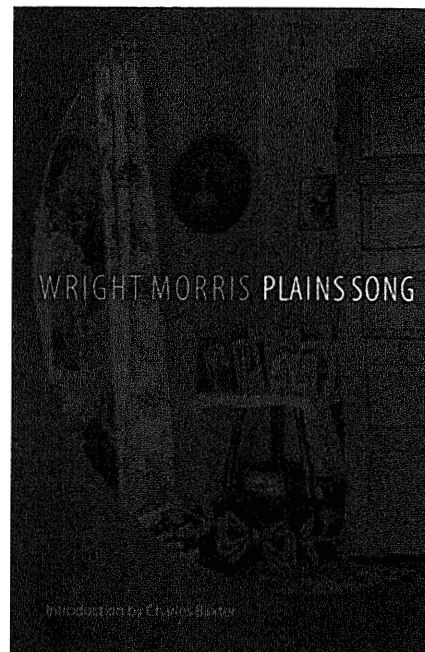


## Survival on the Plains: Iconic Women in *The Stone Angel and Plains Song*

by  
Jody Ludlow

The painting is called *The Prairie Is My Garden*, and I see it as emblematic of pioneer women's ability to adjust to their environment, to be pliable, accepting, and to search out life-sustaining beauty no matter how small or retiring . . . While the woman is content to let the prairie nourish her and her children, the man is grimly trying his best to bend the environment to his will, to make a "by God" proper garden . . . I like to believe that that hint of pain in the woman's eyes is not from the harshness of the land but from the anguish of watching her man struggle with a beast at once too rough for him to conquer and too fragile to withstand his abuse.

-Dan O'Brien *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*



A persistent theme in literature of the Plains is the inescapable isolation of those living on the landscape. Often this isolation, beginning as an external reality, becomes internalized as inhabitants succumb to the hardness of life on desolate lands and adopt seclusion as a state of mind, carrying such feelings of isolation with them even after leaving the terrain. As the land is hard and, at times, unyielding, so become the people who migrate to it, their surroundings reflected in the internal. Those who wish to prosper on the Plains, control it, and dictate upon it a profit, find much resistance, while those looking to survive find they must integrate themselves into the landscape by adopting its ways. Thus a divide is created in how people cope with "the physical and psychological isolation, the waste, and the destruction that persist as settlers invade the prairies and plains" (Quantic 47).

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Women on the Plains—particularly, though not limited to, early generations of homesteaders—were often successful in adapting to the hardness of the land. In fact, the expectations placed on these women were already tied to those placed on the land as dynasty-building fathers and husbands demanded children, mostly sons, from women as they demanded crops from the land. Many women, their fates reflected in the Plains, did not readily acquiesce to these demands. In contrast, many struggled to keep an individuality that asserted freewill rather than a predetermined role. Despite popular belief that they fit into a set category, the “saint in a sunbonnet” for instance, scholars insist that frontierswomen actually “brought a myriad of backgrounds, statuses, values, and beliefs with them to the frontier area” (Riley 14, 15). Working to dispel the myth of hegemony on the Plains, many Plains writers depict women who challenge the assumptions and expectations placed upon them while adapting to the land around them. Writers such as Margaret Laurence and Wright Morris create frontierswomen who adjust to life on the Plains by embracing its desolation. At once challenging the assumptions of the iconic landscape and the iconic Plainswoman, these writers reveal the numerous dimensions to both, unveiling the personal touch of these women on the lives and the lands of the Plains. The imprint these women made is not one etched out by dynasty builders, but one that depicts strength and survival, and an unyielding will to resist alongside the land they come to embrace.

Coming from the Canadian Plains, Margaret Laurence is familiar with the various layers of rural isolation. *The Stone Angel*, the first and most popular novel of her Manawaka trilogy, introduces Hagar Shipley, a character who challenges the stereotypes of the frontierswoman. Hagar, born onto the land of Laurence’s own upbringing (Neepawa is renamed Manawaka in the novel) transitions from motherless child to hardened housewife to iconic frontierswoman, relenting her silence and stone-like demeanor only shortly before her death at the age of ninety-four. Hagar’s burden in life as a woman born onto the Plains by a mother whose significance came not in her person but in her purpose is introduced at the onset of the novel through the imagery of the stone angel in the cemetery overlooking the town:

Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who

relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother’s angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day. (Lawrence 3)

Through the stone angel, Hagar introduces the “feeble” ghost of her mother and the attempted and failed dynasty of her father. The angel’s presence, “cast[ing] the long shadow of death over the ensuing narrative,” is depicted as a herald of death rather than salvation (Vauthier 47).

Further into this opening passage, Hagar invokes the lingering presence of the natives of the land whose fading imprint magnifies the misplacement of her own decaying legacy upon the Plains: “a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always . . . when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree” (Lawrence 5). When this ghost-like presence of the Cree is noted in addition to the angel’s disintegration from snow and grit, the temporality of life on the Plains is reiterated.

This graveyard opening heightens the reader’s sense of the isolation felt by Hagar. Laurence, in fact, felt such isolation personally, stating “I felt the loneliness and isolation of the land itself” (Chew 36). Yet the draw to the land remains strong. Hagar’s history on the Plains, established and passed down by her father, permanently shaped her identity. Jason Currie, the first of the family to settle in Manawaka, established his hold on the land and likewise, on his wife. The angel, carved in Europe and placed upon the plains of Manawaka, hovers over the body of Hagar’s mother, bought by Jason Currie “in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty . . . forever and a day” (Lawrence 3). The angel in the graveyard, the queen of the markers, was erected not in honor of Hagar’s mother, the woman buried beneath it after a premature death, but in honor of Currie’s dynasty and the role of women in this dynasty. By ordering the most costly ornament for the grave of his wife who died in childbirth, Currie flaunts his own wealth, one that has been squeezed from a crop-producing land and an heir-producing woman. For young Hagar, the angel’s presence is not a reminder of her mother as she lived, but of her own fate as a woman on the Plains: “The angel thus becomes the symbol of a dynasty” (Fabre 18). As a woman born to the homesteaders of the Canadian prairie, Hagar inherits the strict

expectations of a patriarchy—to obediently assist in (re)production.

Hagar is conflicted in how she processes the presence of the angel and the empty space left by her mother. As one critic observes, “her story . . . becomes a constant contest between her belief that she can escape death and the continual imposition of death . . . onto her life” (Stevens 95). She is reluctant to explore her mother’s existence in depth, apprehensive to expose herself to such weakness and fragility. Hagar, in fact, begins to identify compassion in any degree as a sign of weakness, and therefore, a sign of her own impending death. When asked to wear her mother’s shawl to comfort her dying brother, Hagar vehemently refuses: “I was crying, shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough” (25). The shawl, a more authentic memorial of her mother than Currie’s angel, frightens Hagar by its foreshadowing of death, and Hagar rejects this fate outright, sealing compassion within herself as a death sentence should it surface: “all I could think of was that meek woman I’d never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he’d inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much a part of me wanted to sympathize” (25). Dan, predictably, dies, like his mother succumbing to death because of his fragility; Hagar, rejecting all aspects of her, lives.

Hagar’s rejection of the stone angel, in part the symbol of woman’s place in Currie’s dynasty, is not as absolute. Hagar is torn, feeling both resentment and reverence for the angel. When Hagar visits the Manawaka cemetery with John, her favored son, they find the angel toppled over and grotesquely painted with lipstick. John, rebellious to his mother’s attempts at propriety, laughs, hinting that he may in fact be the cause of the angel’s fall. Hagar, on the other hand, repeatedly asks, “who’d do such a thing,” insisting that the angel be set back in her rightful place overlooking the dead and wiping its mouth clean of the offending lipstick (179-80). In the same passage, however, Hagar reveals “I never could bear that statue. I’d have been glad enough to leave her” (179). Hagar, less critical of the angel than her actual mother, partly admires the stone, which in its lasting presence, despite some decay, stands juxtaposed to the dead, erected as a promised symbol of eternity. However, the angel, made of stone and therefore blind, embodies a barrenness of emotion that contrasts the emotional presence

of the mother. For most of her long life, Hagar chooses blindness and hardness, afraid of succumbing to the death that her surroundings continually threaten. As a child, Hagar readily dismisses her mother’s shawl, leaving the fragile woman with a firm finality in the belief that she is likewise turning her back on death. The angel, however, entices her with its promise of the everlasting (“forever and a day”) yet dismays her in its stone-cold blindness and its “reminder of his [Currie’s] power and conventionality” (Vauthier 50).

The disaffection Hagar adopts as her method of survival is manifested in many ways. She creates an emotional barrier to her husband, Bram. Hagar hides her desire for Bram and feigns aversion to sex with him in order to preserve her detachment: “It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know” (81). Hagar refuses to let her husband know that she enjoys sharing the intimacy of sex with him. Along with denying her sexual impulses, Hagar hides her fears and insecurities. Concerning horses, one of Bram’s joys in life, Hagar prefers to appear insensitive rather than afraid: “I didn’t let Bram see I was afraid, preferring to let him think I merely objected to them because they were smelly” (83). In numerous ways, Hagar closes herself off to her husband, eventually forcing him out of her life when she moves off the farm.

She pushes her sons away as well. Hagar was able to provide the farm with male heirs, which initially seems to contradict the sterility she projects. However, even though Hagar gives birth to offspring, she does not cultivate them into reliable descendants for the farm. Marvin leaves the family home at a young age only to return for brief and unemotional visits. John, Hagar’s favored child, develops a deep resentment for his mother. Hagar criticizes John’s choice in a wife to the point where she severs any hope of connecting with the young couple. When John is in the hospital after his accident, he calls out to his mother for help, only to realize that she is incapable of providing comfort. His last act in life is to forgive his mother for her hardness: “He put a hand on mine, as though he were momentarily caught up in an attempt to comfort me for something that couldn’t be helped” (242). Even though Hagar gives birth to these men, she is not able to fold them into the family and create an heir for the farm. Hagar repels those in her life who are most capable of providing her with love and comfort, choosing instead to surround

herself with sterility and barrenness.

The tension between the angel and the mother, between the stone and the woman, between the dynasty and the individual, between connection and distance, between life and death is finally resolved by the end of the novel. Life and death on the Plains hardens Hagar. Beginning with her mother's death and culminating in John's, Hagar develops a stiff resistance to any weakness: "The night my son died I was transformed to stone" (243). However, her will to survive despite the ephemeral nature of life she has witnessed in her small Scottish-Canadian settlement is superseded in her final days by her desire for human connection.

Two key encounters with men late in the novel allow Hagar to relinquish her hardness and accept her death; therefore leaving the angel and the dynasty it symbolizes to embrace her most human dimensions. After exchanging stories of love and death with Murray Lees, a stranger and unlikely companion, Hagar feels an unexpected connection and forgives the man for the wrong he may have done, both to her by exposing her whereabouts and in his own life regarding the death of his son. She reaches out to touch him instinctively, no longer a living stone statue but a woman, and offers words of relief: "I didn't mean to speak crossly. I-I'm sorry about your boy" (253). This act frees Hagar from the stone angel and, in turn, from the designation as an icon. As the icon, the stone statue, Hagar was unable to connect and forgive. This exchange with Murray Lees is pivotal in Hagar's life "because it opens her to the possibility of forgiveness and change" (Stevens 89). In this moment, Hagar learns that hardness of will, not hardness of heart, is needed for survival and permanence. She explains this epiphany as her desire "simply to rejoice," regretful that she was never able to "speak the heart's truth" (292). She discovers that connection with the land and the people upon it will bring her the sense of permanence she seeks. This discovery is solidified when she breaks the dictate of her father and his dynasty. Hagar frees Marvin from the generational expectations she was subjected to when she gives him her final blessing: "You've been good to me, always. A better son than John" (304). Hagar relents in her hardness and comforts Marvin, allowing him to feel closure and release. This second and final interaction with the men in her life frees her descendants and allows her heart to rejoice. She does not satisfy her father's will by paying homage to the stone angel in her final days

and perpetuating his hardened ideals, but rather she ends life in a final rebellion—one of compassion that frees her future generations.

Hagar's death and departure for the Manawaka cemetery, where she will join her parents, husband, and son, puts to rest her father's plans. The death and burial of Hagar, Currie's last surviving heir, "will effect her last and most vital transformation" (Chew 43). Likely, Hagar is the last to be placed into the family plot that holds both of her names: "the stone said *Currie* on the one side and *Shipley* on the other" (184). With Hagar, the cemetery becomes the true dynasty of the Plains, encompassing the icons, the Shipleys, the Curries, the angel, within the land in the equalizing sweep of death.

Wright Morris likewise develops female characters that create a method of surviving the hardships of life on the Plains. In his novel *Plains Song*, Cora Atkins progresses through a pattern of adapting to the environment by becoming hard and seemingly emotionless. While Hagar Shipley inherited the isolation of the land when she was born onto the Plains, Cora Atkins, moving from Ohio to Madison County, Nebraska, is married into the lifestyle. As a homesteader's wife, Cora adjusts to the landscape by becoming like it, hardened and unyielding. Cora has only one child and never gives birth to a male heir for the farm. She is likewise unyielding in affection and physical contact—closed off from both her husband and her daughter. Ultimately, Cora becomes so tied to the land that she cannot cope off of it. After her husband dies, Cora continues to live in rural isolation despite her failing health. Cora, outliving those of her generation, is successful in surviving on the Plains because she learns to connect with the fundamental nature of the land. Contrary to her granddaughter's assumptions of Cora's wasted life, Cora is a woman who asserts her individualism and autonomy, etching out an existence for herself in an unforgiving landscape. Cora's life is an example that the "waiting, the being still, the not speaking are part of a *revolutionary* stance," and on the farm, she develops a firm will and a readiness to resist expectations (Gunnars 124).

Cora's introduction to the Plains, her marriage to Emerson and journey with him to his home in rural Nebraska, deeply unsettles her. On the journey to her new life, Cora has sex with her husband for the first time and likens the experience to an "operation without the anesthesia" (14). For Cora "horror exceeded horror" during the transition into life

as a married woman. Along with the physical demands of marriage, the homesteader's dwelling is not what Cora expected. On the journey, before seeing her new home, Cora pressed flowers into a ladies' fashion catalogue, wondering "was this what she would find where they were going" (12). In contrast, Cora arrives to the house the couple will share with her brother-in-law and gets right to work cleaning and organizing the household. Despite the harsh initiation, Cora adapts to the endless work waiting for her in her house on the Plains and even learns to enjoy it (19). Although Cora adjusts to her new life as Emerson's wife, her introduction to this life leaves her with a permanent reminder, a "scar blue as gun metal between the first and second knuckle" where she bit her hand during sex with her husband on their journey to the Plains (Morris 2). Cora's scar is an initiation into her new life as a plainswoman, and it "remains for life, mute testimony to her physical and emotional isolation" (Waldeland 14). Cora soon learns that the "Prairies were a place where women stopped talking," so amidst all of her fear and discomfort on the journey, Cora does not make a noise—already adopting the silence of the place (Gunnars 121).

Cora Atkins bears a child from her single sexual encounter with her husband, but she does not produce any sons for the farm. When judged by the expectations of frontierswomen, Cora begins a legacy of barrenness: "It is a curse in this family that the women bear only daughters if anything at all" (Morris 1). Similar to the opening of *The Stone Angel*, the opening passage of *Plains Song* reiterates a destiny of isolation and struggle for those living on the Plains. With only a daughter, the farm will not be passed along to a male heir: "She [Cora] had borne a daughter, to be fed and clothed, then offered on the marriage market. Who would be there to run the farm as they grew old" (Morris 36). Cora never produced a viable heir for the farm. Thus, the fragility and temporality of the homestead is established.

The barrenness flows into Cora's physical life as well. She only has sex with her husband once and avoids physical contact with him for the rest of their lives together. After years of marriage, Cora feels that "she knew him less than if they had never met," and she seems to find comfort in the fact that "He did not move toward her. He did not caress or strike her. He lay awake with his thoughts or he slept, or he snored, as if they had reached an understanding" (Morris 37, 36). Cora is most

comfortable in her relationship with her husband when they occupy separate realms and do not cross paths intimately.

The barrenness that Cora brings to the farm contradicts the expectations of frontierswomen. The stereotypical ideal reveals a woman on the Plains accompanied by a child: "one of her hands clasps the tiny fingers of a child, her other arm cradles a rifle or perhaps presses a baby against her breast. She is wife, mother, helpmate" (Riley 14). This stereotype is one that Cora soon dismantles. Emerson challenges his wife's choice to refrain from bearing more children by informing her that "What a woman needs is one thing, but what a farm needs is another" (Morris 36). Emerson voices his displeasure with his wife's choice, and Cora feels pressured by the expectations of fertility placed upon her—"They were heavy with her. They weighed her down more than the child"—but she nonetheless sticks to her decision and does not give birth to another child, even for the sake of the farm (37).

The relationship Cora has with her daughter Madge is also marked by a barrenness of connection. Serving as mother to Madge and surrogate mother to Sharon is not a natural undertaking for Cora. In fact, despite deep feelings for Madge, she does not feel particularly inclined to play with her daughter or Sharon: "She never handled the girls as tenderly as she did an egg" (Morris 88). Unlike Belle, who "couldn't seem to get enough of child caring and tending," Cora is relieved to be free of childcare "while there was so much to be done elsewhere" (40). The men are often found on the floor with the children playing and making physical contact with them, a pastime Cora never indulges in. Although Cora is a responsible mother, she does not have the maternal impulse toward her child: "She simply didn't feel the interest that Belle felt. She felt duties toward the child, and concern for her, but was not so eager as Belle to hug, fondle, and pet her" (46). As Madge develops into a woman and begins a family of her own, the disconnect between mother and daughter persists. In a scene where intimacy would be most natural, when Madge is in her corset discussing feminine health issues with her mother in the rented room during the Chicago trip, Cora closes herself off. She listens only because she "had no choice but to hear it. Not to see it, she closed her eyes" (140). Cora distances herself from her child as much as possible: "She hoped to minimize what she heard by saying nothing herself, keeping her eyes averted" (141). Cora does not feel

comfortable sharing this intimate encounter with her only child.

This hardening and disaffection is Cora's way of coping with her environment. In addition to finding repose in the constant work of the farm and in her distance from human contact, Cora adjusts to the isolation and loneliness she encounters daily by finding company in nonhuman outlets, such as her chickens, which provide her with not only companionship but a separate income. They become part of her daily routine, and she takes pride that "they were *her* chickens" (Morris 33). With the money from the eggs, Cora is able to enhance her small domestic space. She takes offence when Emerson questions her about the money: "When he came in from the fields . . . he found the porch screen latched and had to rap on it. His shoes were caked with field dirt. She asked him to take them off. Behind her he saw, gleaming as if wet, the linoleum that covered the floor of the kitchen, brightly colored as Christmas paper" (33). Cora makes these improvements to the home without consulting with her husband. She also indulges in music for comfort and culture. She buys a piano, also without consulting Emerson, and spends much time deliberating where it should go (62). Along with the kitchen updates, the piano is paid for with Cora's money, and she makes these purchases independently of her husband. Cora finds ways to fill her life with simple objects that occupy and beautify her domestic space. She does not invest her work or her money in cultivating the land.

Cora adjusts to her life on the Plains so thoroughly and adopts the nature of the Plains so successfully that moving off the land is a great strain on her. During her journey with Madge's family to the World's Fair in Chicago, Cora shuts down, revealing the extent to which she has become a creature of silence and isolation: "All of her functions had stopped" (Morris 140). Cora spends much of her time in Chicago ill and prefers to be alone in bed rather than among the crowd. Choosing not to visit Sharon, Cora spends her afternoon "Seated alone, in this throng of people . . . seized with a sadness so great her throat pained her" (143). Cora is not able to leave the isolation that has become an integral part of her person. She returns to the farm nearly broken, ready to reunite with the landscape she has grown accustomed to.

Even after Emerson dies, Cora cannot conceive leaving the place that she has so wholly adapted to. This solidifies Cora's claim to the farm, a farm Sharon comes to refer to as Cora's alone, and demonstrates Cora's

refusal to be merely a helpmate, as often assumed of frontierswomen. For the last phase of her life, Cora is a single woman living on the Plains, a reality, contrary to popular belief, not uncommon for women on the Plains. Cora's owner rather than helper designation, her single status, and her old age comprise some of the more "complex characteristic[s] of women settlers on the prairies and the Plains" (Riley 23). In challenging these stereotypes of frontierswomen, Cora's life complicates the generalizations of the Plains icon. Sharon at one point compares Cora to "a book of paintings in the library" with the "intense staring eyes of icons" (Morris 88). Cora, however, is more than a picture or an icon—she is a woman who challenges the assumptions of frontierswomen and who lives with a fierce individuality and a competency in managing her own life. Because Cora does not farm the land to generate a living off of it or produce children who can, she is deeply connected to it. In fact, her ability to coincide with the land rather than control it brings her peace and security. When Madge demands that Cora go through a trial phase of living off the farm, Cora refuses to eat until she is returned to her home (173). Cora is uncompromising in her choice to stay on the homestead regardless of failing health or any other obstacle. Her life and death is sealed to the Plains.

This marriage to the land gives Cora a permanence that Orion and Emerson fail to achieve. Not only does Cora outlive her generation of homesteaders, but she remains a strong presence even after death. When Sharon returns to Madison County, she is shocked that Caroline, Madge's daughter, openly criticizes Cora because "It seemed so obvious that Cora would hear, wherever she was" (Morris 199). Sharon believes that even in death Cora will hear that her granddaughter, Caroline, misses the "meaning of Cora's life, emphasizing the emptiness, drudgery, and lovelessness" instead of the strength and connection Cora built with the Plains (Waldeland 17). Furthermore, Cora's pickle relish is served at the family's dinner after her death, once again asserting Cora's continued, though silent, presence despite Sharon's fear that "Cora had been erased from the earth" (Morris 209, 214). Sharon remains aware of Cora's presence, and she "continues to feel the pull of the lives, especially Cora's, spent and spilled on the Plains and finally understands and values the dignity if not the sacrifice implicit in those lives" (Waldeland 19). By aligning herself with the land, Cora creates a lasting presence

that would have otherwise been impossible.

The marks of Cora's presence on the land are, however, fragile, as Sharon finds when she returns for Cora's funeral. Driving past the old homestead, Sharon witnesses the death of the place that Cora took such pains to preserve. Caroline informs Sharon that "Nobody wanted it . . . There was nothing worth saving" (Morris 200). However, since Cora tied herself to the character of the land and not the manmade structures placed upon it, her impact on the Plains outlives that of the farmhouse: "Was it the emptiness that evoked the presence of Cora? Not her image, not her person, but the great alarming silence of her nature" (200). Emptiness and silence is Cora's harmony with her surroundings, so even without these buildings, the essence of Cora remains.

What Caroline fails to recognize and what Sharon finally realizes is that Cora's will to "not-speak is an act of refusal"—Cora's refusal to comply (Gunnar 126). Sharon is aware of Cora's strength, and she recognizes the connection Cora shared with the Plains. In this recognition, Sharon understands that Cora's silence was not a surrender to Emerson or to feminine expectations, but a silence she shared with the land that deepened and strengthened her life on the Plains. In accordance with Sharon's observation, Cora's "soul had made its peace with things" (Morris 215) and her imprint on the land and lives of those who shared the Plains with her lingers.

The permanence sought by dynasty builders proves to be feeble. However, those who adapt to the land find permanence and peace in joining with the seclusion and silence that marks the Plains. This lasting impact is brought about by joining with the land, not fighting to break it. Hagar and Cora did not fit into the expectations of helpmate and heir provider that frontierswomen were so often categorized by. Because of this resistance, they become a lasting presence in their ability to adapt to the nature of the land. The exposure to the wilderness of the Plains, its isolation and rigidity, hardens those who live upon it. Those who live on the Plains with an understanding of its desolation, who can embrace its silence and adopt its hardness, are able to survive and persist. Often misunderstood as monolithic icons, women like Hagar and Cora unveil stories that deepen the understanding of the personal lives of women on the Plains and reveal the complexity of their existence on such a landscape. The ability to endure the isolation of rural life is

a revelation of strength and capability, where adapting successfully to the environment rather than demanding that the environment adapt to human expansion creates a sense of solidity and continuity.

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