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**Conversion, Assimilation, or Sovereignty: Native Shape-shifting and Settler Colonialism in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Oak Openings***

Joel Wendland-Liu

**Abstract:** *The Oak Openings* documents, reproduces, and enforces a textual racial formation that strives to reconstruct and reshape a Native sovereign space of Anishinaabewaki into West Michigan. For Cooper, the transformation of the land, from “empty” to productive, anticipated a necessary conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christianity and assimilation of white civilization that forms the plot trajectory of his novel. Despite drawing on a discourse of an empty wilderness and providentially- and racially-ordained expansion, *The Oak Openings*, like many of Cooper’s so-called Indian novels, is compelled to address ongoing Native presence and the Anishinaabeg’s determined struggle for sovereignty. For Cooper, a bee discourse proved an effective fictional device to operationalizes whites’ imagined superiority as an ethical justification for settler-colonial process of land expropriation, mass killings, removal, and subjugation. Native history and culture prove unfriendly to the seeming inevitability of this settler colonial logic. Anishinaabe societies preferred alliances through mutually beneficial relations over violent confrontations. What has been read by scholars as subjugation through the supplanting of traditional Indian cultural values, in the context of Anishinaabewaki, should be regarded as the long-held cultural practice of resilience and resistance to subjugation.

**Keywords:** James Fenimore Cooper, Native Americans, settler colonialism, *The Oak Openings*, Anishinaabe

**“What May Happen in a Field of Wild Oats”: Ecogothic Retribution in “The Damned Thing”**

Joseph Hansen

**Abstract:** This essay explores the expression of two parallel anxieties in Ambrose Bierce’s 1893 “The Damned Thing.” The work depicts, in non-chronological order, a man’s struggle with and eventual defeat by a mysteriously invisible creature (“the Damned Thing”) that inhabits his Californian homestead. On its surface, the story is markedly ecophobic, and I conclude that Bierce’s intention was to unsettle his readers by suggesting that humankind’s control of the natural world is incomplete at best and nonexistent at worst. However, I find that there is a second, unconscious fear of Native American attack articulated in “The Damned Thing.” I place the work in the historical context of the Modoc War of 1873 and the Ghost Dance revival of 1890, drawing connections

between white American anxieties produced by these events and the anxieties experienced by protagonist Hugh Morgan in response to the titular creature. Furthermore, I examine the ways in which Bierce's use of ecogothic tropes and landscapes—most notably, the field of wild oats in which Morgan meets his demise—simultaneously conceals and reveals a guilt over the recent California genocide. Ultimately, I conclude that “The Damned Thing,” while ecophobic in nature, holds a buried recognition of wrongs done to indigenous North Americans, specifically those of California, and a fearful anticipation of retribution for these wrongs.

**Keywords:** Ambrose Bierce, colonialism, ecogothic, Gothic, indigenous history, racism, settler colonialism

## **Homeland Lost: Threats to the Subject-Land Continuum in Emilio Fernández's *María Candelaria* (1943)**

Stephanie Gates

**Abstract:** The process of urbanization creates a social reality of estrangement from the land and natural world. In the 1940s Mexicans abandoned rural spaces in dramatic numbers; this era exemplifies this modern condition of separation from nature, and its repercussions appear in Mexican cultural productions from this era. Now regarded as a masterpiece of Mexican Cinema, the film *María Candelaria* (1943) directed by Emilio “El Indio” Fernández addresses this experience in a striking way: the film is at once socioculturally specific to post-revolutionary Mexico yet speaks to the viewer on a deeper and universal level through the depiction of the shared experiences of identity construction, social masks, perceptions of beauty, and, most importantly, separation from and loss of homeland. The film's allure lies largely in its ability to spark emotions of the collective unconscious and this loss of homeland, and by extension a loss of culture, is central to this effect. The space of Xochimilco and its representation in the film serve as an alternate way of thinking about lo mexicano, as part of a symbiotic connection of land and self, harkening back to the Aztec and indigenous manners of thinking about the humanity and the environment. This article traces the historical context of the film under the Ávila Camacho presidency, then turns to artistic precursors to *María Candelaria*, following with a close reading of the characters' relation to the film and their implications for the realities of the physical Mexican landscape.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, Emilio Fernández, Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, *María Candelaria*, Mexican film, urbanization