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ALEXANDRE HOGUE'S PASSION ECOLOGY AND AGRIBUSINESS IN *THE CRUCIFIED LAND*

MARK ANDREW WHITE

In 1939, Texas artist Alexandre Hogue completed *The Crucified Land* (Fig. 1), a striking comparison of water erosion on a Denton, Texas, wheat farm to the martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth. *The Crucified Land* was originally intended as the final canvas of Hogue's *Erosion* series, which the artist began in 1932 as a condemnation of the careless agricultural practices that had produced wind and water erosion in his home state.¹ When Hogue exhibited *The Crucified Land* that year at the Carnegie International, the painting's provocative religious overtones drew the notice of one critic, who referred to it as the latest in a "series of sermons on conservation."² The anonymous critic,

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though brief in his or her assessment of the painting, rightly acknowledged the conflation of religious morality and ecological principles in the painting. Despite this observation, there has been scant critical examination of Hogue's relationship to ecological thought or his application of religious ideals to the painting.

This is not to say that *The Crucified Land* has been ignored by critics or historians, although it has received less attention than paintings such as *Drouth Stricken Area*, 1934 (Fig. 2), and *Erosion No. 2 – Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1936 (Fig. 3). *The Crucified Land*, like its companions in the *Erosion* series, has been interpreted as Hogue's "condemnation of unwise farming practices" and his denigration of "man's ignorance of nature."³ This interpretation has been advanced repeatedly since the 1930s as indicated by *Life* magazine's 1937 profile characterizing the *Erosion* series as a "scathing denunciation of man's persistent mistakes."⁴

Although Hogue certainly blamed the extreme erosion and dust storms of the 1930s on indifference and negligent husbandry, the visual imagery of *The Crucified Land* indicates that he shifted his criticism of agriculture to the cultural roots of such abuse through



FIG. 1. Alexandre Hogue, *The Crucified Land*, 1939, oil on canvas, 42 x 60 in. Courtesy of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

an ecological sensibility. Hogue developed a contrast in the painting between the verdant wheat grass and its implication of abundant fecundity with the looming disaster of water erosion that slinks in serpentine lines from the immediate foreground into the lush fields. The farmer has plowed downhill and across the contours of the land with his tractor, demonstrating a seeming indifference to the environment but favoring industrial efficiency and hence profit. His reckless cultivation of the soil has produced the ideal terrain for water erosion as departing rains at left wash away the ruddy topsoil of North Texas and form gullies that will expand with further erosion until the acreage's fertile potential is literally washed away. The resulting wasteland will lack the essential nutrients to sustain crops but will provide ample support for the needle grass that has already crept into the field in the lower left

and right corners. As the gullies infiltrate the field, they threaten to undercut the cadaverous scarecrow whose tattered overalls barely disguise his cruciform support. Future storms will collapse the embankment and send him and his rock foundation into the rut.

Hogue's taut draftsmanship gives the eroded terrain the appearance of jagged, flayed flesh, and his inclusion of the wasted, cruciform scarecrow reinforces the comparison in the painting's title between the scourging of the land and the torture of the Passion. Salvation from this agricultural sin requires immediate action before the encroaching evil of erosion undermines the entire area. The sinuous gullies that snake back into the field add an additional biblical allusion to the devious serpent and a paradise soon lost to the encroaching wilderness. These pervasive violent overtones in *The Crucified Land*, when paired with the religious



FIG. 2. Alexandre Hogue, *Drouth Stricken Area*, 1934, oil on canvas, 30 x 42¹/₄ in. (76.2 x 107.31 cm.). Courtesy of Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas Art Association Purchase.

references, indicate an ecological sympathy for the land as a sacred body and an attack on the aggressive practices of agribusiness.⁵ *The Crucified Land* associates the loss of paradise with capitalist exploitation, suggesting a repudiation of the dominion over nature that God granted humanity in Genesis 1:28 as a justification for environmental plundering dangerous to both nature and humanity.

As such, *The Crucified Land* indicates a reverence for nature as a sacred body, rebukes the human dominion, and proposes an ecological relationship with the environment that emphasizes conservation. Hogue's personification of nature in the painting shares much with Depression-era ecologists such as Frederic Clements, Aldo Leopold, and Paul Sears, who not only characterized nature as a delicately balanced organism but also emphasized a symbiosis with nature. It also compares

closely to contemporary commentators such as Pare Lorentz, John Steinbeck, and Archibald MacLeish, who not only attempted to raise public awareness of the abuses of industrial agriculture but also invoked religious metaphors to describe the environmental devastation of the 1930s.

Despite much of the engaging scholarship on Hogue, critics have largely neglected his relationship to ecological thought, his religious metaphors in *The Crucified Land*, or the dialogue between the two. Lea Rossen DeLong has noted some ecological content in his work, recognizing that "Hogue's work often suggests a 'cause-and-effect' relationship which illuminates the interconnections in nature, of which humanity is a part," but did not investigate further.⁶ Hogue's use of religious rhetoric has been discussed to some extent by historian Brad D. Lookingbill, who associated the artist with

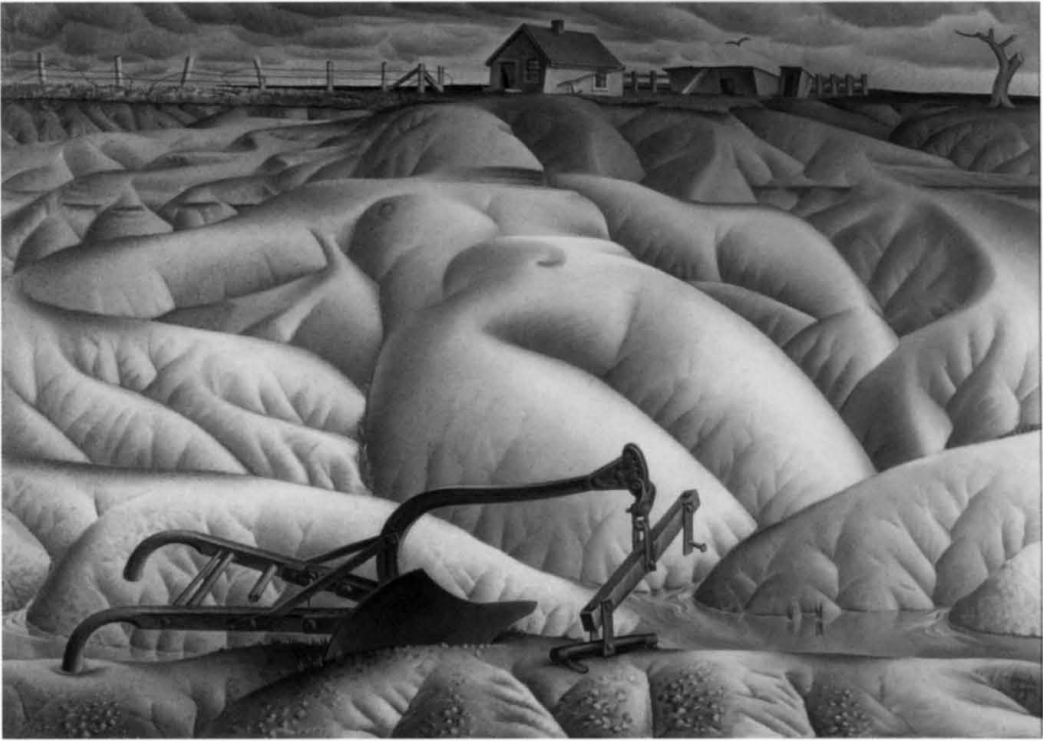


FIG. 3. Alexandre Hogue, *American* (1889-1994), *Erosion No. 2 – Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1936, oil on canvas, 44 x 56 in. Courtesy of The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Museum purchase.

Sacvan Bercovitch's concept of the American jeremiad. According to Lookingbill, Hogue was among those "prophetic voices" who "cried out in bewilderment about the fate of civilization when observing disasters."⁷ The *Erosion* series not only attempted to alert Americans to the crisis but also offered a form of catharsis for those suffering through environmental horrors. Hogue's interpretation of environmental devastation as a moral failure certainly connects him with the jeremiad, although *The Crucified Land* is conspicuously absent from Lookingbill's narrative. Lookingbill's argument, however, does not entirely explain the Christian references in *The Crucified Land*. Hogue's association of agribusiness with religious symbolism questions, as Lynn White would do in the 1960s, the "Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."⁸

A further examination of the issues posed by *The Crucified Land* requires a discussion of

Hogue's upbringing and its relationship to the *Erosion* series. When Alexandre was only six weeks old, his father, Charles Lehman Hogue, accepted a Presbyterian pastorate in Denton, Texas. The son would later distance himself from the church out of disgust at internal politics, and it is possible that his disdain for church dogma contributed to the criticisms suggested by *The Crucified Land*.⁹ This is not to say that the artist held all of Christianity in contempt, but he may have opposed some church doctrines, such as the notion of dominion over nature.

Alexandre's profound respect for nature would be shaped by his childhood affection for the Bishop Ranch, his sister's 50,000-acre sheep and cattle operation near Dalhart in the Texas Panhandle, and by his time spent tending the family garden with his mother. On the Bishop Ranch, Hogue developed a deep affinity for what he called "the most luscious grassland



FIG. 4. *Alexandre Hogue*, *Drouth Survivors*, 1936, oil on canvas, 30 x 48 in. Formerly Musée National d'Art Moderne (destroyed by fire).

in the world” and would later insist that the High Plains “never should have been plowed. Sad to relate, the grassland is gone forever.”¹⁰ DeLong has noted that it was in Dalhart “that Hogue began to recognize the human capacity to destroy nature’s fragile balance. Reverence for the land, fascination with its expansive space, and a sense of loss at its destruction were attitudes which Hogue must have formed on the flat, windy plains of the Panhandle.”¹¹ His lament for the destruction of the grasslands surrounding Dalhart later informed one of his most notable paintings from the *Erosion* series, *Drouth Survivors*, 1936 (Fig. 4). Like *The Crucified Land*, *Drouth Survivors* depicts a landscape exhausted by overplowing, with the tractor identified once again as the means to this destructive end. Desertification is the result here, through the absence of water and the power of the wind; the tractor and the barbed wire fence have been nearly consumed by the shifting dunes. Only prairie dogs and rattlesnakes can subsist in this wilderness, as the desiccated cows and denuded vegetation suggest. The fate of the cattle may be a subtle

inference to Hogue’s lament for the Dalhart ranchlands, as DeLong has suggested. *Life* ran the headline “Artist Hogue Feels That Grazing Land Was Destroyed ‘First by the Fence, Then by Overplowing, Now by Drouth.’” The West Texas Chamber of Commerce apparently took such offense at Hogue’s *Erosion* series and *Drouth Survivors* that they sent a representative to Dallas to buy the painting for fifty dollars so that they might burn it in a public bonfire.¹²

Hogue’s love and lament for the vanished grasslands had a decisive influence on the *Erosion* series, but his respect for nature was also formed by his mother, Mattie Hoover Hogue. Alexandre often assisted her in the family garden, where she would speak of “mother earth” engendering in her child “visions of a great female figure under the ground everywhere, a figure which might be injured if one were not careful.”¹³ His early sympathy for nature and his personification of it as a maternal figure would later lead the artist to paint *Erosion No. 2 – Mother Earth Laid Bare* in 1936 (Fig. 3). The painting depicts a large feminine form in the buff clay subsoil of the Dallas area

with a lethal gash running through her neck. The plow lies nearby, the perpetrator of this heinous murder and a symbol of “the power of the phallus.”¹⁴ Mother Earth’s nude form not only testifies to the destructive consequences of poor farming practices, which have stripped away the layer of protective topsoil, but also infers that the disregard for nature’s delicate state is a form of sexual violence, the rape of nature.

Although Hogue credited his notion of a feminine earth to his mother, *Mother Earth Laid Bare* relied on an inveterate paradigm of western civilization that interpreted nature as both “a nurturing mother” and a disorderly consort, which required that “the female earth and virgin earth spirit [be] subdued by the machine.”¹⁵ Hogue, however, belongs to what Carolyn Merchant has called the environmentalist counternarrative, first formulated by the romantics and transcendentalists, which personified nature “as a powerful female to be revered, rather than a virgin land to be plowed and improved.” This counternarrative has largely fused with that of the feminists in the twentieth century “to view nature as originally positive and pristine, but as desecrated and downgraded by commercial and industrial development.”¹⁶

Hogue accentuated the visual impact of said commercial destruction through a technique he referred to as “psycho-reality.” Although this would seem to imply a relationship to Surrealism, as would the feminine personification of nature, Hogue publicly distanced himself from that style. The *Life* essay defined this formal technique as means of intensifying the psychological resonance of the environmental devastation through aesthetic means: “By placing symbols together in neat geometric patterns, he hopes to produce a ‘superrealism’ that will make the observer not only see the Dust Bowl, but also feel its heat, its despair, its anguished death, the tragedy of its farmers.”¹⁷ In *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, the tightly drawn geometric forms suggest an environment that had been fatally cleaved, chopped, and eroded to its naked essence.

Hogue further stressed his indignation at a butchered, violated earth by adding an ethnic counternarrative to *Mother Earth Laid Bare* following its completion. The artist finished the painting in Taos, New Mexico, and discovered from either his fellow Taos artists or residents of the nearby Pueblo that an analogous belief in Mother Earth could be found in Puebloan cosmology. As he later recounted in 1946, the Puebloans’ respect for Mother Earth had also created a similar fear of harm:

I learned about the Indian belief regarding the Earth Mother which runs through all animistic religions throughout the world as well as throughout all time. According to [Puebloan] beliefs the earth mother is pregnant just before the sprouting in spring and a quiescent period is declared in which time no iron wheels or other metal instruments may move over or pierce the ground. They even remove the shoes from horses.¹⁸

Puebloans forbade metal specifically “for fear of injury to the Earth Mother,” suggesting a similar regard for nature as a fragile feminine body. Hogue’s imagery in *Mother Earth Laid Bare* was so analogous that an elder of Taos Pueblo “thought I had managed a look-see into the secrets of their beliefs.”¹⁹

The artist was unaware of Puebloan cosmology when he began *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, but he may have encountered the Taos elder by the time he began *The Crucified Land* in 1939.²⁰ Hogue clearly sympathized with Puebloan beliefs as further validation of his own animistic interpretation of nature and as a criticism of the mechanization of American agriculture. The lacerated furrows in *The Crucified Land* identify the tractor as the agent of violence against an animate, living nature, invoking both his mother’s warnings and the Puebloans’ prohibitions against metal implements. Both the plow and the tractor’s steel wheels act as blades carving into the earth’s flesh. This is particularly notable in terms of the wheels, since rubber tires were readily available as an upgrade to almost all tractors by 1935.²¹

Despite the influence of Mattie Hoover Hogue and Puebloan cosmology, *The Crucified Land* does not suggest the same gendering of nature in *Mother Earth Laid Bare*. The Christian reference in the title and the male clothes of the scarecrow could imply a nontraditional interpretation of nature as masculine; however, the eroded land is not necessarily an inference to a feminine or masculine body but to the flayed flesh of an animistic nature.²² Hogue seems to have suppressed the artificial gendering of nature in *The Crucified Land* in order to make a fundamentally different argument: no specific sex or gender could be exonerated from the crimes against nature. Instead of the implied male violence of *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, Hogue argues in *The Crucified Land* that all viewers are potentially liable, and the bloody soil that flows from the eroded farm to the lower edge of the canvas stains all hands.

The issues related to both *Drouth Survivors* and *Mother Earth Laid Bare* indicate an unwavering attack on agribusiness, which was largely responsible for converting prairie into farmland during the boom market of World War I. His lament for the grasslands, his animistic interpretation of nature, and his criticism of a kind of industrial agriculture act as ecological arguments favoring conservation. But before Hogue's connections to Dust Bowl-era conservation may be examined, it is necessary first to discuss the spread of agriculture to the North Texas grasslands, its environmental consequences, and its industrialization.

The North Texas prairies had long since supported herds of grazing animals such as bison, antelope, and elk, and provided an ideal environment for cattle and sheep ranches in the nineteenth century. The spread of agriculture to North Texas occurred primarily during World War I, when President Woodrow Wilson attempted to remedy food shortages among European allies and American troops by encouraging increased crop production in the Great Plains with an emphasis on wheat and corn. Agricultural conversion of the grasslands was seen as instrumental to the war effort, and Pare Lorentz would later highlight this belief

in the 1936 film *The Plow That Broke the Plains* through vintage footage of war-era agriculture and the narrated pronouncement that "Wheat will win the war!" But the war effort also initiated a land boom that accelerated in the 1920s, and cultivation in North Texas increased by 69 percent between 1924 and 1929. Crop speculators were persuaded further by reports from the railroads that advertised an annual yield of wheat between thirty and thirty-five bushels. Agriculture was so lucrative in the late 1920s that "There was hardly an acre of arable land around Dalhart which did not pay for itself in its first year."²³ This striking change to the grasslands around Dalhart certainly caught Hogue's attention and would later inform the indignation with which he treated agriculture.

The profitability of a cash crop like wheat encouraged monoculture planting that often exhausted the soil within a few seasons. This kind of crop speculation produced what historian Donald Worster has called "a trail of exploitation" that created a class of transient farmers who moved from acreage to acreage once the land could no longer sustain the crop and who had no real tie to the earth. These farms were often owned by an "agricultural entrepreneur [who] stood for the idea that the land's true and only end was to become a commodity—something to be used, bought, and sold for human gain."²⁴ Inevitably, this environmental disregard resulted in a "barren earth, marked by deep gullies, slashed timber, and thinning soils," ending with the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl. Hogue's colleague Otis Dozier acknowledged such transience in Texas in *The Annual Move*, 1936 (Fig. 5), which depicted a family abandoning both the homestead and the exhausted land for the next field.²⁵

The industrialization of agriculture through the tractor exacerbated the environmental consequences of this practice, especially when some farmers hoped to gain greater efficiency by plowing the fields immediately after the harvest in order to save time before the next planting season. Winds and water in the intervening time often eroded the topsoil, leaving a desolate wasteland. The phrase "tractored out" came



FIG. 5. Otis Dozier, *The Annual Move*, 1936, oil on masonite, 24 x 36 in. (60.96 x 91.44 cm.). Courtesy of Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Eleanor and C. Thomas May Jr.

to describe such an outcome, and its currency prompted Dorothea Lange to use the phrase as the title of her 1938 photograph of an unproductive, fallow field in West Texas (Fig. 6).

The Crucified Land depicts this “trail of exploitation” in both the monoculture of wheat, which eventually saps the acreage of its fertile potential, and the downhill furrows, which hasten the erosion. Although the farm seems occupied, Hogue identified the site as “an abandoned field,” suggesting the tenant may have moved on to an adjacent plot.²⁶ The degraded, linear furrows clearly point to the tractor as the agent of erosion, but it is doubtful that Hogue limited the tractor’s significance solely to environmental devastation, considering its tremendous impact on 1930s agriculture. He could not have been unaware of the agricultural laborers in Texas that had been “tractored out” of their jobs and homes by the spread of mechanization, and his choice of tractors in

The Crucified Land indicates that he must have been conscious of such consequences.

The tractor in *The Crucified Land* is most likely a 1930s McCormick-Deering Farmall, and most likely an F-20, although it could be an F-12.²⁷ Farmalls proved the most popular form of mechanization because they could perform multiple tasks with the assistance of numerous attachments such as plows, rakes, and harvesters. Such improvements in tractor technology enabled landowners to mechanize the planting and harvest, increasing efficiency and profitability. The number of tractors in Texas increased from 37,000 in 1930 to 99,000 in 1938, resulting in drastic labor reductions and tenant evictions.²⁸ One estimate noted that each tractor displaced from three to five tenants or sharecroppers, and by 1942, approximately 60,000 farm families had been displaced by mechanization.²⁹ A 1939 report from Fort Worth summarized the problem effectively:

Men with resources are buying or leasing large tracts of land. . . . They are displacing many small farmers—those who have been successful as well as marginal farmers. Most of the large operators are using tractors, thus throwing many farm laborers out of employment. . . . The worker has gradually degenerated from farm owner to tenant or sharecropper and finally to farm laborer.³⁰

This economic degeneration of the farm worker through agricultural industrialization also led in some instances to the physical decline of such displaced individuals. Works Progress Administration supervisors in Texas noted that “upon each visit to the office, we notice that the unassigned worker is thinner, his clothes more ragged, his facial expression more gaunt, his patience and endurance frayed.”³¹ In short, the capitalist culture of crop speculation had produced a relatively sudden mechanization of the Texas farm with erosive consequences for both the land and society.

Thus, Hogue’s inclusion of the tractor in *The Crucified Land* not only represents a disregard for the environment but also implies an equally destructive effect for many Texas farmers. It is no accident that the scarecrow wears the overalls and chambray shirt of the typical Depression-era farmer, and its tattered, wasted form suggests a physical decay comparable to the WPA reports of unassigned workers. DeLong, by contrast, has argued that Hogue lacked “sympathy with the suffering of uprooted farmers” and that his “partisanship with the land” separated him ideologically from filmmaker Pare Lorentz and from writer John Steinbeck.³² However, a closer examination of *The Crucified Land*, as the culmination of Hogue’s thought on the subject of environmental abuse, indicates that the artist was not entirely opposed to the farmer but to the industrialization of contemporary agriculture and to the capitalist ideology behind it. As such, Hogue may have more in common with Lorentz and Steinbeck than is apparent.

Lorentz’s *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, commissioned by the Farm Securities Admin-



FIG. 6. Dorothea Lange, *Tractored Out*, Childress County, Texas, 1938, gelatin silver print, 9¹⁵/₁₆ x 13 in. (25.24 x 33.02 cm.). Copyright © the Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland. Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

istration, also depicted the tractor as a significant participant in the Dust Bowl. His juxtaposition of a fleet of tractors with a fleet of tanks during the World War I montage implies a kind of technological war to “break” the Great Plains soil. Lorentz specifically relates this agricultural aggression with the boom market of the 1920s by alternating images of ticker tape machines and harvested wheat. This montage, which ends with the market crash of 1929, suggests that Lorentz perceived the environmental devastation of the Dust Bowl as the result of “an entire culture of greed and overindulgence, a society that has lost its moral bearings.” Fin Dunaway has argued that Lorentz blamed “the sins of unbridled capitalism” for the blowing dirt and eroded fields found in later sequences of the film.³³ Lorentz was far less specific than Hogue in his association between the tractor and economic hardship in *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, but he did capture the extreme poverty in the Midwest and the migration it produced.

John Steinbeck, however, clearly acknowledged the tractor as the impetus behind both environmental devastation and economic destitution in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Steinbeck conceived of the tractor as

a violent implement that increased production in the short term but resulted in devastating consequences for the environment. As he succinctly stated: "The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died."³⁴ But the machine was not solely to blame since it was merely a tool of capitalist desire. The banks and finance companies that held the leases on land, not to mention the tractors that would soon farm it, demanded increasing profitability, which required enhanced efficiency through mechanization. This desire for capital also led to tenant evictions since "one man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families."³⁵ The tractor operator that eventually came to take the tenants' jobs and raze their houses had become just another inhuman component of the capitalist machine, "a robot in the seat" who "loved the land no more than the bank loved the land." This automaton, seemingly fleshless in his concealing gloves, goggles, and rubber mask, lacked all empathy with the land because the bank had "goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest." As a result, the tractor operator lost all sensorial and emotional attachment to nature: "He could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth."³⁶ For Steinbeck, this lack of empathy with the land suggested an unwillingness to regard nature as a living entity. Capitalist greed, which discounted all aspects of nature except for its potential monetary value, prompted the death of the land through mechanistic efficiency. As an alternative, the author proposed the figure of Jim Casy, who undergoes a Christlike martyrdom toward the conclusion of the novel. Casy notes early in the narrative his ecological connection to nature: "There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy."³⁷ Steinbeck's attack on agribusiness and his proposal of a different attitude to the land is strikingly similar to Hogue's argument in *The Crucified Land*, which not only condemns agricultural industrialization but also conceives of nature as animate.

Both *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The Grapes of Wrath* indicate that agricultural industrialization was not simply an economic issue but a moral question regarding fair business practices and society's proper relationship to nature. In each example, profit is positioned as both the dominant objective of agribusiness and as the immoral and injurious cause behind the economic and environmental ruin of the Dust Bowl. Lorentz and Steinbeck utilize the tractor as a representation of said ruin and the capitalist greed that prompted it.

The comparisons of Lorentz and Steinbeck to Hogue's *The Crucified Land* indicate that the tractor was not only perceived as an icon of agribusiness and environmental catastrophe but also often connected to an unethical and immoral desire for profit. Hogue, like his contemporaries, regarded the tractor with mistrust and suspicion, not for its inherent properties but for the uses to which the machine was put in the 1930s. His depiction of the tractor as an agent of injury and even murder in *The Crucified Land* asks the viewer to consider the issue of agricultural industrialization on moral grounds. In this regard, Hogue's objective was not merely the condemnation of recent agribusiness practices but also the promotion of an ethical, symbiotic relationship with nature that emphasized conservation and preservation of natural resources such as the grasslands. The artist later insisted that "I did not do the erosion series as social comment. . . . Social comment is negative, my interest in conservation is positive."³⁸

Hogue's reference to conservation, when matched with his lament for the vanished grasslands and his indictment of the ethics of agribusiness, connects him to Depression-era ecological thought and particularly that of Frederic Clements of the Carnegie Institution. Clements characterized ecology as a concern for biological "wholeness" in which humans, animals, and plants act as "organs working in unison within a great organism."³⁹ This theoretical model emphasizes a symbiosis or interdependence among nature's disparate parts that must be maintained to prevent ecological

failure. It also identifies the introduction of monoculture agriculture into the relatively fragile grasslands ecosystem as the culprit behind the Dust Bowl, placing the onus on humanity's disregard for ecological balance.

Clements's theories were readily adopted by other ecologists in the 1930s who condemned the abuses of agricultural industrialization and encouraged contemporary Americans to redefine their relationship with nature as symbiotic. Aldo Leopold urged Americans to reject the traditional definitions of the land as property "entailing privileges but not obligations" and of progress as "the enslavement of a stable and constant earth." Like Clements, he characterized nature as "a state of mutual interdependent cooperation between human animals, other animals, plants, and the soils, which may be disrupted at any moment by the failure of any of them."⁴⁰ The idea that human beings were capable of disrupting an entire ecosystem obliged a moral responsibility to the land, and Leopold proposed conservation as the new ethical paradigm. But for ecologist Paul Sears, this symbiotic relationship might be continually undermined by the "diabolical power of modern technology" which "accelerate[d] the speed with which [natural resources] are consumed" and created a culture of excess that gratified human desires but exacerbated exhaustion of resources.⁴¹

Although it is unknown whether Hogue knew the work of these ecologists, his interest in conservation and his criticism of agricultural industrialization in the Great Plains certainly demonstrates a similarity of thought. Clements's characterization of nature as a "great organism" would have been particularly attractive to Hogue, given his enthusiasm for the archetype of Mother Earth and his depiction of the land as body in *The Crucified Land*. The personification of nature as an organism also implied that reckless action on the part of humanity could promote failure of an ecosystem, resulting potentially in its death. *The Crucified Land* not only depicts just such an outcome but also equates such disregard with murder. Hogue specifically situated the farm in the North Texas

redlands "to symbolize the fact that water is cutting into the very flesh of the earth, draining it of its life-blood, crucifying the land."⁴²

By portraying such environmental disregard as a form of execution or murder, Hogue invoked a popular metaphor among the ecologically minded commentators of the period, and the criticism he leveled against agribusiness in *The Crucified Land* compares most closely to that found in Archibald MacLeish's notable exposé "Grasslands" for *Fortune* magazine. It is likely that Hogue had read MacLeish's essay, since the author discusses Dalhart and two of the accompanying photographs depicted dust storms battering the town. MacLeish's essay pointed to the agricultural boom following World War I as the primary cause behind the Dust Bowl and criticized agricultural industrialization in the Great Plains as a form of capitalist exploitation. To this end, he detailed the story of Tom Campbell, a symbol "of the American passion for power, speed, and the predictable machine," who received a ten-year lease on the Shoshone Reservation in Wyoming and the Crow, Blackfoot, and Fort Peck reservations in Montana during World War I at significantly reduced rental payments.⁴³ Campbell secured financing on the 100,000-acre venture from James J. Hill of the Great Northern Railway and J. P. Morgan, and this capital allowed him to mechanize with heavy, medium, and light tractors. Tractors not only allowed Campbell to break sod at an astounding rate but also helped to decrease expenses thereby increasing profit. By continually modifying his tractors for greater efficiency, Campbell reduced his labor costs from 200 employees to 50 and his operating costs from \$7.50 an acre to \$4.80 an acre. Mechanization through the tractor had made such efficiency possible, and MacLeish even credited Campbell's innovations with the increased use of tractors in the Great Plains: "Without Tom Campbell the tractor would have been a different and an inferior thing."⁴⁴

For MacLeish, Campbell's faith in technology and his desire for increasing efficiency and profit typified the disregard for the environment that produced the Dust Bowl. The author

regarded such attitudes as both destructive and violent, and he too personified nature as a means of undermining Campbell's exploitive approach to the land while also encouraging his readers to develop a symbiotic relationship with nature. He defined erosion as a "Cancer of the Earth" or "an ill resulting from injury to the vegetative cover," and he illustrated his point with a photograph of erosion (Fig. 7) that compares closely to the foreground of *The Crucified Land*. In order to prevent the "murder" of the land through wind and water erosion, he prescribed "the healing humbleness of grass" as a physical and moral antidote to the greed and indifference of Campbell and his tractors.⁴⁵

MacLeish's appeal suggests that grass is a vital link in the Great Plains ecosystem and only its restoration may repair the significant damage caused by agriculture. His association between the loss of prairie grasses and environmental collapse was echoed by Steinbeck's Tom Joad who blamed the failure of their Oklahoma farm on the loss of such grasses: "Ever' year I can remember, we had a good crop comin', an' it never come. Grampa says she was good the first five plowin's, while the wild grass was still in her."⁴⁶ The eventual eradication of the prairie grass results in the failure of the Joad farm, emphasizing both the precarious balance of the Great Plains environment and the symbiotic relationship between prairie grass and contemporary Americans.

MacLeish would go even further to suggest that human lives were intimately connected to the fate of the flora. At the beginning of his essay, MacLeish confronted readers with the notable phrase from Isaiah 40:6, "All flesh is grass."⁴⁷ In the Bible, the verse is followed by

and its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.

Although MacLeish did not maintain the biblical metaphor throughout his essay, his use

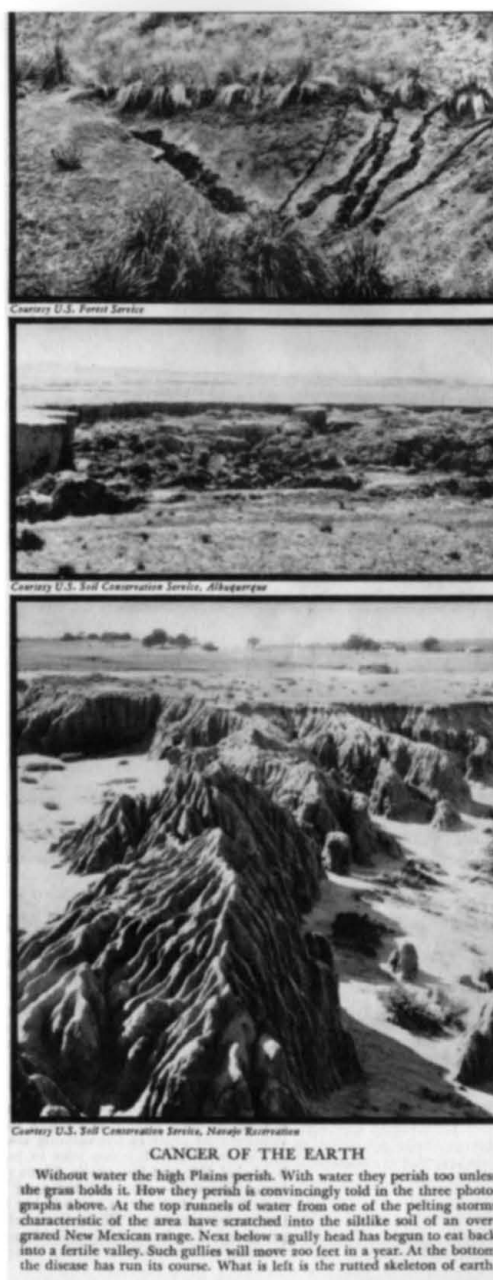


FIG. 7. "Cancer of the Earth" from Archibald MacLeish, "Grasslands," *Fortune* 12, no. 5 (November 1935): 67. Courtesy of *Fortune*. Copyright © 1935 Time Inc. All rights reserved.

of Isaiah adds a prophetic tone, thus warning Americans of the potential consequences of their disregard for the grass.

The verses from Isaiah emphasize the eternal power of the divine, but also the transitory nature of earthly existence. Biblical admonitions such as this were numerous during the Dust Bowl, according to historian Brad D. Lookingbill, and journalists often characterized the Dust Bowl as a form of divine judgment against human hubris. After the black blizzard on April 14, 1935, the *Topeka Daily State Journal* ran the headline "The Garden of Eden Destroyed When Man Turned the Sod on the Prairies of Kansas," and numerous other commentators, particularly religious leaders, interpreted the Dust Bowl as a sign that Americans were facing expulsion from paradise.⁴⁸ But as Lookingbill has demonstrated, those who lived through the Dust Bowl generally saw its hardship as divine judgment for their sinful lives but not necessarily for their treatment of the environment.

The Crucified Land warns of the destruction of the American Eden through the serpentine gullies that slither back into the farmland, corrupting its fertile potential, but Hogue saw this moral failing differently. The reference to Eden was not simply an invocation of the North American paradise, but a moral lesson on the consequences of human greed. In the biblical Genesis, God granted Adam and Eve partial dominion over the earth but forbade them from eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Deceived by the serpent, they succumbed to avarice and ate from the tree, resulting in their expulsion from paradise and eventually their physical death. Hogue clearly drew an analogy between the greed that prompted Adam and Eve's disobedience and that which motivated the plowing of the grasslands. Adam and Eve lost paradise when they attempted to exercise complete dominion over its every aspect, and Americans now threaten to lose their paradise to what Hogue considered "the evil effects of erosion," which were prompted by an equally destructive drive for profit.⁴⁹

Hogue's reference to the expulsion from an American Eden and his juxtaposition of nature with the Christian symbolism of the cross sug-

gests comparisons to Hudson River landscape, particularly that of Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church. For instance, Cole's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1827-28 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), may be seen as "an allegory of America's fall from grace, as the wilderness was increasingly destroyed by westward expansion and industrialisation."⁵⁰ In addition, Church visited the theme of the cross in the wilderness as a reference to a blessed nature in works such as *To the Memory of Cole*, 1848 (private collection), *Cross in the Wilderness*, 1857 (Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, Spain), and *Heart of the Andes*, 1859 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

While Hudson River landscape may have had some influence on Hogue, William Lester's *The Three Crosses*, 1935-36 (Fig. 8) may have been a more immediate influence. *The Three Crosses* was exhibited alongside Hogue's *Erosion No. 1 – Permian Red Beds*, 1932 (State of Oklahoma Art Collection, Kirkpatrick Center) in the Eighth Allied Arts Exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1937. Lester gives traditional Christian iconography a decidedly Southwestern flavor by using fence posts for instruments of martyrdom. Christ and the two thieves are nowhere to be found, so the skull of Adam awaits the Savior's redeeming blood. The centurions have already gambled for Christ's garments, but the winner must have decided that the prize was of little worth, as it lay unclaimed nearby. Although *The Three Crosses* is admittedly ambiguous, Rick Stewart has suggested the crosses may not only be references to Christ and the thieves but also to settlers' graves "where the bones have been exposed by the restless elements." Lester's inclusion of a darkened sky, "suggesting a dust pall over the bleak landscape," may then be a reference to the perception held by some historians that the environmental conditions of the 1930s were the result of inept pioneers, ill suited to handle the tenuous ecological balance of the prairie grasslands.⁵¹

The implication of human involvement in environmental disaster, filtered through Christian symbolism, would have been a clear

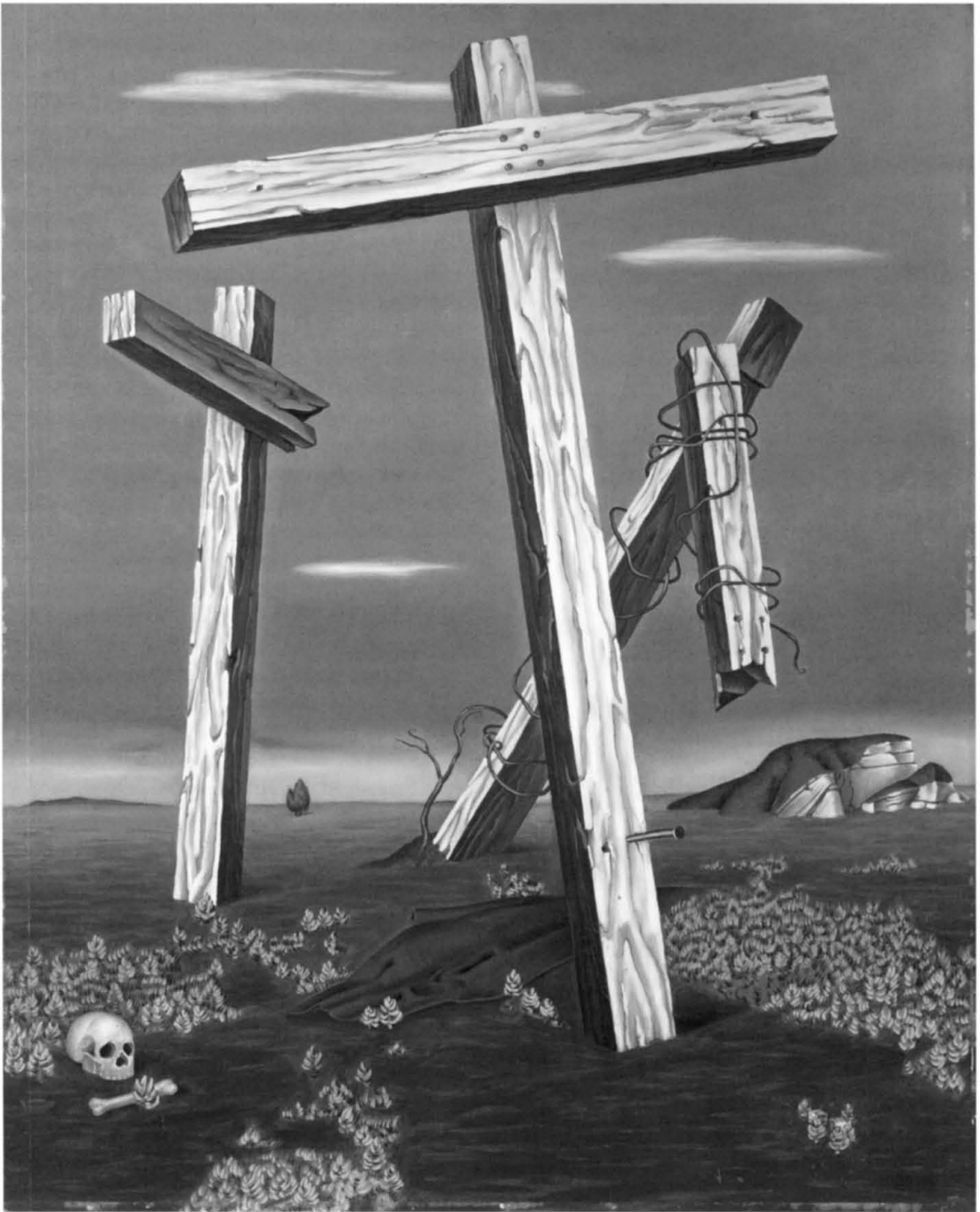


FIG. 8. William Lester, *The Three Crosses*, 1935-36, oil on masonite, 30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 60.96 cm.). Courtesy of Dallas Museum of Art, gift of the New York World's Fair Department of Contemporary Art.

influence on *The Crucified Land*, but Hogue's ecological sermon is far more confrontational

with the ramifications of human greed evident in the wasted landscape. The application of

industrial efficiency to agriculture has left the land bloody and broken with the instrument of its execution, the tractor, nearby. By using the Christian metaphors of the fall from grace and the crucifixion to condemn the sin of avarice, Hogue also posits that a form of salvation from this ecological disaster is possible. His previous comments and the evidence within the painting suggest that salvation can come only through a revision of thought, namely the embrace of an ecological sensibility that regards nature as a delicately balanced organism of which humanity is only a part. Hogue would have agreed with Lynn White's charge that Christianity had isolated humanity from nature and fostered environmental abuse:

Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes towards man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians. Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are *not*, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.⁵²

In light of White's argument, *The Crucified Land* acts as an ecological appeal for a complete revision of human attitudes towards nature and the agricultural practices those notions produced in the 1930s. Alexandre Hogue's scathing condemnation of agribusiness as murderous, avaricious, and destructive questions the application of capitalist principles to agriculture and links him ideologically to the ecological thought of contemporaries such as John Steinbeck, Frederic Clements, and Archibald MacLeish. His image of the flayed, bloodied land is not simply an indictment of agribusiness abuses but also an appeal for conservation as a moral relationship with nature. By inferring that mistreatment of nature was a crime against humanity as well as the environment, Hogue argued that the American paradigm of

a boundless, inexhaustible nature that allowed unchecked consumption and exploitation was a dangerous ideology that resulted in the human and environmental tragedies of the 1930s. As such, *The Crucified Land* represents not only an important document of 1930s America but a passionate embrace of ecological principles that still resonates today.

NOTES

I would like to thank Alan Braddock and Leisha O'Quinn for their thoughtful comments in the production of this manuscript as well as the editorial board and staff of Great Plains Quarterly for all their valuable assistance in publication.

1. For a complete history of the *Erosion* series, see Lea Rossen DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces: The Art of Alexandre Hogue* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984). DeLong has noted that "Each *Erosion* painting presented a different aspect of the blind, continual exploitation of the land for which humans are clearly culpable" (20). *The Crucified Land* was the last work that Hogue painted in response to contemporary environmental conditions in Texas. In 1944 *Encyclopedia Britannica* approached him through the Associated American Artists to paint additional images of erosion, resulting in *Avalanche by Wind*, 1944 (University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson) and *Soil and Subsoil*, 1946 (Oklahoma City Museum of Art). Hogue clearly noted in the information sheet he prepared for *Encyclopedia Britannica* that the images depicted environmental conditions around 1932-34 (DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 140). It should be noted that DeLong lists 1938 as the date for Hogue's *Erosion No. 2 - Mother Earth Laid Bare*. However, the Philbrook Museum of Art says the painting was dated by the artist as 1936.

2. "Paintings in International Art Show Reflect World Turmoil," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 19, 1939, quoted in DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 130.

3. DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 130; Rick Stewart, *Lone Star Regionalism: The Dallas Nine and Their Circle, 1928-45* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985), 108.

4. "The U.S. Dust Bowl: Its Artist Is a Texan Portraying 'Man's Mistakes,'" *Life*, June 21, 1937, 61. The Dust Bowl as it was defined in the 1930s encompassed the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, southwestern Kansas, southeastern Colorado, and northeastern New Mexico. It was generally defined by the dust storms that plagued the region in the

early 1930s. Brad Lookingbill has suggested that Hogue may have been one of the first to use the term Dust Bowl in reference to his 1933 painting of the same name. Brad D. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 136, n. 2.

5. Although agribusiness is a term of recent origin, it effectively describes a dominant trend in agriculture since World War I. Webster's *New World Dictionary*, 2nd College Edition, 1984, defines agribusiness as "farming and the business associated with farming, as the processing of farm products, the manufacturing of farm equipment and fertilizers, etc." The Internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia* adds, however, that agribusiness has also become associated pejoratively with corporate farming as opposed to family farming. Agribusiness may be defined in this regard as the application of capitalist business practices to agriculture through the embrace of industrial production. Mechanization and technological innovation are considered key to the increase of agricultural efficiency, which results in greater profitability. As such, agribusiness helps to describe the relationships between economics, technology, and agriculture. *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, "Agribusiness," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agribusiness> (accessed October 20, 2005).

6. DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 7.

7. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA*, 25.

8. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203.

9. DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 14.

10. Hogue to Matthew Baigell, June 14, 1967, Hogue Papers, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, box 2, folder 1. While Hogue blamed agriculture for much of the erosion that spawned the Dust Bowl, he ignored the equally important issue of overgrazing and its role in erosion. His bias originated most likely in his attachment to his sister's ranch.

11. DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 7.

12. "The U.S. Dust Bowl," 60; Elisabeth Crocker, "Hogue Ignites Bomb from the Southwest," *Dallas Morning News*, May 15, 1938, quoted in DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 24. Hogue sold *Drouth Survivors* to the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, but ironically the painting was destroyed in a fire in 1948.

13. Hogue to Frederic Allen Whiting, late 1939, Hogue Papers, 3:8.

14. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA*, 40. *Mother Earth Laid Bare* is Hogue's most recognizable image and has been discussed extensively in critical literature. For further discussion, see both DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, and Joni L. Kinsey, *Plain Pictures* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

15. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, paperback edition (1980; New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 2.

16. Carolyn Merchant, *Inventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 118.

17. DeLong has argued that "Hogue was willing to admit there was a surrealist tone in some of his works, but he did not wish to be considered a surrealist." She finds his work closer to magic realism, which Jeffrey Wechsler defined as "an art of the implausible, not the impossible, of the imaginative, not the imaginary." Wechsler, *Surrealism and American Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), 38. She maintains, however, the Hogue's term "psycho-reality" most closely describes his style.

18. Hogue to Thomas Beggs, February 8, 1946, Hogue Papers, 1:10.

19. Hogue to Tom Kelley, May 5, 1946, Hogue Papers, 1:10; Hogue to Alfred Frankenstein, May 28, 1944, Hogue Papers, 2:2.

20. Hogue first visited Taos in 1926 and returned nearly every year until the beginning of World War II. When he visited Taos in 1938, he showed *Mother Earth Laid Bare* to a group of his Taos colleagues that included Kenneth Adams, Emil Bisttram, Howard and Barbara Cook, Lady Dorothy Brett, Andrew Dasburg, and Ernest, Mary, and Helen Blumenschein. Hogue remembered that Dasburg was the first to associate Hogue's image of a feminine nature with Puebloan beliefs, and it is likely that Dasburg fostered in some way Hogue's meeting with the Taos elder. Hogue to Frankenstein, May 28, 1944, Hogue Papers, 2:2. For Hogue's experiences in Taos, see DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*.

21. Randy Leffingwell, *The American Farm Tractor* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1991), 103.

22. This may be partly supported by Hogue's *Grim Reaper*, 1932 (Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro), which depicts "a wheat-haired human face" symbolizing "a death in nature itself, brought about by greedy, voracious plows of profit-conscious farmer." Hogue fuses a personification of the land with that of the wheat farmer to suggest both human negligence and nature's wrath (DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 100). Hogue never transferred the drawing to paint because he decided to work with "a less surrealist attitude" (Hogue to Frankenstein, April 19, 1973, Hogue Papers, 2:3).

23. Archibald MacLeish, "Grasslands," *Fortune* 12, no. 5 (November 1935): 187-88.

24. Donald Worster, "The Dirty Thirties: A Study in Agricultural Capitalism," in *Americans*

View Their Dust Bowl Experience, ed. John R. Wunder, Frances W. Kaye, and Vernon Carstensen, 359 (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1999), originally published in *Great Plains Quarterly* 6 (Spring 1986): 107-16.

25. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 59. Rick Stewart has interpreted Dozier's *The Annual Move* as a "reassuring survival of tradition and continuity in such an uprooting"; however, the image seems far more complex and deserves further attention (Stewart, *Lone Star Regionalism*, 63).

26. Hogue to Beggs, February 8, 1946, Hogue Papers, 1:10.

27. The identification of the tractor as F-20, which was produced between 1932 and 1940, is based primarily on the position of the engine and wheel configuration.

28. Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942), 218.

29. McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, 220.

30. Report quoted in McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, 222.

31. McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, 226.

32. DeLong, *Art of Alexandre Hogue*, 19.

33. Fin Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 49.

34. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939; New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 49.

35. Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 44.

36. Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 48.

37. Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 110.

38. Hogue to Baigell, June 14, 1967, Hogue Papers, 2:1.

39. Frederic E. Clements and Ralph Chaney, *Environment and Life in the Great Plains*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1937), 51.

40. Aldo Leopold, "The Conservation Ethic," *Journal of Forestry* 31 (October 1933): 635.

41. Paul Sears, *This Is Our World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), 278.

42. Hogue to John O'Connor Jr., August 29, 1938, Hogue Papers, 2:2.

43. MacLeish, "Grasslands," 186.

44. MacLeish, "Grasslands," 187-88.

45. MacLeish, "Grasslands," 62, 67, 203. MacLeish would revisit the theme of an injured earth in his celebrated book, *Land of the Free*. His "book of photographs illustrated by a poem" used documentary photographs from organizations such as the Farm Securities Administration Historical Section in order to question Americans notions of progress. On page 42 he included a photograph from the Tennessee Valley Authority with the caption "A bleeding hillside"—*newly plowed land in a Virginia valley after one hour of rain*. The image of extreme erosion echoed many of the photographs included in "Grasslands."

46. Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 37.

47. MacLeish, "Grasslands," 60.

48. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA*, 31.

49. Hogue to Beggs, Hogue Papers, 1:10.

50. Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 93. Also see William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach, eds., *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1994); J. Gray Sweeney, "'Endued with Rare Genius:' Frederic Edwin Church's *To the Memory of Cole*," *American Art* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 44-71.

51. Stewart, *Lone Star Regionalism*, 69. Like Dozier's *The Annual Move*, Lester's *The Three Crosses* clearly deserves further attention. James C. Malin was the first to argue that pioneers were responsible for the Dust Bowl, and that a knowledge of progressive agriculture and the specific environmental conditions of the prairies would help remedy the damage caused by this earlier agricultural generation. Malin, *The Grasslands of North America: A Prolegomena to Its History with Addenda* (Lawrence, KS: privately published, 1947). It is possible, however, that Lester beat him to the punch.

52. White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1206.