



# Peter Matthiessen and Ecological Imagination

Intaek Oh

*Peter Matthiessen and Ecological Imagination* offers an ecocritical reading of the Watson Trilogy—*Killing Mister Watson* (1990), *Lost Man's River* (1997), and *Bone By Bone* (1999)—which draws together themes Matthiessen has been exploring both in his fiction and nonfiction. While this study argues that his ecological imagination comes from his unique experience as a novelist, naturalist, environmentalist, social activist, and a student of Zen, it also illustrates that for Matthiessen, economic, political, social, racial, psychological, epistemological, and ecological issues are all inseparably interconnected. Set in the Everglades frontier in the formative era of American industrial capitalism, Matthiessen's novels are his grand attempt to reexamine the root causes of ecological disaster in the region and the costs to the people and the land that accompanied the conquering of the frontier.

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Peter Matthiessen  
and Ecological  
Imagination



Yoshinobu Hakutani  
*General Editor*

Vol. 54



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern  
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Oh, Intaek.

Peter Matthiessen and ecological imagination / Intaek Oh.  
p. cm. — (Modern american literature: new approaches; vol. 54)

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Matthiessen, Peter—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Ecology in literature. 3. Nature in literature. I. Title.

PS3563.A8584.Z64O43 813'.54—dc22 2010017160

ISBN 978-1-4539-0017-8

ISSN 1078-0521

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

**Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council of Library Resources.



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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006  
[www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com)

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Printed in Germany

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# Acknowledgments

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I am grateful to all of those who have taught and inspired me during my doctoral study at the English Department of the University of Tulsa. I am particularly grateful to Professor James G. Watson, Professor Gordon O. Taylor, and Professor Lars Engle. Professor Watson helped me greatly in many stages of my writing, routinely taking extra time to read and comment. Professor Taylor helped me with his informative comments and suggestions. I am greatly indebted to Professor Engle for so many things. I will always be grateful for his unwavering support and encouragement during my hard times.

My wife, Jihee, greatly supported me and wonderfully endured my detour. I will always be thankful for that. My little brother who overcame his illness with courage and grit has been the source of my inspiration during the whole writing process.



# Chapter One

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## Peter Matthiessen's Ecological Imagination

In the beginning of Peter Matthiessen's *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983), Pete Catches, a Lakota holy man, says to Matthiessen:

We've come to an age when we should know better what we are doing ... We must now try to understand what is wrong with us, why we have to tamper with and change the forests and the land. We have done this too long—not us, but the white man. Let's not walk on the moon, then fail to understand what this Creation is all about. This is life, this is beautiful, everything is the way it should be.<sup>1</sup>

The Watson Trilogy—*Killing Mister Watson* (1990), *Lost Man's River* (1997), and *Bone By Bone* (1999)—is Matthiessen's grand attempt to explore this question. Matthiessen's search for the truth about E. J. Watson eventually becomes his meditation on and exploration of the same issue Pete Catches poses. The Trilogy is set in the Everglades and the Ten Thousand Islands, a place he has known since he was eight years old, and explores the root causes of the ecological crisis in the region. For Matthiessen environmental problems are manifestations of the deeper problems in society and his exploration reaches deep truths about them. In the process he examines the way in which environmental problems are connected with social, economic, political, and racial problems as well as with the problem of how human beings relate to the world. In doing so, Matthiessen reexamines the American myth of progress through the metaphorical lens of the Watson story. The Trilogy not only draws together themes Matthiessen has been exploring both in his fiction and nonfiction all his life but also incorporates them into the thread of the Watson story, turning them into a single composite text in which each thematic strand is inseparably interwoven into the whole.

In the Watson Trilogy Matthiessen challenges us to rethink the idea of progress that has underlain the dominant discourse in America since frontier times. I argue that Matthiessen's ecological imagination and critical perspective on progress come from his unique experience as a naturalist,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: Penguin, 1992), xxxviii. Subsequent citations of *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* will be given in parentheses in an abbreviated form, *Crazy Horse*.

environmentalist, social activist, and especially a student of Zen and the spiritual traditions of Native Americans. I will draw on his nonfiction books as well as his other major fictions in my attempt to clarify and contextualize the complex issues and questions he raises in the Trilogy.

Peter Matthiessen—novelist, nonfiction writer, naturalist, environmentalist, social activist, and Zen master—holds a unique and important position among major contemporary American writers. He is not only one of the best fiction writers of today but a highly successful writer of nonfiction as well.<sup>2</sup> He is a renowned naturalist, who is widely regarded as “a philosophical guru for people who care about the environment.”<sup>3</sup> He has long been recognized as one of the few American writers who have been actively engaged in social justice issues, especially concerning Native Americans. He received *inka*, the final seal of approval, from Zen master Bernie Glassman in 1997, and thus became a Zen master after years of rigorous practice that started in 1969.<sup>4</sup> His books reflect all of these extraordinary experiences and provide unique insight into the central issues regarding the representation of reality that modern writers have been wrestling with.

Matthiessen wrote many influential nonfiction books that stem from his lifelong love of the natural world and unwavering commitment to social and environmental justice. As Alfred W. Crosby notes, Matthiessen’s first nonfiction, *Wildlife in America* (1959), along with Fairchild Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet* (1948), Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), and Rachel Carson’s seminal *Silent Spring* (1962), inspired environmentalism as a popular movement that began in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Since *Wildlife in America*

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Matthiessen is one of the few writers who won the National Book Award in both fiction and nonfiction. His fiction, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* was nominated for National Book Award in 1965, and *Shadow Country*, his most recent fiction, won the award in 2008. His nonfiction, *The Tree Where Man Was Born* was nominated in 1972 and *The Snow Leopard* won the award in 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Wroe, “Profile: Call of the Wild,” *The Guardian*, 17 August 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Matthiessen’s first encounter with Zen took place “on an August day of 1968” when he met in the driveway of his Sagaponack home “three inscrutable small men who turned out to be Japanese Zen masters.” He gradually became interested in Zen and “those men in [his] driveway” who “knew something that [he] wished to know.” He began Zen practice seriously in 1971 and was ordained a Zen priest by Maezumi-roshi in 1981. In addition to *The Snow Leopard* (1978), a Zen pilgrimage to the Himalaya, he compiled *Nine-Headed Dragon River*, his Zen journals, in 1985 while researching the Trilogy. Peter Matthiessen, *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals 1969-1982* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 3-4. Subsequent citations of *Nine-Headed Dragon River* will be given in parentheses in an abbreviated form, NHDR.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History,” *American Historical Review*, 100 (October 1995), 1186.

he has traveled all over the world writing about the still-unpolluted worlds and peoples of South America, *The Cloud Forest* (1961), New Guinea, *Under the Mountain Wall* (1962), Africa, *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (1972), Central Asia, *The Snow Leopard* (1978), and Siberia and East Asia, *Tigers in the Snow* (2000), *The Birds of Heaven* (2001). His commitment to social justice and strong sense of the writer's responsibility to "speak for those who cannot speak for themselves"<sup>6</sup> led him to write such nonfiction books as *Sal Si Puedes* (1969), *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983), *Indian Country* (1984), and *Men's Lives* (1986).

The heart of Matthiessen's work, however, is his fiction.<sup>7</sup> Matthiessen began his writing career exclusively as a fiction writer until for financial reasons he turned to nonfiction. Since the publication of his novels *Race Rock* in 1954, *Partisans* (1955), and *Raditzer* (1961), he has written five other novels along with many short stories. Matthiessen's breakthrough as a novelist came with the publication of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965) and his major works of fiction now include *Far Tortuga* (1975), *On the River Styx and Other Stories* (1989), a collection of Matthiessen's best short stories, and the Watson Trilogy.

Matthiessen's fictions, however, have not received much critical attention so far. This might be more than anything else due to the enormous success he has had with *The Snow Leopard*, his journal about his Himalayan journey in the wake of his wife's death in search of the elusive snow leopard.<sup>8</sup> Since the publication of *The Snow Leopard* literary critics have tended to brand him mainly a travel or nature writer who also writes some novels. While his nonfiction books have steadily drawn enthusiastic responses from ecocritics over the years, there simply are not many literary essays written about his fiction. Lured by Matthiessen's extraordinary career paths and nonfiction writings, critics seem to have never quite grasped the complex, unique insights and visions realized in his major fictions. William

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Norman, "Peter Matthiessen: The Art of Fiction CLVII," *Paris Review* 150 (Spring 1999), 212.

<sup>7</sup> In his interview with Howard Norman, Matthiessen said that "I am a writer. A fiction writer who also writes nonfiction on behalf of social and environmental causes, or journals about expeditions to wild places. I have written more books of nonfiction because my fiction is an exploratory process—not laborious, merely long and slow and getting slower." Norman, 190.

<sup>8</sup> Matthiessen said in his interview with Andrew Clements that "that book [*The Snow Leopard*] was a nail in my coffin as a novelist" and "It's put me in a pigeonhole, which I'm fighting my way out of, to everybody's boredom." Andrew Clements, "Wild at Heart," *The Guardian* (26 October 1999), 14.

Dowie's *Peter Matthiessen*, a general introduction to Matthiessen's career as both fiction and nonfiction writer, is still the only book-length study of Matthiessen's work. Even *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, his first major novel, has not drawn due necessary attention, although it was widely read and adapted into a film with the same title in 1991. Among Matthiessen's novels, *Far Tortuga* has drawn relatively enthusiastic responses over the years. Bert Bender allocates two chapters of his book to *Far Tortuga* along with early novels and short stories "that derive their central meanings from the sea." Bender calls *Far Tortuga* a "masterpiece" and "one of the greatest sea novels of all time, in any language," and asserts that "Within the tradition of American sea fiction, only *Moby-Dick* is a greater book."<sup>9</sup>

More recently in 1994 John Cooley wrote a long essay on Matthiessen's major novels, including the first installment of the Watson trilogy, *Killing Mister Watson*. Cooley, who sees Matthiessen's fiction from the perspective of the pastoral tradition, acknowledges the difficulty of approaching him in terms of pastoralism, saying his novels contain "recognizable elements of the pastoral, yet each is fragmented and problematic" and does not "overtly mediate, as a traditional pastoral, between nature and civilization." He argues that Matthiessen's fiction "dramatizes habitat destruction yet shuns any temptation to articulate models of resolution and fruition, or an embracing ecological vision."<sup>10</sup> Although this essay was written before the publication of the other two installments of the Watson Trilogy, Cooley, I think, seems to miss Matthiessen's insights into the social as well as the individual dimensions of existence in *Killing Mister Watson*. So far the only critical

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<sup>9</sup> Bert Bender, *Sea-Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 199. Among the few other critics of *Far Tortuga*, James Grove views the novel from the American pastoral tradition and argues that Matthiessen uses "the pastoral world of the old turtle fishing days" as "an idyllic norm which exposes modern society's spiritual poverty." Richard F. Patteson sees old turtle fishing days as a state of Eden in which "man is at peace with himself and one with nature." Patteson approaches the novel from this holistic point of view and argues that this state is not an unreturnable place but 'a vision of wholeness' that is "difficult to experience and still more difficult to sustain." Rebecca Raglon traces the process in which as an ecologically minded author Matthiessen develops a proper ecological form in *Far Tortuga* that could express his sense of biocentrism and a perception of interrelatedness. Raglon also explores the connection between Matthiessen's development of ecological sense and his involvement with Zen Buddhism.

<sup>10</sup> John Cooley, *Earthly Words: Essays on Contemporary American Nature and Environmental Writers* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 191. In this essay, Cooley deals with Matthiessen's *The Cloud Forest*, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, *Far Tortuga*, the short story "On the River Styx," and *Killing Mister Watson*.

work that does justice to the entire Watson trilogy is James G. Watson's recently published article titled "Man Writing: The Watson Trilogy: Peter Matthiessen in Archive." Through careful reading of both the texts and the manuscripts and other records in the Matthiessen Archive, he traces the "composition history and the complex creative process by which the three books came to be." He also traces "the ways and the extent to which Peter Matthiessen came literally to be in them" as "a manifest presence in the trilogy."<sup>11</sup> In doing so, he shows "the experiments that mark the process of composition, and the revisions of those and of previously published work he [Matthiessen] adopted and adapted to his need" that "echo in the back-and-forth weavings of the published narratives."<sup>12</sup> With the timely arrival of this informative archival research, it is now both appropriate and possible to examine the published trilogy, Matthiessen's greatest fictional achievement.

The Watson trilogy is the product of Matthiessen's twenty years of obsession with E. J. Watson. As Matthiessen points out, he devoted "a third of [my] writing life to a single project" of writing the Trilogy and has "great faith" in it.<sup>13</sup> Set in southwest Florida, the 1300-page Watson Trilogy is Matthiessen's most ambitious fictional project and the greatest achievement so far in his long and successful writing career. It is the most comprehensive in its thematic scope, as well. In his *Paris Review* interview, asked if the trilogy is his *magnum opus*, Matthiessen admits that he tried to explore all of his major themes together in the Trilogy:

You said that, not me. But certainly it draws together in one work the themes that have absorbed me all my life—the pollution of land and air and oceans, the obliteration of wilderness and the wild creatures, not to mention the more defenseless members of our own species, in particular the traditional peoples left stranded by the long-term cruelty and stupidity of what passes for progress and democracy, especially among businessmen and politicians.<sup>14</sup>

Along with the broad scope of its subject matter, another quality that distinguishes the Trilogy from his other major fictions is that it is set in America. Over the years Matthiessen developed a pattern in the way his long fictions are conceived and written. His fiction is initially conceived when he

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<sup>11</sup> James G. Watson, "Man Writing: The Watson Trilogy: Peter Matthiessen in Archive" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 46 (Summer, 2004), 246.

<sup>12</sup> Watson, 267.

<sup>13</sup> Norman, 194.

<sup>14</sup> Norman, 212.