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To Come Alive in Our Experience: The Sounds of Listening in Sigurd F. Olson

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Our task, rather, is that of *taking up* the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves—to the green uttering-forth of leaves from the spring branches.

— David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

## Introduction

We seem to be stuck. Fazed into a fixed state where our words do little to respond to the massive, planet-altering pressures coming at us everyday from all directions. Newspaper articles, international treaties, and countless books and articles tout our harmful effects on the oceans, forests, and the air, supporting their claims with data point after data point. We are aware that some change is needed, but it seems that our vocabulary has yet to catch up with change. Our language exists between abstraction and very present reality: conversations identify the immense problems we are up against, but respond with vague language that offers empty solutions.

And this is where I see literature as essential for not only coming to terms with the current environmental crisis, but also for tackling these issues head on with fierce compassion, dedication, and humility. Literature has the ability to challenge our old ways of representation. It can incite dialogue on the productive and revelatory power of seeing the world in a renewed, empathetic light. And this is because words are born out of our bodily selves, selves that feel, sense, and respond to the landscape, often in unconscious ways. But because we speed through our daily lives, our words become detached from their organic origins. Instead they float in the urban, technological matrix that covers most of the planet. Literature has the potential to reanimate our words with the buzzing energy of the land, and in the process renew our consciousness of the world so that we can wholly take part in it.

One writer that felt this intimate connection with the land, and worked throughout his life to write his words back into the animated realm of direct experience, was Sigurd F. Olson. I

believe his nature essays should be revisited at the present moment because he spoke to a renewed consciousness of the world that manifested itself in a general attitude of sensitivity toward the land. He wrote from a protean standpoint rooted in the landscape to establish multiple access points to reality and, in turn, free his readers to experience various knowledge domains sizzling throughout the natural world. A staunch proponent for the creation and preservation of wilderness areas in the mid-twentieth century, he valued these places largely because of their aesthetic value. In 1938, early on in his career as both a writer and conservationist,<sup>1</sup> he argued that we gain “spiritual value” from the wilderness, and “a familiar base for the exploration of the soul and the universe itself” that provide “perspective” (Gottlieb 21). While some scholars might characterize this perspective as one gained from an escape of modern day life (perhaps to avoid one’s problems), I would argue that an Olsonian perspective is defined by each individual locating a place in their own lives where they can see their bodily self alongside the universe, and in this position gradually come to better understand their responsibility to the earth. In effect, Olson provides a keen examination of how we can remain grounded in our individual selves, while learning to become active, responsible stewards within our wider communities.

Olson was, and still is, intricately tied to the place of the Quetico-Superior (QS) region,<sup>2</sup> an international wilderness on the border of Canada and northern Minnesota predominantly

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<sup>1</sup> Olson excelled in both parts of his professional life. He is the only person to have received the highest honors of four leading citizen’s organizations that focus on national public lands (Izaak Walton League, National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society.) He also received the John Burroughs medal, the highest award given in nature writing. It was an incredible feat to achieve national recognition as a nature writer *and* lead multiple national conservation groups because of the time and energy it took to cultivate and develop critical thoughts in two very different occupations (most environmentalists dedicated themselves to writing or political activism in the environmental sphere, not both) (Backes 316).

<sup>2</sup> The Quetico-Superior region encompasses the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), Voyageurs National Park, Grand Portage National Monument, and Quetico Provincial Park. The area supports a great amount of ecological diversity (Searle xi).

navigated by canoe (Searle xi). For Olson, the QS region was an endless expanse of brilliant blue lakes and vibrant green islands that engendered a novel way of being in and of the world. He traversed this terrain for decades first hand, and retraced his steps as he recounted the region in his narrative essays, where he attempted to exhibit emotional, spiritual, and historical responses to sound: most notably the songs and silences of the natural landscape (Russel). I will focus primarily on Olson's first book, *The Singing Wilderness* [SW] (1956),<sup>3</sup> a work that catapulted Olson to the foreground of the conservation arena as both a nature writer and an activist. Its popularity was primarily due to the direct, sensory access of the wilderness experience it gave its readers, which will be of key importance to this discussion.

*The Singing Wilderness* is a work of nature writing that, as Olson's biographer, David Backes, points out, follows most of the standard expectations for nature writing that have evolved since the late eighteenth century: a strong sense of place, caring depictions of landscapes, and an episodic seasonal composition. Despite that, the essays stand apart from many traditions inherent to nature writing because they are meant to represent *attainable* experiences for readers: both the literary and the physical. Olson is heavily influenced by the transcendental traditions of Emerson and Thoreau, which argue that the highest form of knowing is an amalgamation of direct sensory experience and the individual's consciousness of said experience (Backes 312). According to Kristof Van Assche, in his essay on the connections between writing policy, and planning, this results in an augmented perception of the world, one that makes previously inaccessible mental terrain navigable and rich because each experience at the root of different forms of knowledge is a complex sensory bundle of time, space, value, and mindful

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<sup>3</sup> All citations that reference *The Singing Wilderness* will only include a page number. References to any of Olson's other works will include a full or abbreviated title and page number.

interaction (268). No longer “merely a romantic trope,” experience and knowledge actually become a “learning process” (Van Assche 268). Olson’s primary purpose for writing, then, is to create an accessible literary terrain for his readers. By immersing the public in the sonorous and emotionally resonant depths of his personal wilderness experiences, he creates a literary space for readers to imagine the feeling of their own wilderness experiences, and in the process come to see their surroundings in new ways.

I will take up a few key terms in my discussion of Olson’s literary terrain—most notably singing, guide, canoe, and horizon—to highlight Olson’s attempts to bridge the problematic divide inherent to our attempts to explain the world of our directly lived experience. This divide manifests itself in ephemeral moments of experience where we most often tend to forget and forgo our active participation in the present because we are preoccupied with the insubstantial jargon we use to relate such experience. Olson listens carefully to the song of the wilderness, a distinguished attention that finds worth in all of the senses, with each constantly working and redefining the others to create meaning. This makes him attentive to the versatile role of landscape: its ability to support varied experiences, and therefore differing interpretations. Subsequently he could adopt his corporeal and interpreting self to the fluctuating environment of the QS region, where the sounds, smells, and tactile qualities of the area could generate new interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I have used Kristof Van Assche’s essay “Semiotics of Silent Lakes. Sigurd Olson and the Interlacing of Writing, Policy, and Planning” to structure my thoughts on the sundry of ways Olson moves through the landscape of the QS region and the landscape of his texts. Van Assche suggests that Olson adopts a mediating position to initiate a dialogue that fosters communication, rather than alienation. Both physical and narrative travel can be centers for “experience, learning, and aesthetic appreciation” (273). When taken together these disparate centers have the power to reshape connections between the text, author, reader, and society, which precipitate a change of relations between these subjects. So Olson works to handle the tangle of knowledge that lies at the nexus of experience, literature, and narrative. In essence, his language fosters new ways to

This is where I argue that Olson assumes his position as a literary guide—a navigator between the textual and physical worlds. Olson worked for many years of his life as a guide in the Northwoods, where he was not only charged with intimately learning how to move through the tangled web of lakes and portages of the QS region, but also how this land tied him spiritually and emotionally to the people who had historically occupied the area. Part of my argument will consider how this position of guide allowed Olson to reestablish movement through literary and physical landscapes by restructuring the reader's experience to include a revitalized awareness of the body and of language. I will examine the short vignettes of the QS region in *The Singing Wilderness* that keep us moving through the narrative landscape at a brisk clip, never allowing us to rest for too long in one specific time or place. I see this as Olson's effort to bring us into the experience of traveling the region by canoe—a mode of transportation that requires active participation on behalf of the paddler—often via the second person subject. Each essay functions as a lake of sorts, and Olson asks us to paddle through textual waters and make arduous portages between them so as to capture a means of travel that intimately links an individual to the broader, unifying experience of others that have roamed the area. As the canoe glides along the water's surface, the body enters into the reflective nature of the horizon line between sky and water, a line that connects writer and reader, body and land. And so it propels one along, pushes one toward new experiences that add nuance to daily realities and vocabularies. In this way, Olson's essays ask for a dynamic, participatory reading on our part. It is here with the canoe, as I will argue in this essay, that Olson deftly navigates the spiritual,

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make meaning and collect knowledge from direct experience that result in vocabularies more in tune with the soul of the land.

physical, and linguistic worlds, bringing one closer to the body in an all-encompassing reflective landscape.

To explore the implications of the relationships between these key terms I have divided the following discussion into five sections. The first chapter analyzes the many components of the singing wilderness, and suggests dynamic listening (born out of close attention to direct experience) precipitates singing. Direct experience lies at the root of this because it gives rise to a heightened awareness of the natural world, a way of knowing characterized by a familiarity and intimacy with the physical and intellectual traits of all bodies. I will then address the ways in which song relies on silence to revitalize meaning in words themselves. Next, I demonstrate Olson's attempts to productively bring the body into a wide temporal space where the past informs how we move through the present, and also encourages passionate movement into the future. Finally, I argue in the final two sections that Olson's philosophy engenders to capture a strong sense of empathy, one that allows us to see ourselves in the mirror of the world, and recognize that the world does just the same. In other words, he fosters a need to question what kind of world we want to live in, and encourages an imaginative means of approaching the world through language that captures a multi-layered reality in which emotion is as valid a way of knowing as logic.

### **Singing the Wilderness**

In the opening chapter of *The Singing Wilderness* Olson urges his readers to join the euphonious collective of all sensing bodies, not only the human. At first glance, this may seem like Olson tasks his readers to dwell in the nostalgia of the aesthetic, aural nature of the prototypical American wilderness reserve. Yet I would consider that an easy, surface level



interpretation of Olson's writing, one steeped in the rhetoric of Romantic and Transcendental tradition. Though Olson may, at times, bask too frequently in the delightedness of the outdoors to the point that one would think he never struggled in his experience, he is actually at work as a guide. I argue that Olson wrote and rewrote his essays to bring the wilderness of the QS region to life in writing. He understood that not everyone had access to the wilderness; so to create an imaginative, wild textual landscape within his essays was to create an environment where individuals could access the experience of the land through his own direct experience. Further, because he believed that the very act of grappling with words and sentences helped him to perceive more accurately, writing actually tapped into new wells of awareness and knowledge that would not only deepen his connection to the landscape, but be made known to his readers as well (*Wilderness Visionaries* 212).

There is an insistence in the opening pages of *The Singing Wilderness* that suggests almost everyone is listening for something. Restlessness percolates our everyday spaces, predominantly stemming from a desire for a forgotten past when the human body was more in touch with the landscape. This "something" remains ambiguous: "We sense intuitively that there must be something more, search for panaceas we hope will give us a sense of reality... We may not know exactly what we are listening for, but we hunt as instinctively for opportunities and places to listen as sick animals look for healing herbs" (6-7). The human need for "something" remains steeped in such ambiguity precisely because we are persistent in our acceptance of a single language to provide access to reality. With this statement Olson bridges the urge for a strict sense of reality to an amorphous listening of the world. It is an innate urge, to listen. But because we do not often "know exactly what we are listening for," a disconnect arises—one that results in an aimless search for "something." Olson's position is necessitated by the condition for

this aimless search, or sense of being lost; he helps individuals negotiate uncertain physical and intellectual terrain to lead them to find worth in senses apart from the visual.

Olson acknowledges the gravity of this detached, unsettled state in humanity's search for "something." To remedy this, he uses his navigation skills and knowledge as a guide in the QS region, and translates these skills into work as a textual guide. Sanford Marovitz, one of the few American critics to address Olson as a literary figure suggests, "As a wilderness guide, Olson's trade was not to navigate the lakes and rivers of the Quetico region and elsewhere for a fee, but as a listener to its song, he simultaneously navigated between the phenomenal and spiritual worlds, the latter, through intuition, being the link which ties man to the influences and vibrations of the primordial past" (110). A guide for over twenty years, Olson extended an ear out toward the natural world—an ear that was trained to hear the spoken subtleties by which nature communicates, which differs from our commonly held standards and definitions for speech (Tschida 206). A smart and experienced guide in the Northwoods, he never tried to go above and beyond his facilities. While he tackled difficult terrain with gusto and strove to immerse the travelers he guided through the QS in the knowledge and emotional potential of the landscape, he was keenly aware of his own physical and intellectual limits. In parallel, his clear and direct essays never went beyond their own expertise, as Howard Mosher remarks in an introduction to a collection of Olson's essays. He stayed true to writing about what he most intimately knew: his love for the wilderness and the power it held over the human spirit (Mosher xix). In such a way, he uses his essays as opportune wilderness excursions for his readers to unlearn the desire for a single faceted reality. With each essay, we unearth the layers of the high value placed on objectivity that have tightly nestled into nooks of our collective consciousness, and come to appreciate the worth of a more subjective experience.

This manifests itself most startlingly in Olson's unconventional way of writing about the wilderness, one that focuses on the aural versus the visual. The synaesthetic experience of his texts interrupts the warm, snug haven of our objective natural worlds. It forces us to revel in the offbeat, to pause for a second longer in the moments of our search for the "something," so to let some doubt seep into our minds as to our reliance on what we already know and understand. Olson achieves this not only through presenting us with the sounds of the natural world, but from his overt references to how this listening permits an access to all kinds of knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable to the individual. Too often, hearing is conflated with listening. In this sense hearing does little to change the way we move and live in our surroundings, as it involves no intake of knowledge. It exists on a purely aural level, where sounds, while beautiful, breathtaking, eerie, or frightening do little to connect to the *actual landscape* from which they come. In contrast, to listen is to directly partake in an experience, and understand that a sound has the wondrous ability to tap into new ways of knowing, thereby undoing the disconnection between the body and the land. This is because listening involves attention, observation, and attunement—without listening there is no chance for response, or reciprocation. A refusal or an ignorance to listen relegates an individual to the limited realm of prior knowledge. Unconcerned with the varied sounds of the landscape, the individual exists in a one-dimensional realm of previously held assumption, knowledge, and understanding. For Olson, knowledge can heighten his experiences with the rich sounds of the landscape, but it cannot replace these experiences. Bob Henderson defines this manner of knowing well: "[it] is about ways of seeing, sensing, feeling, and being that are a departure from the central rhythms of people's urban working life...[the] music is about the ancient joy of coming alive in our experience" (139). Open to new

ways of knowing and being in and of the world, Olson works to establish a horizon of multiple access points to reality, each as real as the other (Van Assche 273).

Forced to work within the objective boundaries imposed by the written word, Olson makes do with the sensory means he has available to him in his interactions with the landscape of the QS region. Employing clear, direct language that evokes lyrical, organic sounds, he grounds the reader in a place where bodies connect to other bodies in verbal, aural dimensions. In an introduction to a Sigurd Olson reader, Howard Frank Mosher makes note of Olson's "range, power, and lyricism as a nature writer" (xi). This seems to be a common sentiment in the little commentary that exists on Olson's essays: his prose comes close to poetry. Olson's work actually captures wild sounds in lush, vivid poetic language. In a textual space with these aural qualities we are able to find the singing that can occur between the world and the self, allowing us to fully realize those moments where we take part in the world in its essential, enigmatic multiplicity.

With this in mind, Olson invites his readers to hear the "singing" of the wilderness. He lays out what this singing is, and when he first heard the song of the wilderness, in the first chapter of *The Singing Wilderness*. However, the singing that he hears cannot be defined by this one chapter, but should be taken as the singing throughout all of his books as well. Olson hears the singing most clearly in the lakes and forests of the QS region. He cites the song in the resonance of birdcalls at night, in the rushing air of rapids, when fog rolls off of the bay in the morning, and in the chill of winter nights. He hears the song in a sputtering campfire, in the tapping of rain on a tent, in a quiet place "like an echo out of the past" (6). The multi-sensory component of these experiences taken together is striking. In the *feeling* of the cold, in *watching* the fog roll off the bay, in a *quiet* place—Olson finds aural dimensions in senses beside hearing.

He even finds song in quiet, in silence. Moreover, the singing has potential to transcend time, for “like an echo out of the past,” a sound from a long time ago can reverberate in fresh contexts and new sets of experiences.

Olson offers a reason for our inability to hear this song. He insists that it is because of our “almost forgotten past [that] there is a restlessness within us, an impatience with things as they are...” (6). To connect this back to Olson’s statement about our search for a sense of reality, he argues that with a divorce from the past and a burning drive to “move fast enough” into the future, we fail to fully live and experience our present moment. Never content with “things as they are,” our one-dimensional reality is never enough, and our solution is that a vibrant world must only lie ahead. What Olson so brilliantly returns us to is the beauty of living in the humming energy of the present moment. To learn and fully embrace life in each of its ephemeral moments is what it means *to sing the wilderness*. Completely entrenched in all the senses, the body opens itself up to knowing through sound, color, sight, touch, smell, silence, and an acute awareness of time and place.

When one recognizes each of these sensory experiences as various parts of a multi-dimensional reality, one can enter the horizon of the world and exist on the boundless line where the singing wilderness can be heard the strongest. This is because the horizon can hold the past in sight, allow one to fully take part in the present, and look ahead to the future, which shapes a more holistic view of the world. The first time Olson hears the fullness of the singing wilderness is when he runs through the woods to the shoreline of Lake Michigan, where he finds “space and a sparkling blue horizon” (8). A horizon lends itself to “space” and openness. It incites feeling, and a sense of the infinite. There is no desire to rush quickly into the present in an attempt to “fill the void within us,” created by an empty search for something. A horizon line keeps those who

live and exist within it grounded, yet changeable. One can still move toward this search for something, and there is plenty of space for this search, yet the feeling of a void is eradicated, as there is a solid anchoring line to grab hold of. And this is evident not only in Olson's experience, but in his readers. A Connecticut book publisher, John Howland, wrote to Olson after having read part of *The Singing Wilderness* while listening to Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony: "Thank you for adding a depth to my horizon, and some comprehension of things which, unlived, otherwise might have remained unknown" (Backes 256). Howland's personal intellectual and experiential horizon is extended because of Olson's essays. Beyond a deepening of his horizon, Howland begins to make sense of and experience moments physically "unlived" by him. What this conveys, then, is that Olson's multisensory depictions of his personal experiences in the QS region could be transferred into a body that had not directly lived those experiences, but still lead to renewed "comprehension," or heightened consciousness in that other body.

The place of the QS region lends itself to this sort of grounding because there are no definite boundaries. The horizon acts as an anchor between the sky and the watery terrain, keeping one balanced in a landscape that lends itself to movement between solidity and fluidity. In this region, one is always poised in a reflection of sky into water and water into sky. It is a humble place with not much in the way of sweeping vistas. It is languid and accommodating. For these reasons, the QS region is most suitable for travel by canoe. Not only does the canoe adapt to the fluctuations of an environment composed of water and land, it actually moves along the horizon line. From the belly of the canoe you can see the vivid outlines of trees along the shores stretching out and into the water, and up and into the sky. You become poised along this line of reflection, and enter the imaginative and fruitful space of the unbounded horizon line.

Olson holds a deep respect for the canoe in terms of how it allows its paddler to enter into the living, breathing, animate landscape. As he adopted the canoe in his work as a wilderness guide, he similarly adopts the canoe as the linkage between direct experience and textual experience, most poignantly in his chapter “The Way of the Canoe.” Like the physical horizon that connects the sky and water, the literary canoe is a vessel for taking the reader into the horizon between direct experience and our interpretation, our own experience with the wilderness and its song. The canoe engages the body in a constant rhythmic swing: “The instant he dips a paddle, he flows as it flows, the canoe yielding to his slightest touch, responsive to every whim and thought. The paddle is an extension of his arm, as his arm is part of his body... There is balance in the handling of a canoe, the feeling of its being a part of the bodily swing” (78). Olson finds reflection between the body and its active participation in the world through the flowing of the body and the flowing of the canoe. Considering the paddle as “an extension” of the arm, and noting that the arm is part of the body, the paddle becomes part of the body. The canoe requires a balancing act that demands full participation of the now one paddle-arm, and therefore the entirety of the paddler’s body. It is in the “bodily swing” of the individual impelling the canoe through the water, around the shores, and beneath the skies that the body enters into a state of pure horizontality, complementary to all that surrounds it. A moment is offered to those who wish to live for a minute suspended atop fluid glass. Harmony holds out a hand as an invitation to become part of the unparalleled symmetry of the moment. Mind and body blow as sand across the wide expanse of the lake, and become part of the kinship of the clouds, the network of trees, and even manage to feel the splendor of the refracted light that has seeped into every porous corner of the glassy plain. Weightless and effortless, the body enters into the knowledge of the landscape.

Olson establishes the canoe as an entity that is one with the landscape: “The movement of the canoe is like a reed in the wind. Silence is part of it, and the sounds of lapping water, bird songs, and wind in the trees. It is part of the medium through which it floats, the sky, the water, the shores” (77). Olson equates the canoe to part of the natural landscape by likening its movement to a natural subject (“the reed in the wind”). It becomes part of the landscape by way of its bodily movements, and also by absorbing the silence and sounds of the earthly medium it glides through. Floating atop the water, the canoe is able to embody the experience of “the sky, the water, the shores,” or the entirety of the landscape, all at once. Instead of getting lost in the inversion between sky and water, this is actually an immersive experience for the paddler because the sky is now in reach. With the entire world reflected in the watery medium the canoe floats on, the paddler has access to all the world has to offer. It follows that because “man is part of his canoe and therefore all it knows,” he is able to become part of this embodied experience of the landscape. This physically brings the body into a state of reflection, thought, and knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Rather than the body rushing toward the future, yearning to fill a void, the body with the canoe responds to the pressures of the perpetually moving and evolving present, learning to live in balance with each glorious moment as it comes into view on the horizon.

While Olson has experienced physical canoe travel, many of his readers have not. In order to insert the reader into narrative travel with the second person, Olson fully assumes his

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<sup>5</sup> These interpretations were influenced by David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous*, a text that delves into the relationship between the body, the self, language, and the natural world through the philosophical lens of phenomenology. Abram pushes against the culturally engrained notion that our direct experience is derived from the objective world of facts, and turns instead to recognizing the physical body as the center of experience. For a reciprocity between the human and natural world to arise, we must bridge the “experiencing ‘self’” to the corporeal individual organism. Abram argues we must let ourselves “feel *seen*” by other sensing subjects, if we are to use our words to participate with the world. Above all, truth and reality must be found in the community of sensing bodies—the pulsing matrix of individual experiences—and not the objective world.



role as guide by shuttling us as readers, himself as a experiencing body and a writer, and the narrative essay as text between narrative and physical landscapes. He places us in specific instances where reflections abound, completely incorporating us into the fabric of the landscape: “Should you be lucky enough to be moving across a calm surface with mirrored clouds, you may have the sensation of suspension between heaven and earth, of paddling not on the water but through the skies themselves” (78). Through reflection, Olson subtly places us in “suspension” amidst the intersection between the body and the landscape. There is no attempt to characterize knowledge gained from this seemingly valuable experience, but rather an insistence only to immerse the reader in this reciprocity between the surface of the water and the cloud dotted skies. The text works to create the feeling of an existence along this pensile string somewhere amidst the sky and waters, but Olson resists extrapolating further meaning from the moment. Instead, he gives readers access to a moment of reflection and allows us to draw our own feeling about what it is like to “move through the skies themselves.”

And though the canoe cannot suspend its paddler between the sky and water on earthen terrain, the portage between each lake is perhaps just as rewarding as the journey through the water. In Olson’s second book of essays, *Listening Point*,<sup>6</sup> he describes portages in narrative terms as “punctuation marks between long blue sentences of lakes across maps” (163). To transform the lay of the land into the geography of a text bestows a certain rhythm to the land, movement that follows an arc of an idea in which each lake, or each sentence, is necessary to understand the whole. The portage becomes essential because it breaks up the long watery sentences of lakes, making the ideas and experiences intrinsic to each lake more defined, and therefore makes the meaning that can be gleaned from them more accessible. Furthermore, the

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<sup>6</sup> Olson published this collection around his wilderness experiences on and near the rocky outcropping next to his cabin in Ely, Minnesota.

portage defined in the essay “The Romance of Portages” evokes the sense that a portage accrues personality and familiarity as a result of well-established human associations: emotionally charged experiences that make up the fabric of a human life (24). Each portage accumulates a distinct disposition through these personal associations and through the history of people that have walked along its path, canoe and packs in tow. So the portage is a dusty, well-trodden trail with a host of experiences packed deep into the earth where you can find “sounds that are lost on the water” and “see things that until then have been hidden” (*LP* 159). Each individual that walks a portage collects traces of other travelers’ past experiences, and also releases some of the memories and associations inherent to their own experiences into the physical earth. In this way, the portage is critical for a canoe journey because it allows for knowledge to be gained that is restricted to an earthen perspective. On top of that, knowledge amassed from riding the horizon line in the canoe on the water can be shared beyond the individual, and result in a network of experience and knowledge that every person has chance to access.

Olson’s complex understanding of the rich relationship between the topography of text and land was not lost on the readers of his books. He received hundreds of letters every week, and made a diligent effort to respond to all of them within a few days. A letter from Robert C. Mueller of Minneapolis in 1957 addressed the possibility of an urban wilderness: “I can remember how an early morning walk in Chicago – or an evening walk in Mt. Morris – would give me a feeling akin to being in the Q-S country. It is the being about in the open (even in a city) – the looking at the sky – which affords a feeling of kinship with the wilderness. And a book like yours affords assurance that the wilderness is there.” Mueller’s note suggests Olson’s writing had significant effects on its readers in terms of steeping them in the place of the QS country. The feeling of “being in the open” that Olson established through the canoe and the

horizon line could even be felt in the city. Emma Fell, another individual who wrote to Olson, said that this was because Olson's "simple words" described his experiences "so accurately" and made them "so real." For Esther Logman, it allowed her and her husband to "see and feel and hear more," when they took their own trip to the QS region. Another admirer, Harrison R. Johnson, wrote of a passage that made him stop reading and "remember." Taken together, these notes suggest that Olson's simple, poetic language creates the place of northern wilderness in his readers hands so they are able to experience their own worlds through sound, smell, touch, etc. Johnson's note is especially of interest because it asked him to recall his own experiences with wilderness. It made him pause, reflect, and join the watery narrative horizon of Olson's essays.

### **A Soundful Silence**

Olson spurs us to listen to the song of the animated landscape—the sounds that reverberate in context of one another to create meaning. The unity of tone, rhythm, and resonance is one essential element of learning to sing the wilderness and the world. But perhaps the most important element involved in committing the song to heart is that "the time must be right not only for the place, but in the mind of him who listens" (*OH* 102). While this statement is small, it proposes something crucial to the discussion on sound: the mere presence of wilderness music is not enough to alter our state of consciousness in the natural world. What is equally vital is the state of mind of the listener, for only with an acceptance of the wilderness song can an individual body become accustomed to language as a bodily phenomenon that is shared by all expressive bodies, not just the human. An open and eager nature toward the song settles the human body within the living, breathing landscape, where it is fully inscribed into the twittering, murmuring, resonant extension of the horizon. This is what gives our words the potential to engage in a reciprocal relationship with the world along the earth's horizon, and is

what gives our speech the power of assertion in its ability to prompt, shift, and mold the perceptual world.

Language is composed, formed, and reformed as much by sound as by silence. Silence pervades much of Olson's writing, and seems to encourage openness in our listening to whatever may come out of its limitless dimensions. Silence paradoxically exists at the core of sound; it concurrently holds the vibrancy and vacuity of meaning. More than a brief liberation from noise, it actually serves as a space that can soak up and yield meaning. Thus, through reflection, silence is a main source for shifting interpretation of place and self (Van Assche 267). Fully aware of the immense power of silence, Olson gives due attention and thought to the concept throughout his essays, particularly in *The Singing Wilderness*, where he devotes an entire chapter ("Silence") to the subject. The chapter, which discusses why silence is a necessary component of song and where silence can be found, opens with the following lines:

It was before dawn, that period of hush before the birds had begun to sing. The lake was breathing softly as in sleep; rising and falling, it seemed to me to absorb like a great sponge all the sounds of the earth. It was a time of quiet—no wind rustling in the leaves, no lapping of the water, no calling of animals or birds... Standing there alone, I felt alive, more aware and receptive than ever before. (129)

A perfect example of Olsonian silence, this experience is a tranquil occasion that has the wherewithal to soak up every single sound released from the bellowing depths of the earth, which argues for silence as actually being composed of many sounds. In this case, it is the water that has the wondrous ability to shroud the landscape in stillness: no stirring, pattering, or hollering to speak of. In this moment, Olson feels more "alive, more aware and receptive than ever before." This evokes the strength of silence, as it attunes Olson's body to the landscape around him. To heighten his senses and make the lake more navigable, Olson is showered with new meanings, interpretations, and knowledge of himself and the place of the QS region.

Olson goes on to recall a climb up Robinson Peak ridge to see the sun set behind the lakes and rivers. His experience of the sunset is entirely changed by the slow hum of birdcalls that transform into a “softness of sound no louder” than his own breathing. With this the sun begins to “tremble...on the edge of the ridge. It was alive, almost fluid and pulsating, and as I watched it sink I thought that I could feel the earth turning from it, actually feel its rotation” (130). As the rhythmic velvet sounds of his breathing meld into the softness of white throat and hermit thrush songs, Olson’s view of the cosmos is altered to include recognition of nonhuman life and the movement of gigantic planetary bodies. The sun becomes “alive”; it moves and pulses like the pumping blood that sustains Olson’s own body. As a result, he is actually able to sense the earth turn, “feel its rotation.” The resplendence and energy in this moment lies in Olson’s adjusted understanding of his place in the world. Now able to contemplate the sun as a breathing, animate being, and because of this, the earth a being in perpetual movement, Olson’s worldview has shifted. He owes this to the “silence of the wilderness, that sense of oneness which comes only when there are no distracting sights or sounds, when we listen with inward ears and see with inward eyes, when we feel and are aware with our entire beings rather than our senses” (131). Silence allows us to fully come into ourselves, to use our senses not only to take in and learn from external stimuli, but also to turn those senses inward and understand how they are working on us as individual bodily selves. To be aware with your “entire being” is not a rejection of the senses, but a statement that argues the senses are only one way of being in and of the world. The beauty of silence is that it allows us to extend the whole body out and into the world, to comprehend our place alongside other bodies, even those as gigantic as the sun. This is made possible by silence forcing us, in a sense, to turn inward and come to grasp what it is like

to participate in a world as a body among other sensing bodies, rather than a body only sensing external objects.<sup>7</sup>

We come to sense the gravity of silence when Olson paints moments where he is able to listen more acutely to sounds by first being immersed in silence. He describes one of these instances in the final chapter of *The Singing Wilderness*, titled “Timber Wolves,” when he recalls a late night walk that brought him 50 feet away from a pair of wolves: “The river was still aglisten, and the far shore looked black and somber. An owl hooted back in the spruce, and I knew what that meant in the moonlit glades. A tree cracked sharply with the frost, and then it was still, so still that I could hear the beating of my heart” (244). By listening intently to the owl that hoots in the spruce and the crack of the tree, Olson is able to make out the beating of his own heart. Consequently, the sound of Olson’s human heart is equated with the sounds of the forest and the animals that live within its depths. In this way it speaks to the reciprocity inherent to a renewed consciousness of the natural world in all of its many shades and hues. Only by fully listening to his surroundings can Olson fully engage with and actually listen to his own self, to recognize his own bodily noises as part of the noises of the QS region. Ultimately, this allows him to hear the call of the timber wolves: “At last I caught what I was listening for—the long-drawn quavering howl from over the hills, a sound as wild and indigenous to the north as the muskegs or the northern lights. That was wilderness music, something free and untamed as there

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<sup>7</sup> I turn again to Abrams here to shed some light on the relationship between silence and sound. Abram insinuates that silence, which is felt as an absence of sound, works to establish a presence in the immediate landscape. He asserts, “A living language is continually being made and remade, woven out of the silence by those who speak...And this silence is that of our wordless participations, of our perceptual immersion in the depths of an animate, expressive world” (84). When described in these terms, silence becomes the way we participate and perceive the natural world; so silence subsumes presence. Silence is imperative for the development of our language, and therefore our multisensory relationships with the natural world, because it gives new life to words. We lead our lives weaving in and out of silence, creating and recreating language that molds itself to participate in full reciprocity with the landscape.

is on earth” (244). Olson’s unobstructed self, established by his willingness to listen to the natural world, and to find those same sounds within himself, opens him to the “music,” or the singing, of the wilderness. It is the sound surging in the greens and blues of the northern lights, it is the gurgles reverberating in the muskegs, and it is the steady pulse of Olson’s own heart that permits him a more complete access to the landscape.

But the body cannot merely extend itself out to the world and reach inward with the assumption that learning to live in tune with earthly rhythms—most prominently the changing of the seasons—will be immediately accessible. The distinction and fine overlap of silence and sound is integral to this attunement. It is tiny fluctuations in sound, the feeling that comes with a sense of immense quiet, which alerts the body to a shift in seasons, and a shift in manners of life. At the outset of the section on winter called “Coming of the Snow,” Olson notes how the quiet feels like a tight embrace: “There is a moment of suspense when the quiet can be felt, when it presses down on everything and to speak seems a sacrilege” (192). The world holds its breath in hushed expectancy when the silence can be felt. The synaesthesia in this moment gives physical presence to the silence, as it compresses the earth and the air, conferring it with weight that all of the sensing bodies in the landscape, including Olson’s, can feel. Yet, everything is released almost as soon as the silence descends: “Suddenly the air is white with drifting flakes and the tension is gone. Down they come, settling on the leaves, into crevices in bark. Now there is an infinitesimal rustling as the flakes drift into the leaves and duff. Swiftly the whiteness spreads, then the earth is sealed and autumn is gone. Stability has come to the north and to my own life as well” (192). Olson uses the word “suddenly” to signify an instantaneous change that comes over the region with the first snowfall. The first crystalline flakes that dance down to the ground break the pressing “tension” of the quiet and bring winter to the north. The key to this moment is in

terms of breaking the silence with the “infinitesimal rustling” of the snow as it falls softly to earth. While the voice of the snowflakes is almost indiscernible, it is there nonetheless. And the more the snow falls and the whiteness spreads, the slightly louder this rustling gets, until the earth is sealed for the winter months in a soft, hushed rustle of snowy conversations. It is the tactile nature of the shift from pressing quiet to infinitesimal rustling that signals to bodies in the landscape that autumn has passed and winter has arrived. This switch signals “stability,” a sense of balance in both the environment and the body in the environment. With an attunement to sound, the body becomes in sync with its surroundings.

This interconnectedness of the sounds in the QS region that Olson traveled so extensively were not limited to the winter months. In fact, by structuring *The Singing Wilderness* in an episodic, seasonal format Olson takes us through the layered experience of sounds and silences that with various tones of the wilderness blend into a beautiful harmony of sound and meaning. In the essay “The Winds of March,” from the first section on spring, Olson details the way he stalks a partridge down an old logging road: “Then came the slow, muffled beat of the wings increasing to a swift crescendo that had in it the booming quality of tom-toms. As I stood there and listened, I had visions of what was to come, for that sound was part of many things: trout streams in May, lakes calm in the twilight, hazy afternoons with the smell of smoke in the air, loons calling on the open water” (Olson 19). The “slow, muffled beat” of the partridge’s wings create an effect similar to drums, but more importantly evoke and are actually “part of” many other spring time occurrences, such as streams filled with trout, calm lakes so smooth they could be taken for glass, and even a smell of smoke. What Olson insinuates with this statement is that listening asks for the participation of all our senses: the smell of smoke has an aural quality to it



if we are willing to view it in a slightly broader context of comingling with beats of partridge wings, the call of loons on glassy lakes, and the trout streams in May.

In an interview published in 1980 (two years before his death) Olson provides another take on the exceptional quality of moments like these where the senses fuse together and recall one another: “I do believe...that no one can understand the cosmos without first being convinced there is a power behind all things. There is an energy, a thought spectrum, like a Van Allen Belt, in which all ideas and spiritual beliefs surround the earth like the belt of matter surrounding the earth. We in our consciousness flow with this mythical thought” (Backes 289). Instead of turning to a singular God, Olson proposes that we cannot come to understand the universe, and therefore our place in the world, without first feeling the power in experiences like those in “The Winds of March” that harness energy in the comingling of senses. In these instances, our spiritual and conceptual knowledge rotate together with the planetary, rocky matter orbiting the earth. If we can accept the intense energy in knowledge and thought that rotates around our communities and ourselves as the same energy that keeps planetary matter in motion around the earth, then we have the ability to precipitate new ways of knowing within ourselves. Much like we cannot access the full potential of the wilderness song without learning to listen thoroughly, we must learn that our imaginations orbit in a similar fashion to the physical movements of other bodies. In essence, we find our minds and ways of knowing moving in tandem with forces of the world, ultimately securing our place in the vast, whirling, and creative potential of the land.

### **The Beauty in Skating Down the Skyways, or How to Bridge the Past, Present, and Future**

Though Olson focuses much of his energy on the enormous potential of sound and silence, he devotes ample time to explore the power of the other senses as well. Each way of sensing is unique, and offers something different to access the wealth of potential knowledge

along the horizon. In an interview with Olson printed in the journal *Canoe*, James Dale Vickery notes how conscious Olson is of the manner by which “things come together causing change, giving meaning” (19). Everything is always shifting, ever moving forward. To have this “sense of history and future” is a powerful tool that Olson makes great use of throughout his essays (R. Olson xxvii). His deeply held belief that wild places help people connect with their past to help them move self-assuredly into their future is a potent instrument for his creation of textual spaces that encourage a delicate balance between living fully in the present while not letting go of the past or the future. Olson is adamant that we do not forget our pasts and the pool of memories that serve as additional sources of knowledge. He argues that “we must bridge the gap between past, present, and future with understanding” to reach a “better state of balance” (Huyck 74). The horizon line supports this balance beautifully, because it does the job of bridging the gap between the past, present, and future.

To engrain in the reader the importance of a sense of history and the past, Olson repeatedly brings us into experiences of his that show how the power of listening is concentrated in its astounding potential to recollect the other senses. He brings up instances where he pays dutiful attention to the sounds around him, and by doing so exposes himself to the knowledge reaped from an aggregate view of the past, present, and future. It allows his body and mind to syncopate with the seasonal rhythms of the earth. In “The Storm,” an essay describing a May blizzard that puts a pause on bird migration, Olson writes of the spring robin’s song as a “fluid, haunting melody of gurgling notes which sounds like the flowing of water itself.” He describes how this avian song “meant many things” to him in terms of what was to come: the “getting up early and listening to the birds” and “long walks through the woods to the headwaters of trout streams....” Yet, Olson also recognizes how the song signals the end of “ski trails,” “rabbit

tracks,” and “beds of deer in the snow.” Olson holds steady in his attentiveness to the present, to the song of the robin as it conjures up the bubbling water. However, he takes into consideration the past and future occurrences that are interwoven into the call of the robin’s voice. In this way, Olson’s capacity to take notice of the robin’s call, to genuinely listen to its voice and come to find its song in other facets of the landscape enables him to recognize how the past, present, and future are continually pushing and pulling upon one another. Olson pays heed to living in the present: he understands the robin’s first call signals the initial spring storm, but makes clear that this storm has arisen out of the ski trails and beds of deer, and will in some part act as a force that encourages him to take future long walks out to trout streams.

With the recognition that time is embedded in place, Olson is disposed to memory; the echoes of past experience anchored in the land. This occurrence is what allows the body to become one with the wilderness and results in the fusion of human history with natural history. In “Pools of the Isabella,” Olson explains the relationship and significance each pool of water has to those people who are closest to him: “During the many years I have fished the Isabella, it has become a part of me” (90). Olson has come to know this place by visiting it repeatedly, in solitude and with others. Repetitive visits allow the pools to “become part” of him, which suggests a process of unification with the land is not immediate. To become puts forth the notion that Olson must go through a transformation of mind and spirit to become attuned to and access the knowledge swirling around in the depths of the pools. He gives us a hint to how this process of “becoming” occurs: “Not a one [pool] is but dedicated to some memory. When I wade the Isabella, I am never alone. I always hear forgotten banter in the sounds of the rapids, the soft rhythmic swish of familiar rods” (91). The association and establishment of memory in the pools provide Olson with the agency to become, because with these memories he is never alone. Not

only do the pools recall loved and respected individuals that share the land with him, they sing the rapid's witty conversation and the steady movements of fly rods. This scene is a lush chorus of human (fly rod) and natural sounds (rapids) that are in witty conversation (banter). To state that the "banter" is "forgotten" indicates the healthy relationship between the human and the natural world has been severed, completely lost to memory. To take us through his many memories associated with these pools, Olson works to reestablish and rekindle the memories we have with the pools in our own lives. He concludes the chapter with a metaphor that can help us think about how our own memories evolve and come to ground us in place: "Each one of these pools is like a room that has been lived in a long time" (97). If each pool has its own memories and associations, then each memory represents a space for becoming, for beginning to know the particularities that are only known to one who has continually lived in a space. Each room asks for a slightly different approach to knowledge. Whether it is drenched in hearing or suspended in touch, the sensory qualities of the memories provide the weight of the anchor, and are essential to partake in if we are to become part of the natural spaces we inhabit.

The sense that we must come to know our environments through prolonged experience is crucial. Mike Link proposes, in his commentary from *The Collected Works of Sigurd Olson*, that Olson guides us in a manner that asks us to work physically, as well as mentally. What we take away from Olson's essays is that to experience a portage, or a canoe trip more broadly, is much more than just "sweat and labor." In fact, it is an occasion to enter into and come to know the "flow of history" that swirls in riffs and eddies throughout the waterways of the QS region (xxvi). Olson as guide highlights the extent to which this is so in the chapter titled "Flying In," where he discusses the stark contrast in a trip to the QS region by plane rather than canoe: "Formerly, by the time I had reached this spot on the map, the country had had a chance to soak

in and become a part of me. But as I stood listening to the far drone of the plane, I knew that I was still part of the environment I had left and that it would take time for the old feeling of wilderness to come” (114). Again, Olson uses the phrase “become a part of me” to describe a solid understanding of the landscape. In this case, travel by canoe perpetuates becoming, while flying in to the wilderness keeps part of Olson’s body back in the urban environment he left.

David A. Tschida, in an essay from a compilation of works on the ethics of listening, asserts that a divorcement of Olson’s body from place prevents him from meaningful participation in the sensory wilderness. Moreover, it eliminates the possibility of an “entire relationship” with the song of the wilderness because Olson is “displaced by a mode of transportation that silence[s] the voice of wilderness and silence[s] his response” (214). It follows that to gain any real knowledge or understanding of the wilderness and the world requires a participatory relationship based on listening to the multitude of wilderness voices. “Voices” is an especially important term here, for it bestows subjectivity into the sensing nonhuman wilderness bodies, and it demonstrates that if we are to learn anything from our direct experience in the wilderness we must accept that the bodies we come into contact with in these landscapes are just as worthy of our ears as human individuals. Olson closes the section with an analogy that captures the sensory aspect of a journey into the wilderness that is necessary for any knowledge to come of it: “I would be a mole again and learn the feel of rocks under my feet, breathe the scent of balsam and spruce under the sun, feel the wetness of the spray and muskeg, be part of the wilderness” (116). Olson as imaginative mole learns only through touch and smell to be, again, “part of the wilderness.” This metaphor imparts a sense of how Olson accomplishes being a part of the wilderness, for it signals an opening up of his body to the bodies of other creatures in the landscape around him. To recognize there is knowledge to be gained from the perspective and

experience of other organisms is essential to Olson's ability to become part of and sing the wilderness. A return to this phrase is Olson's recapitulation of what it takes to make the body understand the landscape that it is in, suspending the chapter in an open invitation that asks the body of the reader to extend itself out toward the world.

Although memory is pertinent to enter into the expansive knowledge of the horizon line, so is our ecological knowledge of the landscape. In the essay "Caribou Moss," Olson discusses the ecological symbiosis that manifests itself in the title lichen. Using his scientific knowledge, Olson describes the relationship between the two plants that make up the moss: "The algae possess green chloroplasts which through the alchemy of water, air, and sunlight provide the host with the starch it cannot produce itself. The host in turn provides the moisture and the elements of growth from the mineral rock it has dissolved" (162). However, he is quick to challenge our logical reliance on the scientific understanding of "one of the first co-operative ventures in the plant kingdom." He directly questions both the credibility of science, and his reader's assumptions of the legitimacy of scientific understanding, to make room for space where the singing can be heard: "How such an arrangement came about is one of the marvels of evolutionary progression. Happenstance? A conceived master plan? Science can only guess and may never know" (162). While Olson does not address the sounds or smells of the moss itself, the singing in this case is found in the moss's deep ties to its patch of ground: "It is damp with dew, soft and resilient as spun rubber. Down the center of the bed is reddish scar. Underneath that crimson line is a crack in the bed rock filled with the accumulated humus of centuries of growth. Someday a squirrel will bury a cone there" (162). Making the move away from scientific jargon, and instead toward a place where one can read and exhume the layers of the earth, with all of its connections in tow, Olson pushes the reader to grapple with symbiosis from a different

perspective. No longer a complex web of chloroplasts and alchemy, the network of organisms becomes historical; the moss sits atop centuries of hummus growth that one day could be disturbed by a squirrel. Everything is related, and everything affects the whole network. Olson's geology professor, Dr. C.K. Leith, who was resolute in his opinion that even the smallest of crystals were alive and always in motion cultivated his microcosmic view of the world. Each crystal was its own world, "a universe in itself," and the planet was just as alive as these crystals: the shaping of the earth was continual and fluid. If Olson wished to forge relationships with even the smallest crystals, he had to think of the earth and all of its sensing subjects "in the perspective of eons instead of years" (*OH* 137). Thus, to dedicate this much of the textual landscape to the history of lichen demonstrates Olson's efforts to bring the smallest of organisms into our view of the boundless expanse of the natural world. Bruce Hutchinson, in one of the first reviews of *The Singing Wilderness* discerns that "For [Olson] it is a whole thing, an organic body of which all life, from the lichen to the man, is interdependent, logical, and in timeless rhythm" (qtd. in Backes 254). This review is worth noting because it makes clear the intricacies involved in Olson's goals. Namely, these were that the historical and contemporary functions of any organism deserved as much attention as human history; that this interdependence was logical (on the basis of objective and subjective ways of knowing); and that everything moved together along the "timeless" infinite expanse of the horizon.

In the Autumn section of *The Singing Wilderness*, Olson describes a night when he lay down on the ice to watch the northern lights dance above him. As scientific thoughts from astronomers and physicists whirl around in his head, he realizes that these explanations leave him "cold." He adamantly states, "I was in no mood for practicality, for I had just come skating down the skyways themselves and had seen the aurora from the inside. What did the scientists

know about what I had done? How could they explain what had happened to me and the strange sensations I had known?" (186). In this way, Olson brings his readers with him to dance and flit among the northern lights themselves, as he skates through the sky and beholds the aurora from within, instead of looking at the northern lights flit above him in colorful harmonies from the ice below. This is a dazzling way of experiencing the phenomenon because interactions with the northern lights are generally limited to a view from afar, taken in from the glory of an objective view from the ice. Nonetheless, Olson confronts us even more so with this drastic shift in experience by directly questioning the validity, even the authenticity, of scientific explanation. Scientists, who focus on the subatomic particles that collide and erupt in a colorful spectrum, are not able to experience such an event from within the body. They lack any attunement to the sensual sensations that come with skating through a chromatic spectrum. Olson, on the other hand, is able to hear the song in this unique experience because he is able to participate wholly with his body, and with his body as a whole. No longer an exterior shell of a self, Olson's body finds a way to move and communicate with the dancing aurora in the skies above, thereby permitting him to encounter the enormous presence of the moment, one that concurrently disrupts the safe net of objectivity, and lends new breaths of song to be sung out into the world.

### **A Sense of Empathy**

While he often dwells on the feeling of the wilderness, the question of scientific reasoning and logic to our ways of seeing and knowing the world is still important to Olson. After all, he was trained as an ecologist at the University of Illinois and conducted his dissertation on the role of the timber wolf in northern forest ecosystems. That being said the emphasis put on the emotional quality of wilderness throughout his essays tends to take precedence over other ways of knowing. Emotion is essential to our wilderness experience



because it can manifest itself as a visceral reaction, a means of connection, and also a way of knowing. Olson once suggested that ecology was “more than knowledge” because “it was deeply involved with [his] own attitude and emotional reaction to wilderness. A visceral sort of thing beyond mind and factual information, it was an inherent feeling that went down into that vast primordial well of consciousness, the source of man’s original sense of oneness with all creation; a perspective reinforced with logic and reason, cause and effect, and scientific method” (*Wilderness Visionaries* 203). Olson demonstrates ecology extends beyond scientific reasoning into an intrinsic, instinctual place in the body and mind that runs deep in our individual and collective consciousness. Emotion is augmented by rationality and scientific practice. These other ways of knowing are equally as crucial to our interaction and understanding of the natural world because they inform our innate feelings, and help us make sense of these feelings.

Olson expresses a fascinating sentiment in an interview in the *Carleton Miscellany* about the link between emotion and reality. In this piece, he argues that if we are to sever our ties to the earth, we are at risk of straying from our “spiritual roots” at the heart of our culture. He argues that there are some things we can only know by “intuition and deep feeling, and those things in the end are probably more real than the others” (109). The way Olson makes sense of the real in this instance suggests that emotion, due to its empathetic and ingrained qualities, is more real to us because it wells up from deep inside. These feelings are as much a part of our bodies as the blood that flows through our veins or the neuron networks that allow us to sense the non-human world. In light of the discussion above, however, I would argue that this reality is not privileged over the realities of the world arrived at through the lens of science, math, or literature. Instead, it is perhaps a more immediate reality, the first reaction we have to our experiences with our

landscapes. This reinforces the importance of emotion to the discussion at hand, for it is our entry point into the layered reality of the landscape.

Due to the prominence of emotion and feeling in Olson's writing, his compositions inadvertently create a land aesthetic that begins in *The Singing Wilderness* and is expanded upon in later books (Backes 248). As mentioned earlier, Olson has a way with words that captures *all* the senses, not just the visual.<sup>8</sup> He uses his knowledge and expertise of geology, ecology, and evolution to add depth to perception, which reformulates the picturesque aesthetic by focusing on natural elements that do not typically fall under the picturesque. He describes them in great detail to highlight their beauty (Backes 550). This can be seen in "The River," where Olson goes into lengthy descriptions of otters, fishers, and weasels: "There is poetry in the way a weasel can flow through a maze of branches of grass—the liquid movement, the perfect control that enables it to live off those less agile than itself" (219). Olson does not embellish his chronicle of the weasel moving through grass with elaborate language. Alternately, he employs words that can be used in multiple natural contexts, such as "flow," "branches," and "liquid movement." To flow with the freedom of a liquid recalls the swift, deft movement of a river. Similarly, the branches of grass evoke branches of trees that fill the forest of the QS region. This parallel between seemingly disparate natural phenomena subtly places the weasel in the highly interconnected nature of its environment. The simple and direct power of Olson's words instills the scene with a sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Western culture had, by Olson's time, created a nature whose beauty was realized, designed, and sustained by artists and writers who focused almost entirely on the visual. This aesthetic taste dominated the picturesque, so Olson sought an aural metaphor to capture the feeling and spirit of his beloved wilderness (Backes 248-249). William P. Cunningham, in his essay "Listening to the Wilderness: The Life and Work of Sigurd F. Olson," suggests that this is an effect of place: the canoe country does not concern itself with images typical to the sublime, such as grand vistas and sweeping landscapes. Islands, shores, and lakes blend into one another to create a hazy feeling that engenders a turn to reflection and reinterpretation of the self within a place or landscape.

poetry and permits the reader access to the landscape beyond the mere movement of a weasel in the grass.

The vibrancy of Olson's writing is able to express the infinite variety of shades and hues that exist in the natural world in terms of color, movement, and experience. He writes and speaks with conviction of those who sustain an intimacy with the natural world, for these people have an aesthetic and mystical love for their surroundings, and because of this life is made "more colorful and exciting" (Huyck 74). Backes argues Olson is unparalleled in capturing emotion because he writes "like a watercolor artist who splashes color all over and captures emotion in the colors" (qtd. in Hissom 9). A moment awash and dripping with color occurs in Olson's travels along the Skyline Trail: "The west is in full glow and there are streamers of apple green and long splashes of orange and rose. A clump of birch is laced with molten silver. The mass of the swamp is changing now from dark green to black and the sky to blood red. Some of the color is washing onto the lake, the glistening pink reaches turning to mauve as the edges draw their purple from the bog" (228). Olson paints a word portrait in this instance as he recalls his experience skiing over the top of a ridge. All of the colors are displayed in different manners but they all blend together. The greens, oranges and roses of the sky stream and splash into one another, the silver birch actually melts into the landscape, the swamp and sky shift on a gradient from light to dark, and all the color seeps into the watery confines of the lake. A stunning visual display of the sunset, Olson makes use of the bleeding, leaking, and flowing elements of water color to create a imaginative textual sunset for the reader that can illicit an emotional response.

Olson employs clear and direct language to give his readers as unfettered access as possible to complex, emotionally charged experiences. Bob Henderson contends Olson as guide gives us "the way" to "meet the land" and "dwell with the land well" because he acts as an

interpreter for our “lofty feelings of connectedness” (139). Olson spent countless hours unraveling the feelings of his wilderness experiences and translating them into texts we can understand and react to emotionally. He takes the deluge of feelings of awe and wonder and transforms them into poetic word portraits of these feelings that we can attempt to grasp and grapple within the pages of *The Singing Wilderness*. What Henderson offers with this interpretation is supported by Marovitz’s claim that “it is one thing to *feel* communion with the cosmos and quite another, [Olson] realized, to maintain intellectual awareness of the holistic balance that makes life as we know it sustainable on earth” (112; emphasis in original). Marovitz purports that these feelings need to be interpreted if they are to be transformed into intellectual thoughts or ways of knowing about being in and of the world. Because Olson realized this connection, his work as a physical and literary guide to the QS region works to establish means of interpretation that his readers can take from his experiences and apply to their own lives, memories, and contexts.

A specific facet of the QS landscape that lends itself to making sense out of the often complicated interpretation of these feelings, or as Olson often calls them “intangible values,” is water. In *Listening Point* Olson discusses the vitality of water and its historical ties to our culture through his experience with “the witching hour” when the lake “mirrored not only the shores but the spirit as well” (36). In these hours we are able to soak up the feeling of the water as if we are a part of it because we have lived around different bodies of water for so long. Our history flows in tandem with the lakes, rivers, coasts, pools, ponds, and oceans. The strength in water comes from our cultural reliance on it for the advancement of industry, and more importantly from its reflective qualities that are able to reveal our “inner needs,” or inherent emotions (*LP* 37). Olson describes it as an “all-enveloping quality, its complete diffusion into the surrounding

environment, the fact it is never twice quite the same and each approach to it is a new adventure, give it a meaning all its own.” Water is always moving—rippling, swirling, rushing, crashing—which means that reflections are in constant flux and able to change with our shifting moods and experiences. Moreover, the reflective qualities allow the intricacies of the emotional inner landscape to display themselves on the surface of the water amidst the waves, the reflection of the sky and the shores. This brings our emotions into physical contact with the worldly surroundings and establishes us as feeling, emotive bodies among the other emotive bodies in the landscape.

To see our corporeal and visceral selves in the water as a part of the natural landscape encourages a sense of empathy for our surroundings. In the first chapter of *The Singing Wilderness*, when Olson describes the first time he heard the singing wilderness as a young boy, he alludes to the spontaneous, subjective experience of the world, fraught with emotional and intuitive reciprocating events in the collective landscape of multiple sensing bodies: “My perceptions were uncluttered, my impressions were pure and uninfluenced, my feelings of closeness to nature and of sympathy with creatures of the wild were true feelings” (8). Olson dutifully attends to the landscape and living beings around him by listening and opening up his body to their bodies. This enables “true feelings” that bring him closer to nature, and empower him to experience the world in an “uncluttered,” felt immediacy. There is a poignant coherence with the natural bodies of other creatures, as Olson begins to meld with them in the emotional domain of “sympathy.” Ultimately “uninfluenced” by the realm of objectivity, Olson is able to enter as an empathetic body among other bodies into the emotionally charged landscape of Lake Michigan’s shoreline. To have a strong sense of empathy strengthens the individual’s inner links that keep one balanced “physiologically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually”

(Marovitz 114). If we are able to access all of these internal elements equally, we have the capability to arrive at a “holistic truth,” much like Olson is able to do in this moment drenched in the singing of the wilderness.

### **Caught Gently in a Dream Net**

The realization of a layered reality accessible through an abundance of different ways of knowing is powerful because it not only grounds us as beings in the world, but leads to a better understanding of the inner landscape of the self. The inner landscape, with the same undulations as those of the natural world, is where we push our ideas, our imaginations, and ourselves to places that breathe new life into the world. It took Olson a long time to understand this connection, and he worked tirelessly as a writer to bridge the outer and inner landscapes for himself and for his readers. He was adamant that the lack of drive toward wilderness preservation was because American society had been flung into the age of technology. Unable to see the ramifications of this new technological age on the earth, American culture existed on the precipice of uncertainty, not quite sure what would happen if the song of the natural world was extinguished. The questions that most trouble us, according to Olson, were, and I would argue still are, “And yet is this it? Is this what we want? Is this the goal of all our striving? Is there something else?” (“The Meaning of Wilderness for Modern Man” 101). Through his writing Olson asked the American public then, and us now, to think critically about the answers, and in the process inquire more intensely in an effort to move humanity into the technologically advanced future in tandem with the earth, all it has to offer us and all we have to offer it (“The Meaning of Wilderness for Modern Man” 107).

The inquisitive and imaginative outlook Olson had on life was, according to him, inherent to every individual. One of his most powerful statements, spoken at the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Wilderness Conference in San Francisco in 1965, imbued everyone with the capacity to dream:

All of us are dreamers. Dreams are what started everything. Dreams are the most realistic way of looking at life. Dreamers are not shadowy ephemeral-thinking people. The dreamers are the realists. They are the ones who look through all the façade to all the things that we're doing to our environment and see the end result as it affects humanity. We are asking ourselves a great question... and all of us interested in wilderness preservation are asking it all the time, and that is: What kind of world do we want? (*Wilderness Visionaries*)

Dreamers move through the world seeing the landscape in its immediate reality. They are humble enough to let emotion move them, and know how to transfer these feelings into an acute awareness of how the human community they are a part of effects the environment. Because we are driven by our own needs, Olson frames this part of his speech in light of human desires, but sets up the question in a way that makes us entirely complicit in the state of the environment and the negative compounding effects we have on it every day. With this in mind, by asking the question “What kind of world do we want?” Olson asks his listeners in this conference to dream: to think critically and innovatively by drawing inspiration and feeling from the natural world, and in doing so move more assuredly and productively into the future.

A sturdy tie between dreaming and reality then is essential for a holistic empathetic understanding of the world. Without one another, dreaming and reality lose their potency as each informs the other to such degrees that they are in constant need of the other for increased depth and expansion. In Olson's collection of essays *Open Horizons*,<sup>9</sup> he reflects on why he was driven to become a writer and how it was intimately connected to the overlapping realms of dreaming and reality. He quotes the great sculptor Giacometti: “Art is only a means of seeing. It is as

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<sup>9</sup>*Open Horizons* is a collection of Olson's most personal essays written toward the end of his life. Often described as a memoir, the text is a sort of pinnacle of his wilderness philosophy.

though reality was always behind a curtain...the great adventure to see each day in the same face something new surge forth” (*OH* 174). The first time Olson comes into contact with this quotation is before he becomes a writer and is searching for ways to express the emotive power of the landscape. He cannot grasp the usage of the word “reality” because at this point he is a self only concerned with the “visible world and personal gratification” (*OH* 174). Filled with unanswered questions and yearnings, Olson begins to read as he continues to experience his role as a guide in the QS region. By the end of his life, with philosophy and experience joined together, Olson arrives at an understanding of Giacometti: every new activity offered a distinct way of seeing, a fresh means of finding the new in the commonplace. It follows that the definition of the term reality is crucial if we are to make this connection between the dream world and the real. Olson’s reflections suggest reality extends beyond the objective visual world and our inherent exploitative tendencies of the land. So a reality of the world is, in Olson’s very terms, a singing of the world. It is involved with senses beyond the visual—smell, touch, hearing, and taste—and harbors respect for the non-human bodies with which we share the earth. Art, and presumably literature, philosophy, etc. are all “only a means of seeing.” Reality saturates everyday with newness and wonder, and our definition of it must be open to this ongoing re-interpretation.

In the same chapter that Olson mentions Giacometti, he introduces a quotation from Archibald MacLeish as he recalls his fledging thoughts on how he would translate the intangible values of his wilderness experiences into a comprehensible form for others: “Art is a human endeavor and the task of a man is not to discover new worlds, but to discover his own world in terms of human comprehension and beauty” (*OH* 177-178). MacLeish’s ideas serve as Olson’s initial impulse for writing. In conjunction with the words of Giacometti, MacLeish intimates that



we create art and literature not to create new realities, but to ascertain the elaborate nature of our own individual realities. It is in the grappling with, sharing, and singing of these personal realities that we are able to come together, and understand one another and the reality of the world in which we live.

Behind the complex and interconnected world of our subjective realities lies the “net of dreams” (“The Dream Net” 179). The image of such a net is stunning—a patchwork quilt of millions of experiences sewn together by the recognition of each individual reality on the earth. The net can take on many different forms, though Olson details his first experience with the net of dreams as a night with “myriads of stars,” which encourages him in the moment that “while man might unravel the puzzled skein of life and solve the riddles of the universe, what really matters is the wonder that makes it all possible” (179). Thus, the dream net is not only a safety seine to catch us when we develop too much of a reliance on science and math, but it is also a latticework of sensitivities and emotions that encourage us to relish the sensations of amazement and wonder. In the end, our realities abuzz with feeling bring our inner astonished selves to float amidst the starry skies, each of our own worlds brightly shining to create a web of light that cradles the earth and assures us of the majesty of which we are part.

## **Conclusion**

The job of a guide was never to establish a dominion over the land and its untold meanings. Cooley, in an entry on Olson from the *American Nature Writers* reference book, suggests Olson’s endeavor as a physical guide, and more so as a literary guide, was not to “wake his neighbors up, in the manner of Thoreau’s rooster at dawn, but rather bring them quietly, persuasively, to experience nature” (704). So Olson assumes the guide’s position typified by careful, inquisitive, and encouraging instruction; guidance that emphasized an emotionally

charged empathetic experience with the land, as opposed to a forced, one-dimensional purely rational understanding of the earth and its inhabitants. His readers of the vigorous, dynamic textual environment and his travelers of the fluid physical environment of the QS region are prepared to reenter their own worlds a bit off kilter, a strengthening imbalance as it makes the worldly participant less vulnerable to comfortable havens of objectivity. And this is due to the fact that Olson dutifully recognizes the extent to which we get caught up in “our language, our definitions, and our objectives” (“Remarks to National Parks Service” 147). Nature writing works to alleviate these problems of our daily experience because it saturates the individual with the language of physical experience, instead of heady, complicated language that shrouds reality.

A recent Minneapolis Star Tribune article, “Followers Strive to Keep Sigurd Olson’s Legacy Alive,” interviewed Olson’s son, Bob, who insisted Olson “worked his whole life trying to be what he believed in. It was his heart and soul” (Smith 2). Bob Olson mirrors Sigurd Olson’s own understanding of his job as a guide, an occupation that was “never done” (*OH* 94). The title of this article proposes there are some individuals who embody the Olsonian notion that to be fully conscious of the wonderful and often challenging multifaceted reality of our world is a lifetime endeavor. The world offers itself to this continuous exploration in the infinitude of its “open horizon” where there is “no end to the mirage of water and sky extending on and on into the distance” (*OH* 190-191). There is always more to see and smell, taste and feel, reveal and apprehend. A horizon—a source of unending possibility and discovery—coaxes us forward, compassionate and patient in the soft reassuring ripples of reflection.

As beautiful and promising of a space the horizon is, it seems there has been a large-scale failure to listen to the song of the wilderness. We are decidedly unsure of what we find important, and feign awareness of how to go about changing how we live in world. For Olson,

according to his son Bob, the wilds spoke “a vivid language that we understand in our hearts, that spoke volume to us if we would only listen” (R. Olson xvi). Why have we ceased to listen to the “vivid language” of our environment? What have we lost and how are we to regain it? I think we struggle to comprehend the interconnectedness of our world, how our communities have the powerful capacity to severely affect human and nonhuman landscapes across the planet. Again, Olson’s son Bob mentions in an introduction to *The Collected Works of Sigurd F. Olson: The Early Writings, 1921-1934* that it was only after his work overseas that he understood the significance of his father’s work:

It was about that time, when I was working on the Sahelian Task Force and on organizing the World Food Conference at Rome, that I saw graphically for myself the global network of life into which we are all woven, how all parts are related to the whole. I came to realize that the balance and beauty of a wilderness lake and the life about it mesh naturally with the global picture of the interdependence of all things and all people. (xxiii)

Bob illuminates the worth in his father’s work in the connection he establishes between a tightly intertwined global community and the complex symbiosis of a lake. For two (outwardly) different systems to “mesh naturally” imparts a sense of wholeness; these systems that develop and grow independently of one another rely on the same principles. For this reason, we should afford a wilderness pond the same respect and attention we do organizations like the World Food Conference. On the most fundamental level, Olson “recognized the interdependence between a wholesome humanity and a wholesome nature” (Klobuchar xii). While I believe humankind, on the whole, has grasped the mere existence of interdependence between humanity and nature, we have forgotten what Olson never did: a feeling of compassion and consideration. It is a sense of togetherness, a reliance on another body for thoughts, ideas, and imaginings that we cannot access within the finite body of humanity.

In some similar respects contemporary author, Louise Erdrich, is conscious of this interdependence, and elucidates how literature is the mortar for building relationships between the two. A member of the Ojibwe, Erdrich is culturally and spiritually tied to the waters and islands of the QS region. In her memoir *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country: Traveling Through the Land of My Ancestors*, Erdrich details her travels to the Lake of the Woods region (i.e. QS region), the traditional home of the Ojibwe, where she explores her heritage through books, islands, and the Ojibwe language. Books and islands become mixed up for Erdrich to the point where she concludes: “You could think of the lakes as libraries” (3). This conflation of the literary with the landscape is productive, for it helps us see natural bodies as those that can be taken up, written into, communicated with. In this comparison, the lake becomes a place to share ideas, a space to generate knowledge, and a liquid body that asks to be read, discussed, and interacted with.

Beyond this comparison, Erdrich, over the course of her personal journey through Lake of the Woods, contemplates the role of spiritual storytelling and how it has shaped her relationship to the land:

There was a time when I wondered—do I really believe all of this? I’m half German. Rational! Does this make any sense? After a while such questions stopped mattering. Believing or not believing, it was all the same. I found myself compelled to behave toward the world as if it contained sentient spiritual beings. The question whether or not they *actually* existed became irrelevant. (12; emphasis in original)

Caught between logic (which she associates with Western thought) and belief in spiritual, animate beings (drawn from native tradition) that she cannot necessarily see or provide proof of, it seems Erdrich makes sense out of her willingness to accept the reality of conscious, spiritual, worldly bodies by doing away with the distinction between believing and not believing. Instead, no longer tethered to the question of whether or not these beings exist in some rational sense of

the word, she moves freely through the world, responding to her surroundings as if they are a close friend, a parent, or a mentor. She further enriches this idea when she admits to thinking of stones as animate: “I started to wonder whether I was picking up a stone or it was putting itself into my hand” (73). A landscape imbued with agency becomes a space rife for connection, interaction, and reciprocation. And, it is important to note that Erdrich’s change in mindset is brought about by her accruing some fluency in Ojibwemowin—the language of the Ojibwe people—that is tied to the land in a way that few languages are.<sup>10</sup> So language actually structures her relationship to place; it makes her see natural bodies not only as places to be read, but places that read us as well.

And she leaves us swimming in unanswered questions about the relationship between place, language, and literature, ending her personal narrative with the same question she raises in the beginning: “*Books. Why?*” (Erdrich 118). I would like to rephrase her question, if only just a bit, to reflect the larger discussion that this essay concerns itself with: Literature. Why? Literature because of words. And words because they have the potential to reconnect us to the natural bodies we have relegated to the limited realm of rationality and scientific thought. Olson, I believe, gives us one of perhaps many answers to Erdrich’s inquiry in his firm belief that we need to “build up in the human mind this sense of responsibility and stewardship toward the land” (*Conservation, Ecology, and the Mind of Man*). He employs compassionate language rooted in the song of the wilderness in order to break through the linguistic walls composed of logic we have built up around our landscapes, and around our minds. He urges us to speak with a voice that emerges from the depths of our directly lived experience: linguistic seedlings pushing

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<sup>10</sup> Erdrich remarks, “Its philosophy is bound up in northern earth, lakes, rivers, forests, and plains...It is a language that most directly reflects a human involvement with the spirit of the land itself” (71).

themselves up through layers of black earth until they burst through the ground, slowly but assuredly growing into a stimulating, imaginative lexicon of interdependence.

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