). By creating her own natural place Sarah has actually connected herself onto Earth, which, compared to the writer's choice of dwelling in language, has a more constructive power to heal the traumatic sense of absence. Sitting with Sarah in her garden the cousin finally understands that "Sarah's garden, and what she said of the flowers and the desert was enough. Yes, the flowers and the desert were answers to the questions he had been waiting to ask for many years" (185). The ecological implication of this statement at the end of the novel is that nature (signifying natural environments like the desert, and/or landscape) even in its most overtly discursive context leads a writer, who is deeply preoccupied with language, to recognize that nature shapes all meanings and becomes a reservoir of hope. With this acknowledgement Federman closes the gap between the word and the world, and shows that metafiction is not a meaningless textual construction disconnected from the world. Therefore it can take ecocriticism into the areas it has not yet adequately ventured.



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