LANDSCAPE AS A TEXT: AUTHORSHIP OF LANDSCAPE & THE ANTHROPOCENE
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INTRODUCTION
One way of developing an environmental hermeneutic ethic is to consider landscapes as texts, that is, as interpretable documents of meaning as we would literary texts or works of art. If, as with works of art, we allow ourselves into in the worlds they set out in front of us, then landscapes, like texts, can show us facets that can deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world. In this paper, I explore the metaphor of reading the landscape as a text by considering authorship. I ask: If landscapes in the Holocene are authored by a combination of human and nonhuman forces, will landscapes in the Anthropocene, which might be authored entirely by humans have meaning for us? In answering this question, I draw on Paul Ricoeur’s ideas of authorship and intentionality. Ultimately, the I use metaphor of authorship critically to push against both the concept of the landscape as text and the concept of the Anthropocene.

THE APPEAL OF LANDSCAPE
First, a word about the term. I recognize that using broad and ill-defined terms like ‘landscape’ introduces problems, perhaps most obviously of vagueness. Landscape, as I mean it, can often be equivalent to the term ‘place,’ but I elect to use ‘landscape’ because this term points to facets that some but not all places have. Places, as Bachelard famously shows us, can be intimate and private like a room in a childhood home. Landscapes, as
equivalent to vistas, tend to be larger than places in our phenomenological experience, and what landscape draws out that place does not is the human perspective: landscape more often than place implies a vantage point from which it is seen, and this vantage, though not universally shared, still bespeaks a literal view that is possible to have in common. Places, though phenomenologically important, can be more individual than landscapes, and landscapes, as a category of places, at least specify a kind of lay of the land. When I speak about the Dutch landscape, for instance, you have a sense of the features to which I refer because landscapes commonly evoke images that places, in their generality, do not. This is not meant to flatten out the dimensions of politics and power that W. J. T. Mitchell, Doreen Massey and others have remind us are always at work in landscape, but my use of the term is meant to suggest that a point of reference is possible, and the commonality of this point, though open to plurality and dispute, still emanates from a sharable experience of a physical world. This points to another important aspect of the term: landscape is usually an integration of human and nonhuman features: topography, geology, plants, buildings and infrastructure, et cetera. In the words of Andrew Stables, “it [landscape] clearly exists beyond the individual,” and “clearly relates to that which is seen” (Stables, 108). Further, landscape, more than place or other such terms, shares in an aesthetic tradition of painting and photography and simultaneously, in the sense of landscaping, connotes a direct relationship between humans and nonhuman features in working or sculpting the land.

Its lack of specificity allows the term to allude to a general character or overriding feature in a metaphorical way (e.g., a political landscape). It provides a general sense, and its generality, or multivalency, is indeed part of its appeal, at least hermeneutically. For,
if the task is to do a hermeneutical reading, the text, whatever it is, must be open to being read and interpreted. Now, with this modest defense of the landscape terminology I employ, I can put it to use in this hermeneutic context: of reading the landscape as a text.

**LANDSCAPE AS A TEXT**

The first question of this paper asks if we can read the landscape like a text, that is to say: Can we treat landscapes like the literary texts that we read, as interpretable documents of meaning? Of course, the idea of “reading the landscape” isn’t new: it’s been long used in natural history by May Theligaard Watts, who formally pioneered the idea, and taken up by historians like Bill Cronon and Tom Wessels as an approach to revealing and understanding specific places. Likely, people with any personal connection or familiarity with any landscape already engage in ‘reading that landscape,’ that is, they know how to see clues and signs in their surroundings, about what the climate and weather have been like, where food is, who or what has been there before them, how the land has been used historically, et cetera.

However, the idea of landscape hermeneutics tries to do something different from what might be considered a semiotic reading of the signs and traces that natural history teaches us to apprehend. Landscapes and places are such because of the physical inscriptions that bear out human relations with and in them. These are not abstract, geometric spaces but sites that are lived in and impregnated with human influence and meaning. Just as classic texts and works of art continue to illuminate important themes and hold rich meanings for us through present-day interpretation, a landscape hermeneutic holds that landscapes, too, as physical instantiations of past and present
ways of life, hold moral meanings for us. A hermeneutic reading of landscape might consider a landscapes as a palimpsest, where different inscriptions are made over time, and the landscape, as the writable text, records its uses, inhabitations, and manipulations. The physical signs and traces are crucial to a hermeneutic reading, but they are not exhaustive of the moral meanings of the landscape. Knowing the approximate age of a forest, for instance, is part of our understanding of the landscape, and a hermeneutic reading will certainly be informed by natural history. But as with texts, landscapes come into their full meaning through interpretation. Landscape hermeneutics sees landscapes as expressions of past and present human meanings, and reading landscapes hermeneutically will extend beyond a factual or scientific reading of signs and involve considerations that are aesthetic and symbolic, that bear on cultural and individual identities, that are sensitive to values, that ask how people have lived in these landscapes and about the meanings of their historical and present features.

The metaphor of reading the landscape as a text has many implications. For one, that we can read landscapes in this way implies that landscapes are written. I mean this metaphorically, of course: I mean to suggest that landscapes are product of the intentional and unintentional workings of human and nonhuman forces, sometimes in collaboration, sometimes in opposition, and that together, these forces author the landscape. By authorship, I don’t mean to imply that the human and nonhuman authors necessarily mirror the intentionality of the author of a literal text who puts pen to paper, thoughtfully and deliberately crafting a narrative. I mean merely that if we consider the landscape readable as texts are readable, by extension, we need to consider the figures and processes, human and nonhuman, who or that author those texts. In what follows, I
consider authorship as a way of bridging considerations of past authors who forged our present day landscapes with considerations of our present day actions in scripting the future landscapes (of what might be called the Anthropocene).

**AUTHORSHIP, TEXTS, AND INTERPRETATION**

Because the reading of landscape is a hermeneutical one, we should draw our concept of authorship from this field. Here, I look to Paul Ricoeur, whose concepts of the text, the author, and the radical disengagement, interpretation opens up pose some interesting problems for the hermeneutical reading of landscapes.

Instead of the attempting, as did romantic hermeneutics like Dilthey and Schleiermacher, to use the text to reconstruct the original intentions of the author, Ricoeur sees the text as an event whose opening invites novel interpretations perhaps altogether unrelated to the original intentions of the author. Ricoeur defines a text as any discourse that is fixed in writing, and it is the event of writing that both constitutes and emancipates the text. Of course, it is obvious that fixing discourse in writing yields the physical text, that is, produces the document for others to read. But it is perhaps counterintuitive that this fixation *emancipates* the text: after all, isn’t the text meant as an enduring record that a writer sets down? Yes, and for Ricoeur, this is exactly this what makes the text able to be interpreted by a reader. Several features enable this. In the first place, in the act of writing the author breaks with the lived world and creates a world of the text. In the lived world, which we share and where we converse, we gesture and point to things with our bodies and with language, we use personal pronouns to refer to ourselves and others, and our discourse exists in a shared time and space that constitutes
our tacit frame of reference. The act of writing breaks a text from this lived world, and in its place, the author gives us the world of the text. But because this world of the text is only proposed and not actual, pronouns and demonstrative adjectives no longer can bear the ostensive reference exist they do in our shared world: they are open to the reader who must fill in their meanings.

Furthermore, in writing, the speaker must forgo the subject who can self-designate directly: the personal pronoun “I” of discourse. No such “I” can appear in authorship as it can in our lived world of conversation. But instead of denying the voice of the speaker, this engenders authorship. Ricoeur writes: “The author is instituted by the text…the text is the very place where the author appears” (Ricoeur, 1971b, 109). In writing, the speaker becomes author as the ephemeral event of discourse is surpassed by the duration of meaning.

Along with forgoing the self-designating, speaking “I,” the creation of the text also invites the possibility of the audience. In opening up the world of the text, the author does so for anyone. The discourse is potentially open anyone at any time. All of these factors combine so that unlike the specificity of speech, wherein a speaker directs to another in shared time and space, the recording of discourse into a text opens nearly endless possibilities, and discourse of the text and the meanings it sponsors no longer necessarily equate. Ricoeur writes:

“The dissociation of the meaning and the intention is still an adventure of the reference of discourse to the speaking subject. But the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by the author. What the text says now matters more than what the author meant to say” (Ricoeur, 1971a, 148).
That is, it is in the act of writing that the author becomes author, but it is through the act of writing, i.e., in the creation of a text, that the author's intended meanings are ultimately superseded. The text opens up a world of its own, and this structure makes it autonomous with regard to the author’s intentions. In reading, interpreting, and appropriating the text, in coming into the world of the text, so to speak, we as readers will likely find meanings that exceed and possibly contradict the meanings the author intended. Thus, Ricoeur writes, “the “world” of the text may explode the world of the author” (Ricoeur, 1973, 83). In writing, the author relinquishes ultimate authority on the meaning of her text.

This is not to say that the author’s intention cannot or should not guide our interpretation of a text, but that the main goal of interpretation is not an attempt to recover the author’s original intention. Future readings may illuminate previously inconceivable moral meanings. Texts can still be misinterpreted or interpreted badly, but in the multitude of readings that can follow in the life of a text, there can be no privileged reading.

Ricoeur, of course, is speaking of the act of writing and interpreting works of fiction. These works inform, in large part, our moral sensibilities and provide self-understanding, that is, for Ricoeur, crucial. He writes:

“...It must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs humanity deposited in cultural works. What would we know of love and hate, of moral, feelings, and in general, of all that we call the self if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature? (1973, 87).

The way in which, as readers, we can enter into the world of a text, is the final way in which the text is emancipatory: it opens itself up for readers appropriate it as their own. This is the aim of hermeneutic interpretation for Ricoeur: neither trying to find the author behind the text nor dismantling structures within the text, but the effort “to explicate the
type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text” (Ricoeur, 1973, 86). Similarly, if
we think of landscapes as texts, they invite us to understand ourselves and our modes of
being-in-the-world through past and present examples of dwelling in the landscape.
However, it is necessary to introduce the Anthropocene as the conceptual backdrop
before I elaborate further on the moral meanings landscapes as texts can offer us in the
present.

THE ANTHROPOCENE

Though proposed shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene—the age of man—that
recognizes Anthropos as a geologic force is contentious in the non-geologic discourse
(see Crist, 2013; Chakrabarty, 2009; Caro et al., 2011) and not yet formally accepted on
the Geological Time Scale, the dramatic changes humans have effected on earth the so-
called anthropocene bespeaks are beyond question. As listed by its coiners Paul Crutzen
and Eugene Stoermer, the adoption of the Anthropocene is motivated by: the tenfold
increase in human population, increased urbanization and land-use change worldwide,
extensive resource extraction the exhaustion of fossil fuels and the consequential change
in atmospheric chemistry from the emission of greenhouse gasses, the manipulation of
nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, an increase in the rate of extinctions that may amount
to the 6th mass extinction event, among other large-scale changes to the environment
authored by humans (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). The fact that nearly all of the
landscapes on earth are appreciably, and in most cases, profoundly affected by human
actions is the main thrust of the argument for the adoption of the Anthropocene. Human
influence is undeniable: even parts of the globe that appear pristine or are uninhabited by
humans cannot escape the consequences of climate change, for instance, which will alter weather patterns and events, temperatures, and the distribution and composition of species. In the terms of authorship, we might say that in the Anthropocene, there isn’t a landscape on earth humans haven’t co-authored to at least a small extent. To tell the story of the current icescapes of Antarctic or of the melting glaciers on the remotest Himalayan peaks, even if we consider these landscapes wild and largely untouched, cannot be done factually without reference to human activities. This is an unsettling idea, and some worry that adoption of the Anthropocene is a tacit acceptance of these facts of human domination of the earth (Crist, 2013; Caro et al., 2011). In terms of authorship, apprehension about the Anthropocene, then, is a worry that humans, though management, technology, and sheer presence, will come to overrule the nonhuman forces that also currently shape most of our landscapes. A world authored by humans will be one, where, in the best case, all landscapes will bear traces of human lives and activity, and in the worst, all landscapes will be entirely designed and intensively managed by humans, a world where wilderness and wildness and nonhuman others that don’t suit human purposes have altogether disappeared or been strategically engineered so they do. Without nature as a co-author, so to speak, we’ll have a thoroughly human world, where human presence is everywhere and inevitable. Can we find moral meanings in a world of entirely human-made landscapes?

On Ricoeur’s model of the text and of authorship, the meanings of the text can never be exhausted by the author’s intentions. On this view, the answer is optimistic, that yes, moral meanings, external and independent of those foreseen by the human landscape-authors, will abound. The Anthropocene and its landscapes, no matter how
human-directed and designed, will sponsor possibilities of meaning and belonging, advance their own practices, and generate their own set of aesthetic considerations unimaginable to our Holocene-ic sensibilities. Though this sounds somewhat unlikely, an example of present-day conservation decisions reminds us of the dynamism of meanings through time.

Consider De Bruuk, a wetland meadow in the east part of the Netherlands. This very small, 100 hectare plot of land, though seemingly a typical meadow, is an importantly unique landscape for its botanical biodiversity and the practices required to maintain it. The landscape of De Bruuk is a representative of the old agricultural landscapes—patchworks of small farms and pastures—that once comprised the lowlands of Europe. The practice of annual mowing of these pastures, over centuries, resulted in the unique and biodiverse ecosystem of grasses, sedges, and other plants that thrived in the nutrient-poor soils of the area. However, beginning in the 1940s with the intensification of agriculture these types of landscapes were abandoned, the fields went unmowed, and soils became laden with nitrogen from the industrial farming of livestock. De Bruuk is one of the few of these kinds of sites that is maintained in its farmed state: in order to preserve the biodiversity of the site and keep the rare species present, this area is mowed each August, keeping the small site in a state of suspended succession. As a result, the landscape is one of the biodiverse in the Netherlands.

Though I’m not claiming that the landscape of De Bruuk is an Anthropocen-ic landscape, I think that it somewhat contextualizes Ricoeur’s otherwise radical-seeming suggestion about the hopeful springing of future meaning. De Bruuk has meaning for us in our present-day preservation context not because of the intentions of the previous
authors of the landscape—the farmers—who wanted to grow healthy pastures, feed their animals, and make a living from the land, but because of meanings that would never have occurred to the them: our valuation of rarity and biodiversity in conservation, our cultural interest in preserving historical practices and landscapes that are in danger of being forgotten (or overwritten), our attraction to its aesthetic qualities. Our decisions to invest in it and preserve it reflect the moral meanings we find in De Bruuk, and these are largely superfluous to the meanings it held for the farmers of the previous centuries. It might be that the meanings and inspirations that future generations derive from tightly controlled monocultures and highly artificial nature parks that we might author in the coming decades are as unanticipatable to us as the meanings De Bruuk holds were for the farmers of 19th century Holland.

CONCEPTUAL LIMITS

I suspect, however, that there’s more to future landscape considerations than this suggests. First, we might entertain the most basic limitation to the metaphor of the landscape as text: that a literal text is not the substrate of life humans and nonhumans rely on as we do the landscapes in which we live. Changes to the physical landscape can directly mean the thriving or extinction of other species; no such parallel exists in the writing of literal texts. Though those who read the landscapes we leave for them may indeed find rich moral meanings in sites that to us look impoverished or empty, we see from Ricoeur that we cannot, at least theoretically, eliminate this possibility, I would like to suggest that the reasons through which we find moral meaning should guide our thinking about the landscapes we author.
My claim is that we find landscapes morally meaningful because they bear out the history of human and nonhuman relations, and that there are (at least) three attributes\(^1\) that make moral meaning possible, though each is importantly interrelated with and implied in the others. I’ll refer to these as historicity, dwelling, and inter-relation and sketch them very briefly here. First, landscapes are morally interesting to us because they are historical, that is, they manifest historical relations and provide a physical transcript (however imperfect) of events through time. Secondly, this history is morally relevant usually because it involves past and present forms of human dwelling or existence in this landscape. A successful interpretation of a landscape means that we have appropriated its contents in such a way that we can envision the way of life that shaped the landscape in the past: our understanding of the place is deepened by recognizing the ways in which others have had their being-in-the-world in this place. Finally, humans are never solitary in these landscapes but are always interacting and interrelating with human and nonhuman others, and landscapes physically relay some of these relations. Thus far, I have granted the concept of the Anthropocene so I could use it to push against the concept of reading landscapes as texts. However, I think this term deserves resistance, or at least, some serious questioning, which Crist (2013) and Chakrabarty (2009) have begun. I aim here only to mention some ways in which I think landscape hermeneutics can remind us of features that the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene obscures or neglects.

First, I began this paper by justifying my use of landscape for its generality and multivalency: the pluralism central to hermeneutic interpretation that the idea of a layered

\(^1\) I don’t intend these as sufficient conditions for moral meaning but as characteristics of landscape that enable it to have meaning for us.
landscape embraces is one that might help counteract the hegemonic vision that Crist and others have criticized in the Anthropocene discourse. Futhermore, the criteria for moral meanings in landscapes I sketched in the previous paragraph point to some of the ways in which the Anthropocene, as currently conceived in the discourse, might benefit from hermeneutical considerations. First, the criterion of historicity is prominent in the concept of reading the landscape. The continuity with past and future the acts of reading and writing landscape implies could inform the sometimes unreflective, attitudes of the Anthropocene discourse and its pretensions at ahistoricity. Secondly, the criterion of dwelling should remind us that the landscapes we author should be landscapes that sponsor the lives of humans and nonhumans: landscapes where we fit ecologically with other species and can find a sense of belonging are those which we find meaningful in the present. Finally, the criterion of inter-relation challenges the supremacy of the Anthropos in the Anthropocene. Despite the theoretically optimistic reading of Ricoeur, I suspect that the possibilities for finding meaning will suffer if there’s no threat or challenge to human sovereignty.

These represent only preliminary responses to the Anthropocene discourse. I have endeavored to bring out some of the limitations of this concept and the metaphorical concept of landscape as a text in which humans read moral meanings. Both concepts share a limitation I have not yet named, however: complete anthropocentrism in their viewpoints and priorities. Surely both concepts will be improved by appreciating this limit, whatever authorship or the Anthropocene mean in the future.
Works Cited


