UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: May 01, 2009

I, Kathryn C. Bunthoff, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:
PhD
in English & Comparative Literature

It is entitled:
Consuming Nature: Literature of the World that Feeds Us

Student Signature: Kathryn Bunthoff

This work and its defense approved by:
Committee Chair: Tom LeClair
Leland Person
James Schiff

Approval of the electronic document:
I have reviewed the Thesis/Dissertation in its final electronic format and certify that it is an accurate copy of the document reviewed and approved by the committee.
Committee Chair signature: Tom LeClair
Consuming Nature: Literature of the World that Feeds Us

A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

in the Department of English and Comparative Literature
of the College of Arts and Sciences

by

Kathryn Cole Bunthoff

M.A., University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 2002
B.A., University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 1999

Committee Chair: Tom LeClair, Ph.D.
Abstract

This dissertation analyzes works by five North American writers who confront aspects of foodways in their novels in inventive and socially conscious ways. Jane Smiley, Austin Clarke, Norman Rush, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ruth Ozeki make issues of food and agriculture central to their fiction, and in so doing they encourage readers to reconsider the food they eat, and their roles as consumers, in a more critical light. I contend that the novels I discuss evidence a growing concern among writers for the perversity, and unsustainability, of contemporary foodways.

Considered individually, each novel makes self-conscious connections between its thematic focus and its literary form. These points of resonance ask readers to consider the production of texts, and the constructedness of accepted truths, in much the same way that they prompt readers to consider the production of the food. Considered as a group, these novels warrant attention for their literary merit as well as for the timely issues they confront.

Furthermore, these books not only warrant consideration for their thematic and formal concerns; they also require ecocritical scholarship to expand. As ecocriticism has developed from a celebration of wilderness narratives and natural history essays into a more inclusive and nuanced study of literature dealing with far-reaching human environmental relationships, a consideration of human environmental consumption—foodways and food choices—seems an apt area of focus.

The title of this dissertation, Consuming Nature, evokes figurative as well as literal consumption: the point at which nature blurs with human body. Food is a profound link with the natural world. The title of this project speaks to a literal as well as a metaphorical consumption. The consumption of food is paralleled by the consumption of texts, specifically texts that ponder the relationship between nature and culture. Both food and texts not only become a part of us, but become us by sustaining and transforming our lives in countless ways. In turn, we continue to alter and modify the world around us through the production of food and the production and transmission of texts. Furthermore, the consumption of food and of texts is all but unavoidable.
Acknowledgements

To my husband, Jason Bunthoff, who knew I could finish what was on my plate;

my mother, Susan Cole, for her amazing spirit and support;

and my son Elliott, who makes each day sparkle.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One
Introduction
Consuming Nature: Literature of the World that Feeds Us

2

Chapter Two
Putting Food on the Table in Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*

30

Chapter Three
The Perverse Sweetness of Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe*

68

Chapter Four
All You Can Eat: Surplus and Mastery in Norman Rush’s *Mating*

98

Chapter Five
Tuning in to Food Networks: Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*

132

Chapter Six
The Meat and Potatoes of Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*

154

Works Cited

191
Chapter One

Introduction

Consuming Nature: Literature of the World that Feeds Us

In “Farmer in Chief,” a recent open letter to the next U. S. President, Michael Pollan asserts the importance of food chains and food issues in American policymaking, arguing that our food systems “designed to maximize production at all costs and relying on cheap energy to do so” are economically and environmentally unsustainable, posing considerable challenges to our country’s security and progress (64). Food, he argues, is an unacknowledged political issue, for the next president will “quickly discover that the way we currently grow, process and eat food in America” lurks beneath the issues that have received considerable airtime: health care, energy, and climate change (64). Pollan’s letter, featured in the October 12, 2008, New York Times Magazine, is his latest in a series of writings aimed to increase public awareness of the perversity of contemporary food systems.

With his 2006 The Omnivore’s Dilemma, Pollan introduced the American public to the notion that the act of consuming food is a primary environmental relationship, asserting that “the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds” (10). As Pollan traces four meals from source to plate, he indicts our contemporary industrialized foodways, claiming that “what is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all those relationships and connections” (10). Lest our supermarkets and convenience foods allow us to forget the fact, food is nature, however removed it may seem, and
our consumption of food is an essential, fundamental ecological relationship, regardless of our attitudes about nature. The consumption of food renders the natural environment indistinguishable from the human body, thereby incorporating us into—rather than separating us from—the natural world.

Pollan is not alone, as numerous other writers have shed serious doubt upon the widely accepted notion among Americans that inexpensive and abundant food is a laudable situation to be accepted, not questioned. These writers seek to reveal and politicize Americans’ unexamined diets and energy-intensive foodways. Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2000) exposes the inner workings of the burgeoning American fast-food industry, from advertising campaigns to offal, creating skepticism among reader-consumers and making the simple drive-thru fast-food meal a bit more complex than it casually appears. Andrew Kimbrell’s *Fatal Harvest* (2002) decries a broken relationship between industrial agriculture and American consumers, cataloguing the ills of large-scale farming methods that are now the norm. Ann Vileisis attempts to alleviate the estrangement of American consumers from their food in *Kitchen Literacy* (2007) by making a case for a return to simpler foods and a reclaimed knowledge of our foods’ historical and biological origins. Marion Nestle in *What to Eat* (2006) focuses on the labyrinthine American supermarket, deciphering claims of nutrition and food marketing from a public health and nutrition perspective. Michael Pollan’s *In Defense of Food* (2008), a follow up to *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), likewise dispenses advice for healthier food systems as well as healthier individual habits of consumption, which he sums up succinctly on the dust jacket: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” These are just a handful of the numerous texts that have appeared recently to question the environmental, ethical, and nutritional soundness of our foodways.
These texts emerge at a crucial moment: food has become a newsworthy issue, as every aspect of the food industry suggests grand scale, even excess, from globalized foodways to Americans’ overconsumption of what many consider an overabundance of food. Marion Nestle observes that “overabundant food and its consequences occur in the context of increasing centralization and globalization of the food industry and of altered patterns of work, welfare, and government. The food system is only one aspect of society, but it is unusual in its universality: Everyone eats” (26). In fact, the United States food industry produces many more calories (and overwhelmingly in the form of fats and sugars) than needed by the American population. Unsurprisingly, nearly two-thirds of American adults are overweight, and almost one-third is obese (NIDDK). As Michael Pollan (and others) have observed, overconsumption is common because “Americans spend less on food, as a percentage of disposable income, than any other industrialized nation, and probably less than any people in the history of the world” (Omnivore 243). Government statistics show roughly seven percent of household income going to food, with residents of the U.K. and Canada spending roughly nine percent (Economic Research Service). Recent rising food costs have sparked public outcry, but we actually spend a much smaller percentage of our income on food than nearly any other nation in the world.

The recent increase in American food prices is not difficult to understand. Because our inexpensive food travels far to reach us, any increase in fuel cost will ripple throughout the economy, making our far-flung food systems economically vulnerable. The typical food item travels nearly 1,500 miles from its origin to its final destination. In “The Oil We Eat,” Richard Manning holds that “Every single calorie we eat is backed by at least a calorie of oil, more like ten,” so that the energy required for the processing and transportation of our food greatly exceeds the caloric benefit of the food itself (42). Globetrotting foods also periodically spark fears of
food safety and prompt consumers to consider conditions of food production. The spinach, ground beef, luncheon meat, and tomato scares in recent years repeatedly illustrate consumers’ vulnerability in such vast food economies.

This litany of recent food concerns suggests a fractured relationship between consumer and food, and superficially it appears to reiterate human separateness from a natural world that we nevertheless depend upon for daily sustenance. But the writers who have recently taken up the cause of food and foodways argue that this separateness is not only unnatural but also unsustainable and dangerous. Pollan claims that “forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat” (Omnivore 10-11). Pollan painstakingly traces foods back to their sources to give readers a sense of industry transparency simply not available to them otherwise, especially not at their local supermarkets, because “like every other creature on earth, humans take part in a food chain, and our place in that food chain, or web, determines to a considerable extent what kind of creature we are” (6).

* * *

This dissertation examines six works of contemporary literary fiction that address these food concerns. Collectively, they present compelling analysis of transnational food systems and illustrate the potential of the novel as a vehicle of cultural critique. It is no secret among critics that fiction that directly confronts pressing political or social issues is often looked down upon, with the implied notion that the offending writer risks sacrificing literary craft, which is at its best a “timeless art,” to a fleeting cause of the day. Politically-minded fiction such as Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin arguably support this
assessment. Barbara Kingsolver, who has taken up issues of food and agriculture in her fiction, addresses the difficulty of dealing with such issues in narrative fiction:

In my professional life I’ve learned that as long as I write novels and nonfiction books about strictly human conventions and constructions, I’m taken seriously. But when my writing strays into that muddy territory where humans are forced to own up to our dependency on the land, I’m apt to be declared quaintly irrelevant by the small, acutely urban clique that decides in this country what will be called worthy literature. (That clique does not, fortunately, hold much sway over what people actually read.) I understand their purview, I think. I realize I’m beholden to people working in urban centers for many things I love: they publish books, invent theatre, produce films and music. But if I had not been raised such a polite southern girl, I’d offer these critics a blunt proposition: I’ll go a week without attending a movie or concert, you go a week without eating food, and at the end of it we’ll sit down together and renegotiate “quaintly irrelevant.” (“Foreword” xi)

Kingsolver hints at the division between culture and nature at the root of this discussion. Fiction, literary critics seem to assert, is in the realm of culture, not nature. But Kingsolver argues for her fiction’s relevance by underscoring the unavoidability of nature, specifically the sheer pervasiveness of food in our lives. She insists that “whatever lofty things you might accomplish today, you will do them only because you first ate something that grew out of dirt,” regardless of how far removed from that dirt a food product (Pollan would call it an “edible foodlike substance”) may be (xii).

Despite the stigma of the socially interested novel, works of fiction can function as important catalysts in changing public opinion. Overtly political texts like Harriet Beecher
Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* spark enduring and lively critical discussions. Though some criticize Stowe’s novel for its simplistic adherence to the conventions of sentimental women’s fiction of the day, others commend its power to swiftly galvanize public opinion against the institution of slavery. Thus a tension persists regarding the novel’s capabilities as a political text and as a vehicle of commentary on the world beyond the page. Novels in this study raise the question of “How much is too much?” and suggest that artistic success is largely gauged by how the novel disguises its political message. Along these lines, Jane Smiley argues in “Say it ain’t so, Huck” against the unequivocal canonization of Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and instead for Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, asserting that “good” literature can, in fact, be overtly morally charged: “If ‘great’ literature has any purpose, it is to help us face up to our responsibilities instead of enabling us to avoid them once again by lighting out for the territory” (7).

This dissertation analyzes works by five North American writers who confront aspects of foodways in their novels in inventive and socially conscious ways. Jane Smiley, Austin Clarke, Norman Rush, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ruth Ozeki make issues of food and agriculture central to their narratives, and in so doing they encourage readers to reconsider the food they eat, and their roles as consumers, in a more critical light. Taken together, these texts suggest that the world beyond the supermarket, though largely invisible to American consumers, is rife with inconsistencies and abuses that make long-term sustainability of such a system impossible. I contend that these works evidence a growing sense of concern among writers for the sustainability of contemporary foodways.

Through a retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* explores the tenuous survival of a Midwestern family farm in an age of industrialized agriculture.
Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* employs confessional narrative in a look back at the history of Barbados as part of Britain’s sugar trade, finding connections between the human and environmental abuses of a colonial sugar plantation. *Mating*, by Norman Rush, explores globalization’s effects on food economies of sub-Saharan Africa through a first-person narration by a graduate student in nutritional anthropology. Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Prodigal Summer* attempts to educate readers about food issues from an ecological perspective, making a case for the consumption of more locally produced foods. Ruth Ozeki’s two novels, *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, take on the American meat industry and the genetic engineering of food crops. As a group, these texts’ thematic commonalities are readily apparent, at first plainly suggesting a collection of politically motivated texts. And this is not an inaccurate observation. However, in their exploration of issues of agriculture and food consumption, these texts offer much deeper, more thoughtful, and profound analysis of these issues, not as merely issues of the day, but as fundamental aspects of the contemporary human condition.

These books can be read as breaking a pervasive silence surrounding contemporary food issues. Stickers on supermarket produce and labels on plastic-wrapped ground beef offer few clues to help consumers learn anything about the food they consume. This invisible history of our food is exposed by writers who insist that American consumers should know—have a right to know—how, where, and by whom their food is produced. The absence of this information creates both the need and the space for ample written discourse on these issues. Writers are confronting the information vacuum surrounding consumers and the irony that our abundance and variety of food is accompanied by our dearth of knowledge about that food, such as its origins and conditions of production. Writers are attempting to give it a history, giving
consumers information, through narrative. As a result, the burgeoning public sentiment regarding food in the U.S. has developed largely in response to written discourse.

In the same way that we consume food, written discourse reaches us individually, and we process or read it in intensely personal ways. In the same way, we determine what we consume—food or texts—by making choices as individuals (though necessarily constrained by a variety of influencing factors). And much of the written discourse surrounding issues of industrial foodways has been through works of nonfiction, most often investigative journalism. And with good reason: this genre addresses squarely the issue at hand and appeals directly to readers for awareness and, more implicitly, for activism.

But these novels are far from simply exercises in activism; my analysis reveals a mastery of craft, as each novel takes advantage of the novelistic form, particularly its capacity for narrative complexity, which allows each author to vividly render humans’ fraught existence in environmental systems. Considered individually, each novel makes self-conscious connections between its thematic focus and its literary form. These points of resonance ask readers to consider the production of texts, and the constructedness of accepted truths, in much the same way that they prompt readers to consider the production of the foods they consume. These fictional works serve as vehicles of truth while simultaneously castigating the means by which we propagate and disseminate objective truths. Even Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Prodigal Summer*, which is the novel least warmly received by critics, reveals a keen awareness of the novel’s ability to render intricate ecological webs visible for popular audiences. Considered as a group, the novels I discuss warrant attention for their literary merit as well as for the timely issues they grapple with.
Furthermore, these books not only warrant consideration for their thematic and formal concerns; they also require ecocritical scholarship to expand. As ecocriticism has developed from a celebration of wilderness narratives and natural history essays into a more inclusive and nuanced study of literature dealing with a wide range of human environmental relationships, a consideration of human environmental consumption—foodways and food choices—seems an apt area of focus. This project highlights contemporary texts that bear out writers’ concerns with these issues.

The title of this dissertation, *Consuming Nature*, evokes figurative as well as literal consumption: the point at which nature becomes indistinguishable from the human body. Though the abundance and convenience offered by supermarkets allow us to forget the fact, food *is* a profound link with the natural world. The title of this project speaks to a literal as well as a metaphorical consumption. The consumption of food is paralleled by the consumption of texts, specifically texts that ponder the relationship between nature and culture. As food is consumed, sustaining and invisibly changing the consumer, texts are likewise consumed, absorbed by readers. Both food and texts not only become a part of us, but become us by sustaining and transforming our lives in countless ways. In turn, we continue to alter and modify the world around us through the production of food and the production and transmission of texts. Furthermore, the consumption of food and of texts is all but unavoidable.

* * *

By weighing in on food as an environmental issue, these writers echo Frederick Turner’s insistence that the act of growing and consuming food is one of the “great mediators between nature and culture” (50). The perceived distance between humans and the food they eat is noted by Norman Wirzba, who echoes Pollan’s sentiments by lamenting that “Food, for the most part,
is an industrial product. As such its character and quality, as well as the conditions under which it is produced, are determined by the demands of industrial and market efficiency” (11).

Likewise Richard Manning observes in *Against the Grain* that farms produce “commodities,” not foods: “the produce of farm fields is no longer a diverse flow of foods to tables so much as inputs into a series of factories” (97). The recent efforts toward biofuels development show, with perverse clarity, that food crops are, first and foremost, commodities, and can easily become commodities (like fuel) instead of human food.

In “Cultivating the American Garden” Frederick Turner identifies this divide between nature and culture as problematical:

> This ideological opposition of culture and nature—with no mediating term—has had real consequences. More often than need be, Americans confronted with a natural landscape have either exploited it or designated it a wilderness area. The polluter and the ecology freak are two faces of the same coin; they both perpetuate a theory about nature that allows no alternative to raping it or tying it up in a plastic bag to protect it from contamination. (45)

This common conception of nature as a sphere separate from the human realm has caused the emergence of ecological literary criticism, or “ecocriticism”: a critical focus on literature that acknowledges, either directly or indirectly, an awareness of the importance and complexities of natural environments. This illusion of human distance from the natural world has been perpetuated in the tradition of American nature writing. As Dana Phillips argues in *The Truth of Ecology*, wilderness is a “favorite terrain of most nature writers,” despite the fact that “it has always been more a state of mind than a reality” (233). The distance between humans and nature, or between culture and nature, Phillips asserts, is neither terribly great nor terribly definite;
culture and nature, in fact, are “thoroughly implicated in each other” and “the irreconcilability of nature and culture is a matter of literary tradition” (22, 233). In other words, humans are a part of, rather than apart from, “nature.”

Furthermore, if “human transformations of physical nature have made the two [nature and culture] increasingly indistinguishable,” environmentally focused literature suddenly becomes more diverse and polyvocal and less easily defined (Buell Writing 3). A growing number of critics assert that the realm of the human and the realm of nature are segregated by a much blurrier barrier than traditional nature writers and their adherents would have us believe. And as humans consume nature—and as creatures of the natural world, human consumption of the natural world is an unavoidable fact—we transform the world around us in countless ways while underscoring our own physical nature. And nowhere, as I contend in this project, is this consumption of nature more fundamental and more immediate than in the act of consuming food.

Though the writers I discuss here voice concerns that have recently received popular attention, their work justifies more enduring interest and inclusion under the umbrella of environmentally focused fiction. As early as 1823, James Fenimore Cooper’s The Pioneers offered an early lesson in environmental conservation by acknowledging the insatiable appetites of settlers as manifested in their “wasty ways.” Marmaduke Temple’s desire to develop and improve the land is contrasted, of course, by Natty Bumppo’s commitment to living lightly on the land. The friction that develops, between the “laws of man” and the “laws of the land,” pits culture against nature, despite Temple’s honorable and prudent intentions toward “wise use” of the land. The novel suggests that development is ultimately inevitable, and “wise use” is promoted against the nostalgic backdrop of Leatherstocking’s early iteration of the Leave No Trace ethic. Leatherstocking’s exclamation that he will “eat of no man’s wasty ways” is
contrasted by pivotal moments in the narrative that suggest the “wasty” use of wilderness as recreational playground, such as the disagreements over hunting rights, the use of dynamite for fishing, and the wanton decimation of a flock of pigeons for the simple pleasure of killing them (265). Cooper’s indictment of such behaviors depends upon nostalgia for a wilderness frontier that has already faded at the time of his writing.

Roderick Nash finds echoes of Cooper’s Natty Bumppo in Thoreau’s *Walden*, citing evidence of Thoreau’s ardent desire to maintain a balance between civilization and wilderness rather than simply championing the latter:

> Previously most Americans had revered the rural, agrarian tradition as a release from both wilderness and from high civilization. They stood, so to speak, with both feet in the center of the spectrum of environments. Thoreau, on the other hand, arrived at the middle by straddling. He rejoiced in the extremes and, by keeping a foot in each, believed he could extract the best of both worlds. The rural was the point of equilibrium between the poles. (94-95)

Lawrence Buell points out Thoreau’s “unwillingness to write about social life at Walden”: “the segmentation of ‘nature’ from ‘civilization,’ ‘country’ from ‘town,’ already endemic to pastoral becomes even more accentuated” in his writings (*Environmental Imagination* 128). Noting that Thoreau championed what is now categorized as sustainable agriculture, he qualifies Thoreau’s enthusiasm by pointing out that his interest in agriculture was not at all unique at the time but actually “faddish among affluent nineteenth-century Bostonians to take an active interest in farming methods” (*Environmental Imagination* 129,130).

Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901) suggests that the “wise use” advocated by Cooper in *The Pioneers* has given way to the insatiable appetite for profits concordant with the rise of
commodity (as opposed to subsistence) farming. The “nature” in Norris’s novel is manifested by vast fields of wheat, which are described in oceanic terms as a “force” and a “colossal power,” neither a cooperant nor an antagonist, but rather a transcendent force that is never completely harnessed by human agricultural endeavors (448, 635). The massive scale of grain production depicted by the novel affords abstraction; as Conlogue explains, “The remoteness of Norris’s farmers from nature foretells farming’s increasingly abstract relationship with the natural world since the beginning of the twentieth century” (60). Insatiable appetites, power, and greed are mirrored by abject want and hunger as industrialization polarizes the haves from the have-nots and power feeds upon itself.

The wheat at the center of The Octopus is not simply a thematic element; Norris casts the wheat as a force that transcends human control or governance. Fittingly, a complicit railroad official falls into a ship’s hold that is filling with wheat for export, and the grain essentially “devours” the man “with a force all its own” (644). At the novel’s end, “the Railroad had prevailed. The ranches had been seized in the tentacles of the octopus; the iniquitous burden of extortionate freight rates had been imposed like a yoke of iron. The monster had killed” (650).

Apart from the burgeoning power of industrial networks, in which the wheat and the railroad play integral parts, the novel thematically explores appetites and devouring. The actions of the railroad are justified in the novel by a wealthy character, an investor and shipbuilder, who insists upon the country’s need for “new markets, greater markets,” asserting that “We must march with the course of empire, not against it” (306). The grain farmers’ appetites for profit are confronted by the railroad’s appetites for profit as well. And the grain, at the end of the novel, is being shipped across the Pacific Ocean to markets abroad, where its sale and consumption will satisfy literal as well as economic appetites. Wheat is described as “the germ of life, the
sustenance of the whole world, the food of an entire People” (177). Michael Pollan notes its integral role in the contemporary agricultural economy, claiming that

Grain is the closest thing in nature to an industrial commodity: storable, portable, fungible, ever the same today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. Since it can be accumulated and traded, grain is a form of wealth. It is a weapon, too, as Earl Butz once had the bad taste to mention in public; the nations with the biggest surpluses of grain have always exerted power over the ones in short supply. (Omnivore 201)

Norris’s socialist leanings and criticisms of industrialization are echoed in Upton Sinclair’s muckraking The Jungle (1906), famed for its immediate and considerable social impact, which prompted the passage of The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Sinclair’s concern with the plight of the worker was quickly overshadowed by readers’ concern with the novel’s depiction of squalid meatpacking conditions. The Jungle’s depiction of meat processing operations, in which animals are reduced to seemingly unrecognizable products, suggests a connection with the dehumanized lives its characters lead. The characters, like livestock, are depicted as cogs in an industrial machine, not people who possess a satisfying degree of agency in their own lives. As cogs, both are consumed by a burgeoning industrial society in which people are not simply reduced to the status of animals, but both human characters and animals are reduced to industrial inputs. Both are consumed, or rather devoured, as a matter of course.

Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! (1913) and My Ántonia (1915) offer perhaps the most unequivocally nostalgic depiction of an American pastoral landscape and a poetically romanticized view of the rise of industrial farming, markedly contrasting Norris’s bleak naturalist depiction of bonanza farms in The Octopus. In both of these novels, Cather
romanticizes large-scale farming by blurring the division between fields and domestic spaces with descriptions of kitchen gardens that suggest the landscape’s fertility and abundance. In *O Pioneers!* protagonist Alexandra Bergson manages the family farm upon her father’s death, and through her perseverance and land speculation—paired with her brothers’ manual labor—she slowly develops one of the largest and most successful farms in the region. *My Ántonia* is a nostalgic remembering of the life of Antonia Shimerda told from the perspective of her childhood friend Jim Burden, who looks back upon his simple, rural childhood from his position years later working to represent railroad interests.

Both of Cather’s novels demonstrate a remarkable, and perhaps understandable, tendency to celebrate the agricultural progress of immigrant families on the Nebraska prairie by offering rich descriptions *not* of their increasing acres of tillage, but of the gardens, orchards, and wild growth along roadsides and fencerows. These descriptions represent the taming of the prairie and its transformation into farmland, but it is important to note that their focus is ultimately not what they are perceived as celebrating. A closer look at these novels reveals a curious dichotomy that enables the continuation of the American pastoral myth even as that myth contrasts with large-scale production agriculture.

Rather than simply romanticizing her depictions of the prairie turned farmland in these novels, Cather instead conflates description of farmland with descriptions of more domesticated landscapes, such as gardens and orchards. The ultimate impact of such pastoral description is a persistent American agricultural ideal that shows little, if any, similarity to contemporary landscapes of large-scale, production-focused agriculture, which originated at the beginning of the twentieth century.
Unlike Cather’s novels, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1938) casts a cynical gaze at the rise of industrial agriculture as it foregrounds the plight of a sharecropping family faced with persistent drought coupled with plummeting produce prices during the Great Depression. This jeremiad, like Norris’s *The Octopus*, calls attention to the unequal distribution of power and wealth among farm workers and land owners. The “monster” in this novel is figured as the bank, which “has to have profits all the time,” for “when the monster stops growing, it dies” (44).

America’s breadbasket deteriorates in Steinbeck’s novel to a desert of constant want and hunger. Echoing *The Octopus*, characters’ fundamental state of hunger parallels hunger for wealth, profit, and power on the part of landowners and power-holders. As the Joads move from the crippling drought and absence of topsoil of the Dust Bowl to the flood waters of the novel’s conclusion, the distribution of food, and wealth, in the novel is likewise unequal; the bleak final meal depicted in the novel consists of Rose of Sharon nursing a dying man; with no food to be had from the land, the starving sharecroppers are essentially feeding upon themselves.

Industrialized agriculture’s efficiency and production potential—the potential to feed the “starving masses”—are depicted as a farce, as those who work the land with their own hands endure starvation. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel that intended to enact social change, or at least to engage its readership toward the project of social justice through class awareness and acknowledgement of economic inequality. The novel turns the agrarian myth, so pervasive in American history, on its ear, drawing from Biblical influences as well as those of documentary to “rewrite” a mythical past.

What Cooper, Thoreau, Norris, Cather, and Steinbeck together suggest is not only that the link between humans and nature created through food is a complex one, but that the improvements promised by the industrialization of agriculture (aimed at increased efficiency,
uniformity, profitability) further complicate matters. These authors show, in differing ways and
to varying degrees, a growing sense of abstraction, of landscape as a commodity rather than as a
place, as farms increase in size and production capacity. These books, and those that follow,
ponder this abstraction, or practical distance from the land, made possible by agriculture’s
industrialization, and reveal to readers the increasingly remote conditions of food production.

* * * * *

Two critical analyses that focus on farming and agriculture in American literature help to
frame and contextualize my dissertation. Stephanie Sarver’s *Uneven Land: Nature and
Agriculture in American Writing* (1999) and William Conologue’s *Working the Garden:
American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (2001) consider agriculture from an
eccritical perspective, acknowledging agriculture as an enterprise wherein humans shape and
alter their environments in order to sustain themselves, underscoring the inevitability of this
relationship.

Sarver’s *Uneven Land* identifies the conceptual ambiguity of agriculture as an area of
literary study, “belonging both to a green world of nature, a realm that exists independent of
human control, and to a world defined by a human culture that dominates and influences nature”
(4). Sarver examines the period of 1860 to 1920, focusing on the writings of Ralph Waldo
Emerson, Frank Norris, William Ellsworth Smythe, Hamlin Garland, and Liberty Hyde Bailey as
they elucidate responses to the modernization of agricultural methods in the United States. “At
issue,” she says, “is not whether agriculture is bad or good but how agriculture figures in our
experience and in our earthly existence” (9).

In *Working the Garden* William Conlogue focuses specifically on the debate between
small-scale family farming and industrial agribusiness, offering a literary response to this debate
through an “analysis of a wide range of farm-centered texts” (4). Conlogue offers his work as a
contribution to extant ecocritical scholarship by arguing that “discussions of this connection
[between literature and the physical environment] focus overwhelmingly on wild nature, not
farm landscapes” (9).

Conlogue and Sarver assert that the enterprise of food production as a way of life is an
environmental relationship, therefore warranting inclusion within the scope of environmentally
focused literary criticism. Conlogue explains that an exploration of the literature of farming “ties
the nation’s most life-sustaining activity—food production—to how it thinks through its most
pressing and potentially explosive issues,” namely issues of environmental sustainability, racial
and class tension, and the availability of safe food and water supplies (10).

My project likewise seeks to broaden the scope and complexity of literary scholarship;
like Conlogue and Sarver, I seek to open relevant texts to wider critical attention. Unlike
Conlogue or Sarver, who both focus specifically on the agricultural enterprise, this project more
broadly considers how the act of food consumption creates complex relationships between
human consumers and the systems that comprise the surrounding natural world. By highlighting
this relationship of consumption, the texts I consider call for increased consumer awareness and
concern. I posit that by shifting our ecocritical gaze to contemporary writers’ explorations of
food consumption we may adopt less idealistic, more complex, and more careful understandings
of our responsibilities in a changing world. These books also acknowledge the unique potential
of the novel as a vehicle of contemporary commentary as well as an imaginative creation,
explicitly calling attention to the food we consume through our consumption of literature.

*  *  *  *

19
Because I assert that this project contributes to the growing body of scholarship called ecological literary criticism, a brief consideration of this area of critical thought will allow me to place my argument in response to this emergent critical trend. While gaining credence and popularity among literary critics, ecocriticism still remains a relatively new and contested realm of literary interpretation. Cheryll Glotfelty’s *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) is a landmark text itself, putting ecological literary criticism on the map with a collection of essays by various critics and writers who respond to the call for more critical attention to “literature of nature.” The *Reader* makes the case that, since literary criticism has developed in response to contemporary societal pressures, the pressure of environmental crisis likewise deserves critical attention. Ecocriticism as defined by Glotfelty is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” or an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). Ecocriticism’s main objective, according to Glotfelty, is “consciousness raising,” for she asks, “How can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them?” (xxiv). This anthology argues for ecocriticism’s relevance and timeliness as well as attempts to flesh out what ecocriticism may look like. Glotfelty’s introductory discussion of ecocriticism foregrounds literary criticism as a practice that engages literary texts in the service of environmental concern and education. Though she anticipates, rightly enough, that ecocriticism will have its detractors, she insists that writers have in fact been focusing their energies on environmental issues for quite some time.

In *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell finds in American literary history “the spectacle of having identified representation of the natural environment as a major theme while marginalizing the literature devoted specifically to it and reading the canonical books in ways that minimize their interest in representing the environment as such” (10). In other
words, he says, “we find it hard to resist the resistance to nature that is second nature to us in our capacity as critical readers, whatever our behavior in everyday life” (11). In *The Environmental Imagination* Buell prompts readers to open themselves to an “odyssey of reorientation” by “reconsidering the place of the environment in our conventions of reading and writing” beginning with Thoreau’s *Walden* (23). Thoreau’s writings, he posits, are an apt departure point for a discussion of nature writing as a foundational element of American literature. His *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) shift critical focus from nature writing itself to the growing body of literary criticism surrounding it. The former work argues for expanding ecocriticism’s boundaries to include notions of toxicity, urbanism, modernization, environmental justice, and globalism; the latter addresses the debate over ecocriticism as a viable discipline, picking it apart for its various modes and motives and reiterating the sense of urgent environmental stewardship, and the ethical and political commitments, that necessarily accompany such scholarship.

Dana Phillips, author of *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (2003), offers a key critical voice among ecocritics, challenging critics and scholars and claiming that it is “time to disenchant ecocriticism” (40). Phillips charges that the difference between “ecology as a ‘point of view’” and “ecology as a science” is a crucial distinction that ecocritics have nearly wholly overlooked (44). Holding that ecology is a science of biotic relationships, he notes scientists’ general skepticism of the notion of harmonious and balanced systems in ecosystems. Phillips holds that ecocriticism must be “more willing to hybridize than it has been” in terms of the hard delineation between nature and culture (39). “By taking a more skeptical approach,” he insists, “ecocriticism might avoid the dilemma posed by the rejection of theory, on the one hand, as needless abstraction, and by theory’s rejection, on the other hand, of
Phillips calls for a theoretical or disciplinary expansion, or complication, of ecocriticism.

Patrick Murphy, in *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (2000) also offers a call for an expansion of the scope of ecocriticism. He notes the distinction between “writing” and “literature,” and calls attention to the genre he calls “environmental fiction,” which he says has been overlooked by the vast majority of critics and teachers of environmental writing. Murphy makes a distinction between nature writing, nature literature, environmental writing, and environmental literature, asserting that the latter category has been largely ignored, and this oversight has shaped what ecocriticism has become—and what it has failed to become—thus far. He categorizes environmental fiction as “novels that reveal and develop themes around and about the environments of their fictions, because they simultaneously make unfamiliar the reader’s home environment and render it more noticeable and, sometimes, even more palpable” (14).

According to Murphy, environmental novels “help to remind us of that proximity [of the natural and constructed environment in which we live]; at the same time they pose problems and solutions regarding contemporary humanity’s relationship with the rest of nature” (14). He notes that though a new way of thinking (environmental concern) has spawned ecocriticism, “little has been said about fiction,” though its consideration is warranted because it “continues to be the genre of the greatest stylistic and thematic innovations and variations in contemporary aesthetic writing” (15). Murphy finds in the short history of ecocriticism a “nonfictional prejudice,” a preoccupation with nonfictional prose above all other forms of writing, noting this prejudice is even present in Glotfelty’s *The Ecocriticism Reader*, which is held by many as a foundational text in this emergent field. Murphy insists that “writers of nature-oriented fiction utilize multiple
modes of representation in the service of drawing attention to environmental issues, environmental conditions, and human-nonhuman interaction” (23, 29). He supports the valuing of environmental literature, or “ecofiction,” which he defines as being driven by narrative rather than a text in which the narrative works in the service of another primary focus (42).

My analysis identifies fictional texts, excepting one memoir, which can easily be categorized as environmental fiction—and even the memoir, one could argue, is a highly constructed, narrative-driven text. Though these texts have varying degrees of environmental focus and educative aims, all demonstrate a clear attention to character and narrative. Likewise, my work here is an ecocritical endeavor. Though I acknowledge the challenges to ecocriticism that Phillips poses in his call for a truer, more scientifically informed interdisciplinary effort, I align this project with Murphy’s call for greater attention paid to environmental fiction, considering texts that wrestle with the environmental relationships created by food production and consumption. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* Buell observes that “environmental criticism in literary studies is increasingly moving—albeit irregularly—in the direction of extending the concept of environment beyond the arena of the ‘natural’ alone and in the process is becoming increasingly sophisticated in its address to how, in both literature and in history, ‘natural’ and ‘social’ environments impinge on each other” (127). Buell claims that in terms of “humanistic environmental criticism,” “the soundest positions . . . will be those that come closest to speaking both to humanity’s most essential needs and to the state and fate of the earth and its nonhuman creatures independent of those needs, as well as to balancing if not also the reconciliation of the two” (127).

Buell’s call for consideration of the interfaces of natural and social environments is seemingly answered by recent nonfiction that evidences a larger concern with environmental
sustainability, or determining ways in which humans’ natural resource needs can continue to be met while maintaining environmental health and integrity indefinitely. Continuing this line of thinking, ecocentric or environmentally-focused thought inevitably returns to questions of how humans use and shape their environments, so that accordingly the most effective long-term solutions will take human existence into account rather than seeking to restore/maintain environmental health by segregating humans from nature ideologically and physically. My dissertation follows this call for “humanistic environmental criticism” for in our consumption of food, the realms of natural and social converge. My focus on environmental fiction, specifically on issues of food consumption, answers both Murphy’s and Buell’s calls for an approach to ecocriticism that explores the intersection of the natural and the social beyond the realm of nature writing.

*  *  *  *

Much of ecocritical inquiry has concentrated on revealing the environmental insight that literary texts can offer readers, and this project is no exception. I argue that these books explore and explain aspects of food systems that most Americans are largely unaware of. But ecocritical inquiry can also function reflexively, prompting us to reconsider the roles and capabilities of texts, particularly novels, in times of environmental urgency. Each of these novels demonstrates literary quality and craft, not simply a preoccupation with urgent subject matter, and together I consider them proof that novels are uniquely capable of responding to issues with greater insight and imagination than traditional channels of news media. These novels suggest that the imaginative text may well be the most appropriate and effective literary response to worldly concerns such as food production and consumption. Their melding of thematic concerns with
formal craft bears an ecological vision that is still struggling for purchase against traditional anthropocentric paradigms.

In Jane Smiley’s 1991 novel *A Thousand Acres*, the archetypal Midwestern American family farm is found not to be simply rooted in hard work, diligence, and family cooperation; this subversive retelling of *King Lear* suggests that the history of this family farm, and by extension the history of large-scale family farming in the United States, is often a history of abuse of both family and landscape. The narrator’s ties to her family as well as her ties to the farm landscape are revealed in fact to be poisonous to her. Psychologically poisonous memories of suffering her father’s sexual abuse during her childhood are echoed by the literal toxicity of the landscape itself, which is likely the cause of Ginny’s infertility as well as the cancer that is common among the women in the family. The irony, of course, is the public image of the prosperous Cook family farm as an American success story and a major contributor to the idealized image of the American Breadbasket. The outward signs of the family’s prosperity belie a cycle of abuse, and the legal and economic incorporation of the family farm is mirrored by the physical incorporation of the landscape by humans. This layering of *King Lear* with a radically different interpretation—one that privileges a daughter’s point of view, and one that deftly incorporates American agribusiness—prompts an interrogation of literary realism by suggesting that lived experience, as well as fiction, is built upon layers of meaning and interpretation. An examination of what lies beneath the novel, as well as what lies beneath the Cook farm, reveals conditions that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with what lies on the surface.

Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* unearths the endemic abuses in the Caribbean sugarcane industry, suggesting, like Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, that agriculture is not simply driven by hungry mouths to be fed. The British sugar empire as depicted by the novel prefigures
industrialized agriculture in its scale and logic of domination. Sugarcane, as a food and as a commodity, operates literally and figuratively through a convoluted testimony given by Mary-Mathilda, the aging mistress of the plantation manager and mother of his only son. The plantation refines sugarcane, transforming it into table sugar as we know it, and rum. “Refinement” figures literally in the novel as well as metaphorically, as Mary-Mathilda is “refined,” groomed from childhood, polished, if you will, for her role as Bellfeels’ mistress: a polished whore. This refinement, and her subsequent elevation of status, obscures an intertwined history, coarse and impure, of both Mary-Mathilda and the sugar industry at large. Mary’s elevation of status and achievement of cultural refinement are paralleled by the refinement of sugarcane into table sugar and rum. The novel’s concern with Mary-Mathilda’s refinement, and that of the island’s sugarcane, is refigured through the deceptively unrefined, unrehearsed style in which Mary-Mathilda’s testimony unfolds. As the story ponders the process of refinement, the text itself stands as a refined product of Clarke’s craft, a “raw” product that is in fact carefully processed and constructed.

Norman Rush’s *Mating* returns the discussion to foodways of the late twentieth century, but moves it across the globe to Botswana, in sub-Saharan Africa. *Mating*’s narrator, a nutritional anthropologist attempting to make the best of a botched thesis, remains in Botswana, rather than returning to the United States, to pursue Nelson Denoon, an anthropological luminary and founder of a utopian community within the Kalahari Desert. Through a hyperobservant and exhaustingly analytical narrator, Rush exposes and interrogates the evolution of foodways in late-century globalizing economies from the critical vantage point of a developing nation rather than the much more common and familiar backdrop of a developed nation.
As the narrator’s anthropological interests lie in studying appetites affected by globalization and shifting food availability, the text itself mirrors this thematic focus. As the novel evidences the effects of globalization of nations like Botswana—food aid, the availability of and desire for imported items, and the typical destruction of local farming economies—its narrator unselfconsciously illustrates the pervasiveness of commodification, and the allure of power and excess that are endemic to Western development efforts. The novel interrogates mastery by demonstrating authorial and narrative control as well as the allure of excess. *Mating* simultaneously castigates and imitates Western development efforts in Africa through a text and a narrator that illustrate the difficulty of resisting human appetites, which challenge any efforts toward environmental sustainability.

Each of the final two chapters deals with a pair of works that most directly confront the social issues alluded to in the former works. In so doing, they provide a helpful contrast to the novels by Smiley, Clarke, and Rush by more explicitly foregrounding issues of food production and consumption through characters’ prerogatives and concerns. Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Prodigal Summer* and her following memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* attempt to educate readers about the many benefits of embracing local, rather than global, food economies. *Prodigal Summer*, arguably the most didactic text of all, suggests the difficulty of a text that is given over to illustrating foodways as food webs and as an element of ecological interconnectedness. However, a close reading reveals Kingsolver’s careful efforts to evoke ecological networks by weaving together the three plot lines and complicating accepted boundaries between nature and the human realm. Furthermore, the novel suggests that the dissemination of imaginative texts can be likened to that of a seed as a vehicle of information and ecological catalyst.
Finally, Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, easily classified as “issues novels,” take on the American beef industry and genetic engineering in monoculture food crops. Though undeniably educative, these novels resist classification as didactic novels as they deftly grapple with these issues without sacrificing a sense of narrative complexity expected of noteworthy fiction. These novels explore the conceptual, metaphorical wake that necessarily follows such large-scale concerns, suggesting that novels enable writers and readers to question accepted histories and disseminate alternative versions of truth and reality. Like Rush’s novel, Ozeki’s novels both consider fabrication and reality, with respect to food as well as texts, as fundamental qualities of food systems as well as human existence. Furthermore, these novels most clearly illustrate parallels between consumers’ consumption of food and readers’ consumption of texts and information. Consumers of both, these novels seem to argue, should be aware of what they are consuming; novels can make the invisible visible, in terms of food and texts, by highlighting the constructed nature of both and rendering them less transparent. These texts make us aware of that consumption, that we are on the receiving end, and that we are subject to others’ creations.

When taken as a whole, this project expands the boundaries of ecocriticism into the realm of contemporary foodways, supporting an overarching argument for a broader conception of the ecological implications of our daily lives. These texts also suggest the various ways in which fictional narrative can serve authors’ social and political concerns and raise awareness among readers while still balancing contemporary issues with creative projects. In so doing, they show not only the intertwining of the realms of the natural and social, but that the health of natural and social environments is inseparable from the language we use to describe and understand these
environments. Fostering a discourse, these novels assert, will develop a more sensitive and nuanced consciousness with respect to these issues among readers.
Americans typically think of agriculture as simply the production of food, but since the advent of industrialized agriculture in the late nineteenth century, it’s hardly as straightforward as that. Richard Manning, author of *Grassland* and *Against the Grain*, asserts in “The Oil We Eat” that agriculture is no longer just food production, or “farming” as many consumers imagine it; in many countries like the U.S., agriculture produces not food but “commodities that require the outlay of still more energy to become food” (43). In *Against the Grain* Manning explains that he’s not alone in his assessment: “American farm experts no longer speak of food, but of ‘commodities.’ And with reason. The produce of farm fields is no longer a diverse flow of foods to tables so much as inputs into a series of factories” (97). Proponents and critics of industrialized agriculture will agree that agriculture is not simply a means of growing food; it’s a complex system of production, requiring staggering quantities of resources, in the form of energy as well as capital.

Supporters of industrialized agriculture claim that its hallmark efficiency is the only cost-effective way to feed the earth’s burgeoning population. Brian Halweil asserts, “The long-distance transport of food has become such a defining characteristic of the modern food system that most people accept it as the only way for us to be well fed” (12). But recently consumers have become skeptical of the benefits of industrialized agriculture. At first glance, this rising tide of public sentiment against industrialized (large, corporate) agriculture seems to be a case of Americans biting the hands that feed
them. After all, Americans enjoy the lowest relative food costs in the developed world, and the variety of food available to us is stunning, with fresh produce traversing hemispheres to arrive on supermarket shelves regardless of the time of year. Despite this convenience, a growing number of critics of industrialized agriculture, or agribusiness, cite its high social and environmental costs, claiming that food prices don’t reflect the invisible costs of production, such as groundwater contamination, erosion, and loss of biodiversity.

We’ve become estranged from the food that sustains us, these critics argue. How many Americans, for example, can trace any item in their last meal back to its source, beyond the supermarket? This “physical and psychological distance between consumer and food production,” Andrew Kimbrell explains, “creates a tragic disconnect between the general public and the social and environmental consequences of the food being grown and eaten” (1). Kimbrell claims that this distance “allows the corporations to hide the real and terrible impacts of the industrialization of our food supply” (1). In other words, this perceived behind-closed-doors attitude affords very little opportunity for public awareness or industry accountability. Kimbrell’s *Fatal Harvest* (2002) debunks the so-called “myths” of agribusiness, instead illustrating through essays and photographs that industrial agriculture “still gets a free ride from our media and policy makers” because big agriculture “continues to inundate the public with self-serving myths about modern food production. For decades, the industry has effectively countered virtually every critique of industrial agriculture with the ‘big lie’ strategy” (49).1 In *Fatal Harvest*

---

1 And Kimbrell’s text imitates its subject; it is likely no accident that *Fatal Harvest* is an ungainly text on an ungainly industry. Though available without photographs as the *Fatal Harvest Reader*, the unabridged version covers a square foot, and weighs nearly seven pounds.
Kimbrell argues for agricultural reform, stating that “larger, less diverse farms require far more mechanical and chemical outputs. These ever increasing inputs are devastating to the environment and make these farms far less efficient than smaller, more sustainable farms” (56).

Well, then, what is a practical alternative? Wes Jackson, president of The Land Institute and an expert on “alternative agriculture,” has made this his mission, questioning the nature of the agricultural enterprise itself. He explains that although agriculture is generally conceived of as an inherently good paradigm, it in fact is based upon a struggle to dominate nature. He therefore questions the enterprise of traditional till agriculture itself, asserting that “till agriculture is a global disease, which in a few places has been well managed, but overall has steadily eroded the land. Unless this disease is checked, the human race will wilt like any other crop” (42). Jackson instead argues for an embrace of Natural Systems Agriculture, which as the name implies works toward a sufficiently stable ecological matrix through perennialism and polyculture (as opposed to annual planting and monoculture) in ways that maximize soil health, pest management, nitrogen production, and high yields (44). Natural Systems Agriculture, he and others claim, achieves the same end of food security as traditional agriculture, but also sustainably fosters a healthy ecosystem, doing away with inputs like man-made fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Furthermore, tilling is curtailed, thus minimizing the possibility of the loss of valuable topsoil, which plagues traditional agriculture.

Physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva similarly describes industrial agriculture as a “war against ecosystems,” as opposed to a new vision of agriculture in which sustainability is the most crucial element, valuing “the renewal and regeneration of
biodiversity and species richness on farms that provide internal inputs as alternatives to external inputs of synthetic fertilizers and chemicals” (122). Shiva and others seek a “natural systems” approach to agriculture, emphasizing ecological stability, high yields, and erosion control with no-till and low-till methods, which optimally result in drastically reduced need for herbicides, pesticides, and synthetic fertilizers, as well as the fostering of healthy genetic variety.

These “smaller, more sustainable” farms have become a popular ideal as food localism gains interest across the nation. Sustainability can be defined as a simple question: Can this way of doing things continue without causing undue harm to the local environment, to consumers, and to the generations to come? This concern is evidenced in the marked increase in farmers’ markets throughout the United States as well as in supermarkets’ willingness to carry local products on their shelves.

Like other writers, William Conlogue, author of *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture*, sees two opposing “agricultural paradigms”: “alternative agriculture” and “conventional agriculture.” Conlogue ponders the future of agriculture, asking:

> Will agriculture grow more large-scale, capital-intensive, and exploitative of nature—with an emphasis on fewer farmers and unlimited, vertically integrated expansion, as today’s conventional paradigm argues it must? Or will agriculture do an about-face and stress small-scale operations, environmental responsibility, harmony with nature, more farmers, and checks on exploitative expansion, as the alternative paradigm hopes? (171).
Conlogue’s question echoes a rising concern among consumers that the problem with industrialized agriculture is not just what goes into food—what taints “natural” food—but the sheer quantity of energy that makes it all possible. Such large-scale production requires large-scale consumption, consisting partly of what gets eaten, but also of how it gets there. And at the root of all this is energy, Richard Manning argues. In “The Oil We Eat,” he explains that we need to think beyond the calories we consume at the table. The calories (which are simply units of energy) required to get food from the field to the table are considerable. “All together,” he figures, “the food-processing industry in the United States uses about ten calories of fossil-fuel energy for every calorie of food energy it produces” (44).

At a casual glance, this element of consumption beneath food systems may seem an unlikely concern to trace in literary texts. After all, literature often avoids the study of presumably “natural” processes in favor of more removed and metaphorical treatment of human issues. However, the works highlighted in this study exhibit close attention to consumption, especially to the politics of food, and they highlight the complexities, and problems, of Western diets and contemporary global foodways.

I open this exploration of food-focused texts with Jane Smiley’s 1991 novel, *A Thousand Acres*, which has attracted literary as well as popular attention as a novel about farming and families in America’s heartland. The novel’s initial reception was quite favorable, earning it a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, as well as a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award; this success no doubt prompted its translation into a major motion picture. *A Thousand Acres* has received no small share of
attention from literary critics for its reinterpretation of *King Lear*, but scholars have also explored the novel’s evocation of contemporary concerns as well.

Through a retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, *A Thousand Acres* complicates the image of the family farm in Americans’ collective imagination. Smiley has offered a unique reading of *Lear*, narrated from the perspective of the Goneril character, Ginny Cook Smith. Smiley’s rereading of *Lear* is also a rereading of the American Midwest and its human roots in family farming. As Neal Nakadate explains, this reinterpretation of *Lear* foregrounds Smiley’s concern with women’s roles in farming families in the American Midwest:

For Smiley, to live and write in the heart of the country late in the twentieth century was to be aware that American farming has become both a business and a way of life, an enterprise that powerfully controls the land and defines the lives of those who depend on it. [. . .] Over time, farming has grown less visibly brutal, at least to the outside eye, but it remains deeply problematic. The design of *A Thousand Acres* is to reveal how owning land and operating a farm are the focus of a harrowing way of life. (159)

The novel unfolds as Larry Cook, a successful Iowa farmer, decides to incorporate the family farm, and turn it over to his three daughters. He considers the transaction as protection and solidification of his “kingdom”—amounting to a thousand acres—upon his impending retirement from farming. Eldest daughter Ginny narrates as her father’s decision to incorporate the farm divides rather than solidifies both the family and the
 acreage. Buried memories and emotions surface, exposing an unsavory, abuse-riddled reality behind the façade of a picture-perfect successful American family farm.

Though I examine agriculture in *A Thousand Acres*, I shift critical attention from the vast acres of farmed land to spaces and concerns a bit closer to home, to the food on the table rather than on the crops and livestock beyond the farmhouse. Studying the novel from this vantage point reveals the daily consumption of resources that makes the farming possible. Food, I argue, is more than a collection of details used to render a novel “realistic,” and its treatment in novels often deserves more than a passing glance. An analysis of the novel’s food and foodways reveals kitchens, dinner tables, and gardens are often locations of conflict and power struggle among characters. These spaces expose the separation of food production from food consumption that is typical of American culture, even among farming families. A critical analysis of meals and their providers locates characters, especially female characters, within a food chain that seems to loop back upon itself, as they are producers, consumers, and in turn consumed.

The novel’s food and foodways likewise allow various iterations of incorporation to emerge. Larry Cook’s decision to incorporate his farm is largely a product of his appetite for “more,” for increasing his sense of power and status, and for bragging rights. But the novel depicts “incorporation” not just in the legal sense; the word also means to assimilate, to unite, to absorb. Beyond the Cook farm’s legal incorporation, “incorporation” can be interpreted as a form of consumption. The novel’s “food chains” blur the line between what is life-sustaining and what is life-destroying, revealing an invisible culture of poison beneath a false culture of nourishment. Fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides that make industrialized agriculture possible thus create an environment of
toxic fertility. The vulnerable, permeable human body unavoidably incorporates these substances, becoming a destabilized link in a complex food web.

It does not come as a surprise, then, that this incorporation—ostensibly a move to secure for posterity the thousand-acre “kingdom” Larry Cook has amassed—begets not a sense of collective unity or strength, but disconnectedness and estrangement—of characters from each other, of characters from their landscape, and of characters from their own bodies. As the text, which begins as a retelling of *King Lear*, grows into a text remarkably independent from and unlike the play, the legal incorporation of the Cook family’s farm sparks its unsustainable growth, exceeding the family’s farming abilities and even their ability to continue owning it. The novel can be read as a text that reevaluates established narratives of agricultural and scientific truth and offers a powerful argument against the perverse logic of industrialized agriculture.

**Like Farmer, Like Farm**

In the indictments of agribusiness that have already emerged from critical analyses of this novel, the character of Larry Cook is repeatedly identified as the archetypal American farmer, whose persistence and shrewdness beget success. From the opening of the novel, his history is intertwined with the farm’s history, and the farm’s magnitude is a reflection of his own powerful presence. Throughout the novel he is shown to resemble the farm and is even equated with the farm itself; therefore it makes sense to begin this analysis with him.

As Larry, like his forefathers, lays drainage tile beneath the earth and buys up neighboring parcels of land, “improving” the agricultural landscape, he amasses a farm
sizable enough to warrant comparison with the kingdom of King Lear. Larry Cook is well known across the county and respected as a capable, even wealthy, farmer at a time when farms are falling into bankruptcy at staggering rates, when many American families are losing their farms to corporations and banks (Schiff 10). In fact, the twentieth century saw farmers dwindle to near disappearance as a population, from over thirty percent to a scant two percent of the country’s workforce, diminishing to the point that the federal government discontinued its farm resident census (Conlogue 3).

During this time farmers were encouraged by experts—and lured by the promise of high grain prices—to “get big or get out,” which was the prevailing advice during Earl Butz’s tenure as secretary of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (1971-1976). To do this, farmers assumed massive amounts of debt in order to increase their acreage; eventually encumbered by this debt, they were unable to make sufficient profits to stay afloat financially (Conlogue 170). Illustrating this mindset, Smiley’s Larry Cook decides to “get big.” Larry sees expansion of the farm as its key to survival. Larry is one of many farmers attempting to ride the wave of agribusiness and stay afloat. Smiley illustrates Larry’s adherence to this mindset by depicting him as a success story of the American farmer—one of the relatively few—in the late twentieth century, “one of the biggest landowners [in Zebulon County]” (141).

Larry elicits respect among local farmers and acts as an advocate of agribusiness. Ginny recalls photographs of her family’s expansive farm, the picture of success, as featured in Wallace’s Farmer; her father is quoted as saying, “‘There isn’t any room for the old methods anymore. Farmers who embrace the new methods will prosper, but those that don’t are already stumbling around’” (47). Larry has religiously adhered to “the new
methods,” methods to increase farm productivity per acre, and it appears to have paid off; at the novel’s outset Larry’s thousand-acre farm “made him a millionaire more than three times over, especially as it was paid for” (33).

Larry’s declaration of his intention to incorporate is understandably coupled with plans for future growth and expansion: “[…] then we’re going to build this new Slurrrystore, and maybe a Harvestore, too, and enlarge the hog operation” (19). Like Larry, Ginny’s husband Ty has faith in the “bigger is better” model of farming. After the incorporation of the Cook farm, Ginny explains that Ty would like to “double the size of [their] hog operation, from five hundred finished hogs per year to a thousand,” but

When [they] started looking at brochures from confinement systems manufacturers in the week after Daddy signed over the farm, it rapidly became clear that four thousand finished hogs per year was somehow a more optimal number, ambitious but manageable, the sort of number that gained the respect of your neighbors. Four thousand was the number Marv Carson liked, for one thing, […] and it was a number that the Harvestore dealer kept speculating about. It was also the number that bounced off the walls at the café in town, the number that other farmers fantasized about and ‘knew’ was the best economy of scale, not too large for a family operation but enough to keep you busy, solvent, and interested. Pretty soon, four thousand hogs became [their] plan, and Marv Carson gave [them] a $300,000 line of credit. (180-181)

From an initial hog operation of five hundred finished hogs per year, the plan mushrooms to four thousand finished hogs per year, an eightfold increase. This is the number that
everyone “‘knew’ was the best economy of scale”; numbers of hogs and dollar figures are
discussed abstractly, much in the same way as Ginny and Ty, Rose and Pete, and Jess
speculate on properties throughout the game of Monopoly they play in the novel. It is
clear that the size of the hog operation—the quantity of hogs it will handle—becomes
primary, and consideration of what the farm can sustain, or what the farmers can manage,
is of minimal concern. The plan is deemed “ambitious but manageable,” but more
importantly the plan provides “the sort of number that gained the respect of [one’s]
neighbors” (180).

It is clear that farming, at this point in the novel, is quickly reduced to an abstract
enterprise, driven by Larry’s ego and motivated by profit, as Marv Carson feels
motivated to offer a generous line of credit. Later Ginny speculates: “If hog prices
remained steady, and the sows weren’t stressed by the new buildings or the noise from
construction, and [Ty] managed to finish an average of six hogs from each litter to an
average of two hundred thirty pounds each, he could expect his first check in late winter,
for almost $20,000” (274). Ginny highlights the farm’s reliance upon large amounts of
income, and the surest way of insuring income is to expand the operations while
maintaining the farm’s efficiency.

The immense and increasingly abstract Cook farm reflects Larry Cook himself,
and Ginny Cook’s descriptions illustrate the similarities between Larry and his acreage.
As one of the county’s “biggest landowners,” in terms of acreage owned, Larry Cook is
described as having a commanding physical presence as well. Of her childhood, Ginny
Cook says:
My earliest memories of him are of being afraid to look him in the eye, to look at him at all. He was too big and his voice was too deep. [...] His very fearsomeness was reassuring when I thought about things like robbers or monsters, and we lived on what was clearly the best, most capably cultivated farm. The biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer.

(20)

Larry, who is described as “well over six feet and two hundred thirty pounds,” was “never dwarfed by the landscape” from Ginny’s perspective; he seems to be unified with the farm (21, 20). Conlogue observes, “In short, Larry is how he farms” (164). This commanding, powerful presence seems to translate into an overarching belief system; Ginny illustrates her childhood perception of her father’s beliefs:

We might as well have had a catechism:

What is a farmer?
A farmer is a man who feeds the world.
What is a farmer’s first duty?
To grow more food.
What is a farmer’s second duty?
To buy more land.
What are the signs of a good farm?
Clean fields, neatly painted buildings, breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water.
How will you know a good farmer when you meet him?
He will not ask you for any favors. (47)
This “catechism” reveals Ginny’s correlation between her father’s large physical stature, the large size of his farm, and his degree of local power and influence. To Cook and the other farmers in the area, the size of one’s farm, and the size of its yields, are the chief object of farming. What is good is calculated quantitatively, through size and profits. A qualitative valuation is absent; health and long-term benefits (other than maximization of profit) are not considered.

The correlation between the Cook’s enormous farm, Larry’s “bigger is better” farming mentality, and Larry’s physical presence is clear. But Larry’s habits of consumption continue the metaphor, further illustrating and embodying the primacy of size and quantity. Larry Cook is in fact a consumer, and Smiley offers abundant description of his habits to underscore the point. Smiley depicts Larry as a large-scale, voracious consumer of food with a monotonous diet that demonstrates the same steadfast commitment to scale, routine, and sameness that is characteristic of large-scale monoculture farming operations. As his vast farm is dedicated to just three agricultural commodities—beans, corn, and hogs—his diet, and the diet of his fellow farmers, is depicted as expansive but without variety.

First it must be noted that both the crops and the livestock are incredibly resource intensive, and their production results in a terribly inefficient process, whereby much more energy is required to produce food than the energy potential of the food itself. The hogs are perhaps the most energy-expensive operation, for confined livestock consume massive quantities of grain that must first be grown, harvested, shipped, and often processed into a secondary product before ending up in a feed trough. All of that energy is invested to produce meat that is not at all lean or healthy to consume in large
quantities, meat to be sold to and consumed by Americans who consume far more protein
daily than their bodies require.

The agricultural commodities produced by the Cook farm are not food grown to
“feed the world.” The corn and soybeans grown on the farm require considerable
processing in order to be used; food products made with corn or soybeans—and there are
many—are not simply shipped, sold, and consumed but are raw materials for food
products. Richard Manning explains that corn\(^2\) “is not so much food as it is a raw
material (only about 7 percent of the crop is used in cereals and other foods like tortillas),
and still it is our most lucrative crop,” even though most corn “not fed to livestock is
processed into corn syrups” (Against 137, 98). In fact, “about 42 percent of the processed
corn goes into sweeteners” (Against 138). According to Andrew Kimbrell, “a mere 2
percent of the corn used by the United States goes directly to feeding people; another 19
percent goes into processed foods. […] Three-quarters is used to feed livestock” (100). In
addition, corn and soybeans are considered “the leading contributor to soil erosion and
the leading source of groundwater pollution from both pesticides and nitrates” (Against
100-101).

Hog operations like Larry Cook’s—called concentrated animal feeding
operations, or CAFOs, in which livestock are confined and fattened to market weight
with grain feed—are “wholly dependent upon corn made cheap by federal subsidy and on
corn and soybean derivatives” (Manning 137). Hog farming, like other livestock farming,
benefits from overproduction (from grain surpluses), which allows animals to be fed

\(^2\) The corn discussed here is grain corn, not sweet corn. Sweet corn enjoyed at its peak flavor is eaten the same day it
is harvested. However, grain corn, which goes on to become corn syrup and myriad other food additives, does not
enjoy such a simple path to market.
grain cheaply and fattened for slaughter much more quickly than by conventional feeding (pasture and foraging). In fact, “worldwide two-thirds of the corn crop is fed to livestock, increasingly in the United States to swine” (Manning 136).

In light of the energy and resources required by large-scale industrial farming, the “catechism” of Ginny’s youth becomes a farce; the Cook farm can be seen as a wasteful and even monstrous consumer, rather than as a heroic producer, of energy and resources. The farm produces commodities, not food. And as head of the farm, Larry Cook is both instrument and agent in this wasteful, ultimately unsustainable system, consuming and producing on a grand scale.

*  *  *

A look at the food Larry consumes in the novel reveals a parallel between the way Larry farms and the way he eats. A comparison can be drawn between the numbing regularity of Larry’s daily meal routine and the way he (and most other farmers) farm. Descriptions of Larry’s meals reveal a perfunctory daily sameness. Throughout the novel Ginny makes clear that she usually serves him breakfast, dinner, and often supper. Of his supper routine, Ginny explains, “Daddy ate at our house on Tuesdays, Rose’s on Fridays. Even that made him impatient. He expected to come in at five and sit right down to the table. When he was finished, he drank a cup of coffee and went home” (50). Larry is described as rooted quite literally to his land and farm—he is uncomfortable even eating in his children’s homes. He also shuns variety, insisting upon regularity and unwavering routine.

His stubborn routine frustrates Ginny for its senselessness: “Daddy would be annoyed at having to wait for his breakfast. Now that I was no longer cooking for Rose,
he wanted it on the table at six, even though there were no fields he was hurrying to get to” (120). On a night when he is scheduled to eat with Rose’s family, “[h]e was bound and determined to eat smack on the dot at five,” which infuriates Rose, who exclaims, “You know, it’s pretty crazy to have to do the same thing every Friday, week after week, same food, same time” (103). Larry is determined to eat in the predictable security of his own home. Ginny recollects, “[T]here was never a visit to a restaurant other than the café in town, and he never went there later than dinnertime. He didn’t mind a picnic or a pig roast, if someone else gave it, but supper he wanted to eat in his own house, at the kitchen table, with the radio on” (50). Furthermore, he “resisted efforts to change his habits—chicken on Tuesdays, or a slice of cake instead of pie, or an absence of pickles meant dissatisfaction, and even resentment” (50).

Larry’s farming illustrates a similar adherence to routine and habit. Though necessarily responsive to weather and environmental conditions, Larry and other typical commodity crop farmers produce the same crops year after year, a method which depletes soil nutrients, necessitating the use of synthetic fertilizers. In a similar way, neighboring farmers Harold and Loren Clark exhibit monotonous behaviors; Jess becomes exasperated with them: “Sometimes I think of them as the twin robot farmers. Time to plow! Time to plant! Time to spray! Time to harvest! Time to plow! Every morning they eat the exact same thing for breakfast” (77). Jess likens farming methods to a breakfast routine, followed blindly out of habit.

It is not surprising that Larry Cook’s mindset and habits evidence a lockstep commitment to efficiency and standardization. In *Working the Garden*, Conlogue
describes what he categorizes as “New Agriculture” in terms that echo Larry Cook and his farm:

Agricultural industrialization requires farmers to conceive of plants, animals, land, and people through a narrow mechanistic frame that tends not to see them as living things. The industrial farm works toward ever-greater control over nature as a factor in production rather than working with it. Profit is the measure of the new farm, not a family’s continuance on the land, its quality of life, or its relations to the larger community. The new farmer rejects traditional conceptions of agricultural work, work whose model is the husbandman….Industrial agriculture aggressively seeks to replace haphazard tradition with rationality, systematization, efficiency, organization, professionalization, and an identification of farming with urban manufacturing. (16)

Returning to Larry’s food consumption at the table reveals that he repeats the mentality of New Agriculture in a seemingly innocuous way, by consuming substantial quantities of food. During a typical breakfast, Larry eats “sausage, fried eggs, hash brown potatoes, cornflakes, English muffins and toast, coffee and orange juice” and “shovel[s] the food onto his plate with his usual appetite”(29). Dining at a local diner with Ginny, he orders the “full hot dinner special,” consisting of “roast beef with gravy and mashed potatoes, canned string beans, ice cream and three cups of coffee” (187). Like American consumers who do not need—indeed, cannot directly use—the surplus food available to them, Larry doesn’t need all these calories, for as a contemporary farmer his work has become less physical as he often sits in the comfortable cab of a huge tractor.
At one point Larry discusses the expansion of the hog operation to “a thousand hogs, farrow to finish” as he unthinkingly chews on pork chops, illustrating a casual disconnect between farming and the food it produces. Larry’s diet is characterized by abundance, particularly of meats like pork and beef, which is the most resource-intensive food to produce. In addition to consuming food, Larry (and the other men in the novel) also consumes alcohol, suggesting consumption for its own sake; alcohol has no nutritional worth. Ginny remembers, “He drank every night and was gruff every morning” (31).

Considering his patterns of consumption, Larry’s death—from a heart attack in the cereal aisle of a Des Moines grocery store—can be read with irony (363). Devoting his life to becoming the most successful farmer in Zebulon County, he dies not working in the fields, but in a supermarket, and specifically in the cereal aisle, where cheap surplus grain commodities are then sold to consumers as “value-added” products—and that value is added not by farmers but by food corporations. Cereals, made from overabundant grain crops and often loaded with corn sweeteners, are among the most profitable products for food companies; for example, “the cost of corn in Kellogg’s Corn Flakes is less than 10% of the retail price” of a box of the cereal (Nestle 18). Larry, for years encouraged by current wisdom to expand his land holdings and boost productivity, produces commodity crops like the majority of American farmers, making only pennies on the dollar compared with the profits of makers of processed foods. Fittingly, as a disciple of agribusiness, he dies within “the market,” represented literally by a supermarket, surrounded by such products.
It Runs in the Family

As an agricultural producer and consumer on a grand scale, Larry Cook does not operate in human isolation. His daughters Ginny and Rose, who remain on the farm throughout most of their lives, are incorporated into his sphere; his life’s work consumes their lives quite literally. Larry’s decision to incorporate the farm underscores the degree to which Ginny and Rose have been incorporated into Larry’s domain. However, Larry’s monolithic status and his assertion of his fierce independence and self-reliance belie his dependence upon others. Just as he produces and consumes—farms and eats—on a large scale, his life as a farmer consumes his own daughters’ lives.

Ginny Cook, Smiley’s narrator, provides the filter through which we read the novel, and her narration privileges her own perspective whereas most characters in the novel give more priority to Larry’s authority. Throughout much of the novel Ginny’s character is easily interpreted as a typical farmwife on a family farm, managing the domestic sphere while men manage the farming. Ginny and her sister Rose are considered “provided for” by their father Larry, but much of their energy and efforts throughout the novel are devoted to feeding the men in their families.

Much of each waking day for Ginny is spent preparing meals for her family as the farm at large ostensibly provides “food for the world”; her domestic activities of cooking, canning, and gardening illustrate her efforts to put food on the table in a literal sense while male family members work in the fields to supposedly do the same. In the eyes of Larry, Ginny’s husband Ty, and even neighbor Harold Clark, this work justifies farm wives’ existence, but remains practically invisible to the men who rely on their cooking.
Ginny and Rose’s younger sister, Caroline, provides the women’s dramatic foil, for Caroline has escaped the life of a farm wife to become a lawyer—a fate made possible by her sisters’ resignation to remaining on the family farm, a fact she appears oblivious to throughout the novel. Rose’s wedding gift to Caroline, a Cuisinart, highlights the cultural gulf between Caroline and her sisters. Rose and Ginny are women who must cook, unlike Caroline, and neither can afford fancy kitchen gadgetry such as a Cuisinart, a convenience that could remove some of the tedious labor from the never-ending task of feeding the family.

Ginny’s name itself nods to her lot in life: “Ginny Cook” suggests the imperative “Ginny cook.” It is not difficult to imagine her father issuing this statement, or at least implying this, as he waits impatiently for Ginny to prepare a meal for him. Ginny begins cooking for her father when she is a young girl, after her mother dies of cancer. The morning after her mother’s funeral, she remembers, “My father awoke me at five-thirty to make his breakfast,” and she quickly assumes her mother’s domestic duties (316). Years later, as an adult, she still prepares her father’s breakfast daily.

Despite his utter dependence upon his daughters to cook his meals, Larry demonstrates a stunning ignorance of his dependence upon either his daughters, who cook for him, or the land, from which the food grows. When Ginny arrives to cook breakfast one morning, Larry informs her, “Nobody shopped over the weekend. There’s no eggs” (122). Larry illustrates the other end of the complex chain that is industrialized agriculture; food simply comes from the store and is prepared by Ginny or Rose. On a farm where hogs are raised for slaughter, eggs are purchased at the store rather than gathered from laying hens, as was customary on farms in the past. Larry illustrates a
disconnect between farming and the kitchen, and for all his fierce independence, reveals his unwitting dependence on Ginny and Rose.

But Larry’s “use” of his daughters extends well beyond relying on their cooking his daily meals. Rose forces Ginny to remember their father’s sexual abuse of them as teenagers, after their mother’s death. Though initially skeptical—Ginny neither believes nor remembers the abuse—she slowly realizes that it did in fact occur, and that she must have repressed those memories. Accordingly, then, Larry’s abuse of Ginny and Rose upon their mother’s death suggests that they fulfilled the role of their mother, not only to satisfy his appetite for food, but his sexual appetites as well.

The object status of Ginny and Rose in their father’s eyes is suggested numerous times through comparisons drawn between the daughters (and children in general) and the farm’s hog operation. Rose demonstrates a clear awareness of this, claiming that “We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops” (206). Speaking of their sister Caroline’s upcoming marriage, Rose says to Jess Clark, a family friend, and Ginny, “According to Daddy, it’s almost too late to breed her. Ask him. He’ll tell you all about sows and heifers and things drying up and empty chambers. It’s a whole theoretical system” (11). Children are discussed like hogs, and hogs are discussed like people or children. Ty, fantasizing about expanding the breeding operation, wants “a couple of champion boars, the kind whose breeding is so pure they can sit up to dinner with you and not spill anything on the tablecloth” (24). The offspring would be so desirable that one could “put those babies up for adoption”; Ty goes on: “You can say, ‘Yeah, Jake, but you’ve got to feed him with your own spoon, and let him sleep on your side of the bed,’ and they’ll say, ‘Sure, Ty, anything. I’ve already started
his college fund.’ Looking at Ginny, he adds, ‘Or hers. Sows with that kind of endowment get all the benefits, too’” (24-25). The metaphor elevates hogs to the status of children—children with advantages never enjoyed by Larry Cook’s daughters—and also likens Ty and Ginny to hogs, as if they have become breeding stock for the farm operation. These comparisons also speak to the incorporation of women into the farm’s cycle of consumption; as the roles of children and livestock are reversed, hogs perversely displace children at the dinner table. Ginny has even internalized this correlation; while having sex with her husband, she imagines herself in porcine terms: “[her] back seemed about as long and humped as a sow’s,” and she “longed to wallow, to press [her] skin against his and be engulfed” (174).

Larry’s “lust for every new method designed to swell productivity” (47) figures into his valuation of his own daughters, who (perhaps ironically) provide no male heir to directly inherit the Cook farm, which Larry had, not surprisingly, inherited from his own father. Though no direct discussion of heirs emerges, instead remaining cloaked in a discussion of hog breeding, the daughters on the farm are likened to livestock destined for human consumption. Rose takes pains to keep her two daughters away from the farm operations; Ginny remains childless. In a rage, Larry calls Ginny a “dried-up whore bitch” and a “barren whore,” suggesting that her true value on the farm is indeed her reproductive capacity and that her apparent inability to have children makes her worthless (195). Of course, Larry’s anger at Ginny’s inability to bear a child, an heir, is ironic since her bearing a child from his incest would have produced evidence of his abuse. Importantly, Ginny’s infertility allows Larry to “keep up appearances” in the community, for “a good appearance was the source and the sign of all other good things” (215).
Ginny’s childless state—she catalogues five miscarriages—does not just conveniently mask Larry’s abuse; over the course of the novel she, and the novel’s readers, learn that her infertility is very likely the result of the farm’s reliance upon nitrate fertilizers, which are terribly common in large-scale agriculture. Though Larry (and the rest of the family) betray no knowledge of the dangers of nitrate fertilizers, Jess Clark explains that they jeopardize human health by leaching into water supplies: “People have known for ten years or more that nitrates in well water cause miscarriages and death of infants. Don’t you know that the fertilizer runoff drains into the aquifer? I can’t believe this” (177). These fertilizers are used to increase crop yields, chiefly because planting the same crops on the same land year after year strips the soil of nutrients; continued farming is made possible (and profitable) only with the use of synthetic fertilizers. Ginny eventually sees in the farmed landscape, which had been “pure fertility” before its agricultural “improvement,” nothing but “hills that are ringed with black earth and crowned with soil so pale that the corn only stands in it, as in gravel, because there are no nutrients to draw from it” (23, 398).

Smiley reveals a very real and persistent environmental threat through Ginny’s increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of human and environmental health through the water supply provided by the underground aquifer beneath the farm. The water, managed by a network of drainage tiles laid beneath the soil, provides drainage of the land as well as well water for the family. She slowly realizes it is a “loop of poison” with “water running down through the soil, into the drainage wells, into the lightless mysterious underground chemical sea, then being drawn up, cold and appetizing, from
the drinking well into Rose’s faucet, my faucet” (398). This “cold and appetizing” water that nourishes them, and the crops, is a source of poison and illness; evidence accumulates that Ginny and Rose, as well as a number of ancestors and neighbors, are likely victims of poisoning by contaminants, like fertilizers, that accumulate in groundwater. Cancer crops up throughout the novel: Rose suffers from chemotherapy for her breast cancer throughout the novel; Rose and Ginny’s mother died of cancer at an early age, as did Jess Clark’s mother; and Edith Cook, their grandmother, also died mysteriously at an early age. It is implied, by novel’s end, that these women are likely victims of the farming that is also their families’ livelihood.

In *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*, biologist Sandra Steingraber explores the persistence of carcinogens in the human body through a scientific and autobiographical exploration of evidence for environmental causes of cancer. Tracing her own cancer to her childhood in rural Illinois, on farmland very similar to that depicted in *A Thousand Acres*, Steingraber asserts that our daily living environments provide us with an overwhelming number of fleeting exposures to carcinogens and other substances with known health risks. She ultimately insists that our everyday environments are potentially much more hazardous that most would assume.

Steingraber analyzes the relation of heredity and cancer, dispelling the notion that cancer prevalent within a family is always the result of genetics. She explains her own cancer by way of the cancer prevalence in her family, but then adds the fact that she is an adopted child. The perplexed silence of listeners who hear this, she says, “remind[s] me of how unfamiliar many of us are with the notion that families share environments as well as chromosomes or with the concept that our genes work in communion with
substances streaming in from the larger, ecological world. What runs in families does not necessarily run in blood” (251). She explains that hereditary cancers are “the rare exception” and that “fewer than 10 percent of all malignancies are thought to involve inherited mutations”; incidence of breast cancer, from which Rose suffers in *A Thousand Acres*, “also shows little connection to heredity (probably between 5 and 10 percent)” (259).

Another parallel exists between Steingraber’s work and Smiley’s novel: Steingraber pinpoints groundwater, underground aquifers, as a significant site of human vulnerability to carcinogens. “Our relationship to aquifers is deeply biological,” she insists, and though they remain virtually invisible to us,

> Cultivating an ability to imagine these vast basins beneath us is an imperative need. What is required is a kind of mental divining rod that would connect this subterranean world to the images we see every day: a kettle boiling on the stove, a sprinkler bowing over the garden, a bathtub filling up. Our drinking water should not contain the fear of cancer. The presence of carcinogens in groundwater, no matter how faint, means we have paid too high a price for accepting the unimaginative way things are. (210, 211)

As Steingraber explains the complication of heredity with environment, of genetics with ecology, in *A Thousand Acres* Ginny and Rose suffer a perverse combination of familial and environmental abuse. In fact, at the moment of Ginny’s realization that her father had in fact molested her during her childhood, she is bombarded with terrible mental images, which she describes in terms of environmental toxicity; she explains that she “feared how I would have to store [the images of abuse] in
my brain, plastic explosives or radioactive wastes that would mutate or even wipe out
everything else in there” (247).

Ginny, Rose, and other women in the novel are likely poisoned by the
environment they live in, and that poisoning is initiated by their own family members’
efforts to bolster soil fertility. This poisoning often leads to cancers that stymie
reproductive fertility and the continuation of farmers’ own families. In essence, what
produces food hinders human reproduction. And all of this is done, ostensibly, in the
name of food production—to feed, and nourish, the people of the world.

In essence, fertilizers (and herbicides and pesticides) intended to keep soil
fertile—the backbone of industrial agriculture—are the probable cause of Ginny’s
infertility, and quite possibly spell premature death for others. With this in mind, the
production of food (a life-supporting enterprise) paradoxically destroys life by
predisposing farmers and their families to cancer and abbreviating the lineage of farming
families as mothers and daughters are poisoned. A perverse loop becomes apparent, as
human bodies absorb—consume, albeit unintentionally—manmade environmental toxins,
even as the use of these toxins—in fact, fertilizers—is predicated on maximizing soil
fertility and high crop productivity. What renders the soil fertile in the short term renders
women infertile. As the human body accumulates substances that persist in the
environment, “unnatural,” or human-introduced, substances become “natural,” or
integrated into the environment. This complication counters the conception of humans as
separate from the natural world and blurs the assumed boundary between natural and
unnatural environments.
This poisoning, of course, is made possible through farming’s reliance upon synthetic fertilizers, and other chemical inputs intended to boost productivity. The reluctance to understand—or question—the impact of fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides upon the human body (or the local environment) is typified by Larry’s view, according to his daughters, that “history starts fresh every day, every minute, that time itself begins with the feelings he’s having right now” (233). Larry shows no awareness of any potential long-term effects of his farming methods other than his potential to make a profit and amass wealth.

Skepticism of this mindset is apparent in the novel. Though Larry Cook believes that “Farmers who embrace the new methods” of input-intensive farming will prosper, and most (if not all) of Zebulon County’s farmers would agree, Jess Clark, son of neighboring farmer Harold Clark, roundly criticizes industrial agriculture. A vegetarian, a Vietnam War draft dodger, and an advocate of organic farming methods, Jess is an ideological outsider who vows to Ginny that he will “really dedicate myself to organic farming and make something of my beliefs” (78). In a similarly idealistic rush, he gushes over a visit to an organic farm he visited: “It was amazing. He hasn’t used chemicals on his land since 1964. He’s seventy-two years old and looks fifty. They’ve got dairy cattle and horses and chickens for eggs but his wife only cooks vegetarian meals. They get great yields!” (234). However, he never settles and attempts organic farming in the novel, for he abruptly returns to Vancouver; his sudden departure suggests that the idealism that fuels discussion of agricultural reform is much easier to propagate than the real work of farming, and that change will, essentially, take much hard work and a deep relationship with the land.
Another outsider who raises suspicions about industrial agricultural methods is Marv Carson, a local financier and the novel’s comic figure, who first encourages Larry to incorporate the farm. Marv signals a concern with his personal environmental health early in the novel; and his odd habits earn him a reputation of eccentricity among local farmers; when dining with Larry he claims that “People don’t know that it’s not what you eat, but the order you eat it in that counts,” insisting that shedding toxins from the body is aided by eating foods in a certain order (30).

Marv’s quackery does, however, suggest a concern over environmental toxins. Like Marv Carson himself, this concern is marginal at the novel’s outset but becomes unavoidable as the novel develops. When Ginny asks him about what the “toxic foods” are, he explains, “Oh, Ginny, goodness me, everything is toxic. That’s the point. You can’t avoid toxins. Thinking you can is just another symptom of the toxic overload stage” (30). During a later visit, he refuses tap water but instead drinks several bottles of Perrier water that he brings with him (216-18). Even as this tangential character’s habits smack of silliness, his statements and fears are partially well-founded, as he drinks bottled water (not tap water from the farmhouse), conspicuously avoids eating certain foods, and shows an awareness of the ubiquity of environmental toxins. By novel’s end the farm is bankrupt, and Marv Carson manages the sale of the farm to the Heartland Corporation. The houses are removed as a matter of course, and any meaningful human connection with the land is effectively erased: “the fields make no room for houses or barnyards or people. No lives are lived any more within the horizon of your gaze” (396).

But Smiley suggests that poisoning does not simply stop with the environmental toxins that poison farm families. Ginny, who likely cannot have children because of the
nitrates in their well water, in turn becomes a poisoner, attempting to kill her sister Rose. “A farm abounds with poisons,” she observes, “though not many of them are fast-acting” (336). Rose is long the object of Ginny’s jealousy; Ginny’s miscarriages arouse jealousy of Rose’s own children, the sight of which “affected [her] like a poison” (8). Already an understanding of poison is apparent; she remembers, “All my tissues hurt when I saw them, when I saw Rose with them, as if my capillaries were carrying acid into the furthest reaches of my system” (8). The language of Ginny’s interpretation of her jealousy suggests that a kind of poison has caused her own miscarriages, though she has not yet learned any likely cause.

Ginny’s attempt to poison Rose also illustrates the power inherent in the act of preparing and serving food, the power of those who produce food and the power of food itself to either sustain or destroy. Ginny’s method of choice—canned sausages that contain a powerfully poisonous native plant—suggests that the natural world is quite deadly enough without human interventions such as fertilizers and synthetic chemicals. This “canning jar of poisoned sausages and the ability it confers” (399) suggests the latency or persistence of poison; upon finding them years later, after Rose succumbs to cancer, Ginny takes them home to her apartment and pours them down the garbage disposal, where they ironically enter the water supply. She explains that she “relied, as I always did now that I lived in the city, on the sewage treatment plant that I had never seen. I had misgivings” (395). Viewed together, these comparisons speak to the twin abuses, of the environment and of women, in the novel.
“Cooking reminds me of Daddy,” Ginny admits at the end of the novel, alluding to her lifelong responsibility of serving him meals (398). At the novel’s opening, she explains that because she cooked for her own family as well as her father and sometimes Rose’s family, her daily “morning at the stove started before five and didn’t end until eight-thirty” (7). Upon leaving Ty and the farm, Ginny becomes a waitress at a Perkins restaurant beside Interstate 35 in Minnesota. This new life she creates for herself appears to imitate her previous life at home, but now she simply conveys food from kitchen to diner—she does not cook meals for anyone, even herself. As a waitress at an around-the-clock short-order restaurant, she serves breakfast—the meal she served every day for her entire adult life—around the clock. To many, this service sector job would qualify as dead-end employment. Critic Marina Leslie interprets it as an “anonymous eternal present—serving breakfast at a roadside restaurant—[which] seems to be the numbing replication of the caretaking role she has always played” (47). But Ginny describes it as an “afterlife”; her divorce from the farm, and her eventual divorce from Ty, are accompanied by a relieving divorce from cooking. Her newfound freedom entails a freedom from food preparation, even to feed herself. Returning home briefly to see Rose, who is dying, she finds herself in a kitchen, realizing, “[f]or six months I had microwaved every meal I didn’t eat at the restaurant, and my pantry was full of oval plastic dishes that I thought might come in handy someday” (376).

It is fitting, then, that Ginny’s departure from Ty, and the farm, occurs in the midst of cooking dinner: she leaves the oven on with a steak broiling, with Ty standing awkwardly in an unmanaged kitchen. His exclamation, “I gave my life to this place!”
fails to acknowledge that she has done the same, giving her life over to the operations of the farm, albeit in a less visible way than her husband. She even must ask Ty for money so that she can leave, for she has no money of her own.

In her “afterlife,” Ginny serves food daily, but her waitressing is pleasant compared with her life on the farm. She engages in “small talk,” exchanging pleasantries and ensuring customers’ enjoyment of their dining experience rather than preparing the food itself. Just as the Perkins restaurant, situated beside the interstate, provides food for travelers passing through, people dislocated from both origin and destination, Ginny simply conveys food from kitchen to diner, illustrating her position removed from both preparation and consumption, her role hovering in between as a kind of conduit.

As Ginny serves food “off the farm,” this dislocation is pleasant to her; she considers it a relief, even a vacation. Likewise, the food served at the restaurant is dislocated in several ways. The 24-hour restaurant serves any food at any hour—a customer may order breakfast during early morning, midday, or late evening, for example. The menu is temporally disconnected, in that customers’ meals are not governed by traditional meal times (as the meals Ginny cooked and served for years had been). The food is also geographically dislocated, as the standardized menu means food at one Perkins is nearly identical to food at another, irrespective of geographic location, or time of year. Availability of menu items, particularly produce, is a concern of neither consumer nor the restaurant—only insofar as items continue to be available. Blueberry pancakes, or fruit compote, or a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich are available summer or winter, for the same price, regardless of where or when the food is produced. Demand trumps local availability, and food consumption is completely divorced from its
site of production. Fittingly, Ty eventually finds Ginny there, seeking her out in order to begin divorce proceedings as he leaves the farm to begin life in a new place, too. The Perkins restaurant—which could be ostensibly be located anywhere—seems an apt site for their parting of ways, for they are now both dislocated from the farm and from each other.

In the end Ginny moves from a site of fractured food production to one of dislocated food consumption—both utterly typical of contemporary times. She flees her family’s farm, where commodity crops and a livestock operation make possible consumers’—and producers’—disconnection from the food they consume. Both crops and livestock are transported, sold, and processed before redistribution through supply chains to eventually arrive on consumers’ dinner plates. Ginny’s refuge is a place at the end of that supply chain, where consumers give little if any thought to how that food came to be on that dinner plate. Ginny was once a producer of meals that fed farmers of agricultural commodities, but by novel’s end she is merely a facilitator of consumption, a role that makes her both more visible every day but perhaps a less visible link in the food system. Her financial security on the farm depended upon the farm work and the whims of the market responding to the sale of agricultural commodities. Away from the farm, she depends upon continued consumer demand for short-order chain food, largely value-added products made from those agricultural commodities.

As she relinquishes her cooking responsibilities, Ginny also becomes a consumer of processed, prepackaged, value-added foods—foods often produced from crops like corn and soybeans. She reenters the food web as a consumer of a different type. While on the farm, Ginny’s garden, and her work harvesting and canning vegetables, are prominent
features of her life, but after she leaves, she is happy to be completely disconnected from food production and growing, only eating what is microwaveable or cooked by someone else, much as her father had when she cooked for him, thus assuming a position of relative power by not preparing food.

**Textuality, Realism, and “Edible Foodlike Substances”**

The passive consumption that characterizes Ginny’s life at the novel’s end (in terms of her own habits as well as those of her customers) leads us back to the novel’s dealings with consumption in general and to a contemplation of the novel as a consumable object in itself, produced by the author and subsequently consumed by readers. Parallels between the novel’s dealings with agriculture, the consumption of food, and the construction of the novel itself become readily apparent.

At first glance, the novel is a realistic text—that is, by all indications, it adheres to the conventions of realism. Critics have supported this assertion. Ron Carlson holds that Smiley “makes the perils of family and property and being a daughter real and personal and new and honest and hurtful all over again” (BR12). He claims that her depiction of American farming “is so vivid and immediate…that it causes a kind of sunny nostalgia” (BR12). But a closer examination reveals that things are not what they seem, and, in terms of consumption, the question “What is the reader actually consuming?” arises. It is a question of essence versus substance, of an invisible history beneath a vivid present. Scratching the surface of this seemingly realistic novel reveals a number of ways in which this sense of realism is betrayed or contested; this largely typical or conventional narrative gives way to something else entirely.
On its surface, *A Thousand Acres* offers itself as a realistic text, but its retelling of *King Lear* undermines that “realism.” Indeed, the novel is not the story of a unique and individual farming family. Larry, Ginny, Rose, and Caroline are Lear, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia redrawn, and the plot closely follows Lear’s; James Schiff, who details this retelling’s “resounding success” in “Contemporary Retellings: *A Thousand Acres* as the Latest Lear,” allows, “More than almost any recasting that I have come across, Smiley’s remains true to the earlier text in regard to plot” (370, 373). Thus the novel is at once a typical, popular, realistic novel and an obvious fiction, relying heavily on the scaffold of an earlier work.

The drainage tiles buried beneath the soil across the vast acres of the Cook farm provides a similar scaffold or skeleton of sorts, making possible the farming of the land while facilitating the flow of water beneath the surface. “Tile,” Ginny explains, “‘drew’ the water, warmed the soil, and made it easy to work, enabled [the farmer] to get into the fields with his machinery a mere twenty-four hours after the heaviest storm” (15). This drainage system transformed wet, marshy prairie into vast expanses of arable land, fertile because of the slow accumulation of nutrients in the wetlands. Though the tiles are invisible once beneath the ground, Ginny reflects:

I was always aware, I think, of the water in the soil, the way it travels from particle to particle, molecules adhering, clustering, evaporating, heating, cooling, freezing, rising upward to the surface and fogging the cool air or sinking downward, dissolving this nutrient and that, quick in everything it does, endlessly working and flowing, a river sometimes, a lake sometimes.
The grass is gone, now, and the marshes, “the big wet prairie,” but the sea is still beneath our feet, and we walk on it. (16)

As farmers have artificially drained the land, they have created an “invisible sea,” and the landscape is thus transformed from marsh into something else entirely. However, as Ginny notes repeatedly, the tiles have replaced natural watercourses, which “had been filled in and plowed through, so the tile lines drained into drainage wells” that were several hundred feet deep (47). Thus the vast expanse of land, “nearly level as a table,” largely gives no indication of the water flowing and moving beneath (47).

And, fittingly, on this fine and respectable farm that was once marshland, appearances hold central importance. As Ginny explains, “Most issues on a farm return to the issue of keeping up appearances. Farmers extrapolate quickly from the farm to the farmer. A farmer looks like himself, when he goes to the café, but he also looks like his farm, which everyone has passed on the way into town” (215). In short, “a good appearance was the source and the sign of all other good things” (215). Larry’s physical and sexual abuse of his daughters not only comes as a surprise to readers, but is at first unimaginable even to Ginny, for we are given to understand that she had repressed all memories of the experience. What’s more, these actions are never revealed to those who base judgments of the novel’s events on the appearances of “business as usual” on the Cook farm. Even Ginny and Rose are caught up in making the growing discord in the family invisible once Caroline and Larry bring a lawsuit against Rose and Ginny in an attempt to take back possession of the land. The prosperous, well-kept appearance of the farm of course belies the childhood abuse of the daughters as well as their more recently crumbling relationships with one another. And of course the abuse Ginny and Rose suffer
is twofold, as Ginny’s infertility and Rose’s breast cancer are speculatively linked to their nitrate-contaminated groundwater. Though the water bears no outward signs of pollution—it tastes and appears to be perfectly safe—the nitrate fertilizers used on the farm surely percolate into the groundwater supply, posing definite human health risks.

Finally, the enterprise of agriculture manifested in the crops and livestock on the Cook farm—certainly a “realistic” or grounded aspect of the novel—are arguably farther than we realize from what we call “food.” In other words, food production as illustrated here is not simply the growing of food but rather the resources or raw materials of what may become food, or what Michael Pollan calls “edible foodlike substances.” The countless processed foods available as fast food, convenience foods, and value-added products all have their origins, of course, in actual food products. Pollan explains the way in which contemporary farming is largely divorced from what we think of as growing food:

With the rise of industrial agriculture, vast monocultures of a tiny group of plants, most of them cereal grains, have replaced the diversified farms that used to feed us. A century ago, the typical Iowa farm raised more than a dozen different plant and animal species: cattle, chickens, corn, hogs, apples, hay, oats, potatoes, cherries, wheat, plums, grapes, and pears. Now it raises only two: corn and soybeans. This simplification of the agricultural landscape leads directly to the simplification of the diet, which is now to a remarkable extent dominated by—big surprise—corn and soybeans. (116)
Pollan goes on to estimate that corn and soy are so prevalent on farms and in our diets because they “extract the maximum amount of macronutrients from the American farm belt,” turning them into carbohydrates (corn) or protein and fat (soy) (117). These crops are not readily edible but are instead inputs, or raw materials, which are then transformed, according the “value-added” model of food production, into foods we then eat: processed items like boxes of breakfast cereal, canned spaghetti, snack chips and crackers, and fast-food items.

So, just as the realistic novel belies its reliance upon *King Lear*, as the farm’s water table lies beneath the surface, as the picture-perfect family farm sits shakily on a history of unacknowledged sexual abuse and environmental pollution, the “simple” products of the farm, corn and soybeans, belie their role as food—*not* as wholesome produce to be consumed by wholesome, healthy Americans, but as inputs in a complex industrial food chain that culminates in processed food items, which suffer increasing scrutiny by public health interests.

The novel’s probing of these “invisible layers,” which surface as the novel progresses, elucidates and gives language to a heretofore silent and invisible history. Chains of causality and origin, at first so difficult to trace, become painfully apparent, and their visibility here speaks to the imperative of awareness, on the part of readers and consumers. An awareness of historicity—of how humans are grounded, or irrevocably connected, to physical, familial, and environmental origins—underscores the ways in which we incorporate these elements into ourselves not out of choice but automatically and of necessity.
The “obsidian shard” Ginny “safeguards among all others” (399)—which I take to mean the painful memories she likens to a dangerous relic of her past—suggests with its geological associations time, environmental pressure, and mysterious formation out of sight and deep within the earth. Now a material whose properties are prized by the medical realm for its excellence as a surgical blade, obsidian was long a popular material for Native Americans tools and weapons, like arrowheads. This “gleaming obsidian shard” is at once powerful with the potential to inflict pain and harm as well as a thoroughly natural material, from deep within the earth, possessing a mysterious and terrestrial history. Also called “volcanic glass,” it is usually marginally transparent—like glass, but not exactly glass. As a final image, the shard hearkens to the initial transparency of this seemingly realistic novel, which is quickly superseded by a complexly layered text. It also suggests the power of fiction to incorporate disparate threads that weave together a complicated human existence and relationships with the world that sustains and simultaneously undoes us.
Chapter Three
The Perverse Sweetness of Austin Clarke’s The Polished Hoe

As Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres examines the logic of domination behind large-scale agribusiness, Austin Clarke’s 2003 novel, The Polished Hoe, examines the roots of contemporary agribusiness in the plantation economies of the British Empire, specifically the manufacture of sugar and rum in the Caribbean. Beneath a complex and lyrical narrative, in which one woman’s confession of a murder reveals the lifetime of abuses heaped upon her, The Polished Hoe offers an indictment of colonial power and the sugar trade in Barbados (called Bimshire in the novel). Set in the years between World War II and the island’s sovereignty in 1966, Clarke’s novel depicts the plantation sugar industry at the time. Recent popular media attention suggests that the sugar economy remains a powerful influence in the course of personal, as well as global, histories.

Winner of Canada’s Giller Prize, The Polished Hoe has been praised as “a searing narrative of epic proportions” (Carroll 64). One reviewer described it as a “novel [that] demands a great deal of its readers,” and its protagonist Mary-Mathilda as “an admirable creation” (Fisher 114). Brian Bethune identifies the novel as Clarke’s “crowning jewel” in his long list of works, including The Question (1999) and memoirs Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack (2003) and A Passage Back Home (1994). Despite the popular success of The Polished Hoe, attention has been limited to brief, though laudatory, reviews. Much like Pig Tails ’n Breadfruit (1999), a memoir of Clarke’s childhood in Barbados, The Polished Hoe offers fruitful territory for food-
focused analysis. Through its depiction of a colonial sugarcane plantation, the novel provides an artful critique of globalized food systems, illustrating the degree to which agriculture economically and socially exploits laborers, particularly women. The novel’s protagonist, who ultimately capitalizes upon her own subjugation and abuse, exacts profit from this same system that has marginalized her, and in so doing illustrates the difficulty of escaping, and overturning, firmly established economic and social systems founded upon human exploitation.

Much as Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* explores what lies beneath the surface of contemporary American agribusiness, *The Polished Hoe* examines an obvious predecessor in its global scope and logic of domination. As recently evidenced by *The Price of Sugar*[^4], large-scale sugar production has virtually always benefited, and continues to benefit, its small faction of controlling elites. Yet *The Polished Hoe* does not simply offer a critique of this industry or a call for awareness, for these issues are couched within Mary-Mathilda’s personal narrative, framed as a confession, through which Clarke shows the complex contradictions of a life bound by this history and culture. *The Polished Hoe*, like *A Thousand Acres*, unearths a silenced history, exposing what has remained buried under an English colony’s “official,” accepted history.

In a 2003 interview Clarke discusses the origins of the novel, explaining that “There has never been a story told about this system […] the plantation system in Barbados certainly, perhaps also in America, in which an ordinary woman who works in the fields was given the opportunity to narrate what her life was like. And I felt that to have the story told by a woman in

[^4]: This 2007 film is the latest work to treat this subject comprehensively. Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* (1985) provides a comprehensive history of the sugar trade from a sociological perspective.
particular would add to the irony and the effectiveness of the story” (Brown). Largely consisting of a first-person narration delivered by Mary-Mathilda Bellfeels, *The Polished Hoe* details Mary’s life story within the postcolonial sugarcane industry in Barbados. Darnley Bellfeels, the plantation manager, earmarks Mary-Mathilda, a daughter of a field laborer, when she is a young girl, to become his mistress; as such, she endures what amounts to a lifetime of sexual exploitation and abuse at his hands. Yet her plight is not simply one of exploitation, but is instead tempered by “success” of sorts; when she bears his only son, Bellfeels relieves Mary of manual labor and provides her with social status and economic security in the form of the Great House, a well-appointed, even luxurious home. Mary’s relationship with Darnley Bellfeels is one of love and hate, affection and abuse. Through her paradoxical situation of wealth and subjugation, the novel recognizes and critiques the conditions surrounding the colonial enterprise and reveals through Mary-Mathilda a keen political awareness of the complexity of such systems of mastery and domination.

Mary-Mathilda offers her history largely through a fragmented confessional statement given to Sargeant Percy DaCosta Benjamin Stuart (Sarge) following her supposed murder of the now elderly Mr. Bellfeels. But Mary takes a long time getting to the actual confession. The evening of the confession—and the entire novel—are spent prefacing her actual testimony with her life story, which Sarge supplements with his own memories as their stories intertwine, both having grown up on the island together. This resulting narrative reveals a compelling but deeply troubled history of the island, as Mary’s life story evokes “the tragic history of the African experience in the New World” (Bethune).

---

5 Perhaps Clarke gives his project too much credit here, for his fictional Mary-Mathilda is not the first woman of color to speak about the subjugation she has experienced. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is one such text.
As Mary-Mathilda recounts her life story as it has been determined by the colonial sugarcane plantation, in which she is primarily an object to be used (or consumed), her listeners—and the novel’s readers—respond with disbelief and incredulity. By novel’s end, when she reaches her actual confession of a crime, her remaining listener, the police sergeant, is no longer taking notes, for it is “too much for him. He sits on the bed, still at the foot, with his notebook in his hand,” overcome by the absurdity of her story (460). Mary-Mathilda’s testimony suggests that the exploitation endemic to the plantation is not simply an unfortunate historical artifact, but rather, like the human desire for sweetness and intoxication that fuels the sugar industry, the plantation ideology is pervasive and persistent. Mary emerges not simply as a victim; rather, in Deborah Barndt’s words, she illustrates the parallels between subjugation of women and of agricultural land, highlighting “what it means to be both victim and agent (and, most often, a complex combination of these) within a global food system, both depending on and resisting it” (20). For Mary is not simply a human object, but rather in her incorporation into the system she also exacts her own profit; she ends up, in her mother’s words, “getting some o’ the sweets that goes along with it” (426).

My analysis of The Polished Hoe focuses specifically on its depiction of the sugar trade and how the processing, or refinement, of sugar—for that is the primary objective of a sugarcane plantation—is a metaphor of the refinement that pervades the novel just as the “sweet, but sickening smell [of] cane juice” permeates Mary-Mathilda’s daily life (4). As consumers, we are more familiar with the end product, a colorless, nearly odorless sweetener that is ubiquitous in processed foods (though now corn-based sweeteners are often used instead, for they are even cheaper). The refinement of sugarcane also produces rum, for which the Caribbean islands are well known. The novel evokes refinement not simply as a literal process, but also describes
Mary-Mathilda’s cultural refinement and elevation of status that come with her role as Bellfeels’ mistress and mother of his only son. As “raw materials,” both Mary-Mathilda and the plantation’s sugarcane have use value and become refined, their distance from their humble cane field origins increasing, suggesting the distance created between food crops and end products, between field laborers and consumers, embodied by processed foods.

Though the word “refinement” connotes improvement, an elevation of status, a process of purification, or a removal of a corrupting influence, the various iterations of refinement revealed by the novel suggest debasement, corruption, and pollution. As the “purification” of sugar creates a food substance with no real nutritional benefit, this industry continues to rely upon exploitative conditions, and refinement is given a decidedly hollow ring. This emptiness or lack is further suggested by the novel’s textual form and style; as both a rags-to-riches tale and a confession of a murder, the novel suggests, rather, a fragmented, seemingly extemporaneous and unpolished, “unrefined” text. On the surface a poignant personal narrative, Clarke’s novel presents cultural critique by simultaneously creating and deconstructing a culture of refinement. The assemblage of fragmented oral testimony, late-night dialogue, memories, reveries, and gauzy stream of consciousness creates a text that problematizes refinement by undoing precision and exactness, suggesting that purification at the heart of the novel is not only ironic but perverse and unsustainable.

“Sitting down to eat is full of ironies”

Sugar’s significance in *The Polished Hoe* as a commodity, a food source, and as metaphor warrants particular attention in this discussion of food-focused texts. Though the novel has received popular and critical acclaim, the focus of its attention has been its treatment of the
tragic and resilient human condition, not its evocation of broader cultural concerns, such as food and foodways. But sugar, long a staple of English diets, remains a central component of contemporary American diets, and as this novel’s focus it deserves a closer look.

Indeed, denying sugar’s ubiquity in the contemporary Western diet (its various ill effects on human health) is as difficult as avoiding the sweet substance itself. Per capita consumption of sugar in the United States has increased by a third over the past two decades. Numerous writers have drawn attention to American’s love-hate relationship with sugar, most recently linking it to staggering rates of obesity (especially juvenile obesity) and related health problems in the United States. Though sources reveal that Americans’ sugar intake is at its highest point ever, experts agree it will go still higher; the USDA projects demand for sugar to increase more than 15 percent in the next decade (Kimbrell 142).

Recent public concern has focused not simply on consumer health, but also on the conditions of sugar production. Despite the ubiquity of sugar itself, the conditions of its workers have remained largely invisible to the wider world. Focusing specifically on the sugar industry in the U.S., Andrew Kimbrell in *Fatal Harvest* (2002) argues that sugar growing “may be the most concentrated agricultural industry in the United States,” in which a handful of landholders enjoy a lion’s share of the market’s profits in addition to generous federal farm subsidies (139-40). *The Price of Sugar* (2007), a recent documentary, exposes the sugar industry in the Dominican Republic for its dependence upon indentured servitude, as armed guards oversee the toil of workers who live in squalid conditions, often lacking necessities like clean water, housing, education, and basic health care.

The sugarcane industry that circumscribes *The Polished Hoe* was indeed profitable for England, largely because it first commanded control of slave laborers who, after the abolition of
slavery, became slave-like laborers. That the sugar economy was originally dependent upon human bondage comes as no surprise, and “if not slaves, then men who sold their labor because they had nothing else to sell; who would probably produce things of which they were not the principal consumers; who would consume things they had not produced, and in the process earn profit for others elsewhere,” given the toil required in refining sugarcane⁶ (Mintz xxiv). As Philip Curtin reiterates in The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex, sugar production is “extremely labor intensive,” and sugarcane’s huge volume when harvested meant that it required processing before it could be transported (4). But once processed, it is a highly portable commodity that can be shipped far and wide and still garner profits. In essence, “With the discovery of sugar, the star ingredient of a world economy was found,” as its portability and profitability were matched by its alluring sweetness (Dimock 7).

Clarke’s novel evokes the perspective of a woman who represents the multitudes of laborers who provided the foundation for England’s sugar trade. Mary-Mathilda labors as a “common field hand” before eventually gaining privileged status as Bellfeels’ mistress, earning a meager living with her hoe, “weeding young canes; weeding potato slips; yams; eddoes; just plain weeding” (102). Her subsistence is not far removed from slavery, as Mary, her mother, and grandmother scavenge and scrape together their food for daily meals, even stealing food from the Plantation when possible, because they do not earn nearly enough to feed themselves sufficiently (13).

“Food,” Mary states matter-of-factly, is “Something to eat: to put into the belly. All the inhabitants of the Village call it by this name. Food. In spite of the time of day or night, when it

---

⁶ Indeed, this is still a concern today, as The Price of Sugar (2007) attempts to illustrate. Outside the United States, this work is still performed by poorly-compensated laborers whose conditions suggest that slavery is anything but a distant memory.
is served. In any other part of the outside-world, it is called breakfast, lunch or dinner” (183-184). Her statement reflects the plantation laborers’ basic reliance upon food—they eat because they need to. Food sustains them, but they derive no pleasure from it. This perfunctory consumption parallels their exploitation in an industry that feeds on them even as they can only barely feed themselves.

Immediately preceding this passage, Mary describes the relentless toil in the cane factory: “New men arrive at all hours of the night, during Crop-Season only, to feed the crushing machinery and engines with canes. The whistle signals the departure of worn-out men and tired women, every three hours, and up to midnight” (183). The sugarcane industry quite literally consumes its workers—the workers are the “food” that fuels production—and they serve the plantation as nothing more than units of labor. In so doing, the workers are economically exploited to the point that their lives are mere subsistence, and their own food merely sustains their lives.

However, though food may be quite literally sustenance for laborers, the novel suggests that it is not a simple, mundane detail but rather evidence of power relationships among the novel’s characters. Clarke’s attention to food, its production and consumption, elucidates complex relationships between the production and consumption of food and the ideologies that govern the distribution of food in a global economy.

Of course, the objective of the sugarcane plantation, and its countless hungry laborers, is the refinement of sugarcane into table sugar and rum. Nutritionally, sugar is food, but just barely, providing its consumers with little more than calories and possessing no significant nutritional value. Neither sugar nor rum is a dietary staple, and both, when consumed in excess, are quite unhealthy. Increasingly common in processed foods, sugar consumption “causes the
human body to release natural painkillers called endorphins into the bloodstream, and this, in
turn, causes us to crave sweets” (Kimbrell 142). Sugar feeds desire for sweetness, but not much
more, creating a craving that loops back upon itself. In typical Western diets today, sugar’s
ubiquity is unparalleled, a staple in most homes and present in an overwhelming number of food
products. As Mintz explains, “So plentiful and important is this substance in our lives today that
it has become notorious,” and that “If we choose not to eat sugar, it takes both vigilance and
effort, for modern societies are overflowing with it” (Mintz 74). Marion Nestle calls sugar “a
top-of-the-Pyramid food that provides calories but no other nutrients” (108). As Andrew
Kimbrell laments, “Sugar or other sweeteners are present in nearly all processed foods, and now
account for a fifth of America’s calories, with the average American consuming a pound of
sweetener every sixty hours” (142). Sugar is a key ingredient in value-added products, providing
an alluring sweetness and cheap, empty calories, but promising a number of increasingly
common health problems.

Sugar itself thus embodies a type of corruption; it is a commodity that satisfies—for a
time—but does not nourish and sustain a healthy body. Sugar is “food” at its most elemental,
nothing more than raw calories in the form of carbohydrates. And by a strange twist, as the novel
suggests, sugar consumes its producers and consumers, its laborers and its eaters—through
exploitative labor and through those empty calories. But sugar requires considerable labor and
intensive processing. As a “basic” food item, categorized as a staple as opposed to “processed”
foods, it is in fact highly processed.

Sugar, once processed, comes back to the people of Bimshire as rum. In this way they
consume the product of their labor, but it isn’t a drink that nourishes; it is no more “useful” than
the cane trash left after the sugarcane’s harvesting. The difference is that those who drink rum
must purchase the liquor, and in doing so pay twice—through their toil in the cane fields, and again with their meager pay for that labor. Rum also dulls the senses and numbs workers to their daily drudgery. Throughout the novel, as Mary and Sarge sit in Mary’s Great House, they sip rum, which Mary calls “the blood of the island” (45). As Mary’s grown son Wilberforce hurriedly guzzles rum, he “closes his eyes; holds his breath; holds the rum in his mouth; and finally swallows it; and screws up his face” (289), suggesting that consumption is not a pleasure enjoyed in its own right but rather a necessary evil that must be endured and that enables him to endure life on the island.

The cheap labor needed by sugarcane plantations to produce sugar and rum—dehumanized, efficient laborers—can be compared with sugar and calories, as Richard Manning has noted in Against the Grain. “In this mindset [of economic and industrial efficiency],” he says, “Food is no longer a pleasure, an aesthetic experience, a bearer of culture and tradition. It is not cuisine but calories. The efficiency of sugar fits nicely with the ascendant dehumanization that was British industrialism” (Manning 82). Cheap labor and cheap food go hand in hand; even today, “fast food” is largely comprised of sugar and sweeteners (often derived from corn, which is now cheaper still than sugar). In fact, “The highest level of profit is made on the most processed, usually least nutritious, food. The food industry is under pressure to specialize in value-added foods, rather than unprocessed healthier foods” because profits lie in processing (Field 197). The profit potential for food processing is actually a result of a consistent market surplus in certain agricultural commodities, such as corn, wheat, rice, soybeans, and sugar, which creates the need for markets that serve as dumping outlets for these surpluses. It is not difficult to conjecture that any human labor involved in these agricultural markets will likely be
exploited. Furthermore, the soil itself is exploited; sugarcane, like other commodity crops such as tobacco, corn, and cotton, quickly exhausts the soil of its nutrients, effectively using it up.

The novel’s presentation of the exploitative nature of the sugar plantation, and of Mary’s life as a laborer, illuminates a contrast between the plantation workers, who endure extreme poverty and wholesale exploitation, and the wealthy who benefit from their toil, illustrated plainly by the abundance of food at the tables of the wealthy. Food is, first and foremost, literally sustenance. But food is also a commodity that establishes and reinforces socioeconomic status among Bimshire’s residents. The food consumed by the poor differs markedly from the food of the wealthy, and sugar, a pseudo-food and edible trade commodity, binds them together in a plantation economy that amasses wealth for some and heaps exploitation upon others. Mary-Mathilda wisely and accurately observes that “sitting down to eat food is full of ironies” (7).

Meals served in Bellfeels’ Main House and, in later years, in Mary-Mathilda’s Great House provide an unsettling contrast of abundance and lavish variety in the midst of the poverty of the plantation’s laborers and surrounding townspeople. In the plantation’s Main House, Bellfeels and his family take pleasure in meals such as “English mash potatoes, green pigeon-peas and a piece o’ roast pork,” and they enjoyed meals in plenty; Bellfeels would have “three servings of [the main course], his appetite always without limits, and big in all manner of ways” (457). Mary-Mathilda enjoys culinary luxury in later life in the Great House, in contrast to the abject want of her childhood when she, her mother, and her grandmother often relied upon stolen food to sustain them. As Bellfeels’ mistress she enjoys dinners with so much food. Good food. Rich food. Chicken fricassee. Long-grain rice that was clean, you hardly had to pick or wash it; not like what Demerara exported [there]. Ham. From that place [. . .] in the South. Smithfield. Bully-beef. If a ship hadn’t
come in with beefsteak from the Argentyne, ‘cause the Argentyne being Latin-Amurcan, was always a favourite of Germans. And fried pork chops. You wouldda thought we were having a feast. (367)

The novel’s depiction of all the physical conditions of sugar’s refinement thus suggests that as sugarcane is processed and transformed into increasingly valuable or desirable commodities—like sugar and rum—it becomes not only nutritionally dubious but also embodies a disconnect between origins and end product. Much as we remain unaware of the origins of the products in our supermarkets, Clarke reveals a history of the sugar and rum that innocently (silently) await consumers, problematizing consumption by revealing their conditions of production.

The Thing Itself

The refinement of sugar in Bimshire’s plantation economy reverberates through the island culture as an ironic enterprise, for its “improvement” is built upon the backs of laborers’ own degraded lives. The text reveals layers of narrative, or degrees of refinement, similar to the various grades of refinement that result in sugarcane’s end products. The novel’s title suggests a literal and obvious exercise in refinement, figured as the act of polishing. This field hoe is Mary-Mathilda’s purported murder weapon, and she admits to painstakingly, even obsessively, polishing and sharpening it in preparation for killing the elderly plantation manager Darnley Bellfeels. This hoe is heavy with personal historical significance:

…I went back to a hoe, I had-first-used when I was a girl, working in the cane fields, not quite eight years of age. The same hoe, weeding young canes, sweet potato slips, ‘eight-weeks’ yams, eddoes, all those ground provisions.
This hoe that I used all those years, in the North Field, is the same hoe I used this
Sunday night. (6)

On that night she confesses to hacking Bellfeels to death, describing the incident as “very
bloody, like a spoiled slaughtering” (461). This hoe, the tangible evidence of Mary-Mathilda’s
life as a field laborer, embodies her history on the island and, by extension, the history of the
plantation. Mary explains that the hoe is essentially a family heirloom, as “Ma herself used the
hoe she inherited from her mother, my gran. And it was there, on the day she died, leaning up in
the yard, strong as anything, strong as the day the Plantation made it. This is the same hoe I
inherited from Ma” (53). The hoe is in fact passed down to Mary-Mathilda from her mother, who
had inherited it from her mother, thus an heirloom that conveys not ancestral prosperity or joy
but the subjugation of generations on the plantation.

This hoe even ironically betrays England’s colonial presence on the island quite literally;
while taking Mary’s statement, Sargeant notes that the blade of the hoe is stamped with “made in
England” (453). “Mannifactured up in Englund!” he exclaims, “as if it is an earth-shattering
conclusion he has come to, the solution of a long, nagging problem to do with this case” (454).
This hoe, the murder weapon, a product of England, which has been polished tirelessly by Mary-
Mathilda, is an artifact and a symbol of Bimshire’s history as a colony in England’s sugarcane
plantation industry. As the island’s sugar is extracted by England and sold worldwide as a
commodity, the hoe’s status as an English export is ironic, for England, then as now, had few
ture exports other than steel; nearly all of its “exports” were really products of its colonies, like
the sugar and rum produced in Barbados.

Thus the hoe rhetorically unearths the island’s history as an English colony. Mary-
Mathilda insists that her listeners “shouldn’t be a stranger to this history” of exploitation, for they
all have been “bred and born right here, in this Village, in this Island of Bimshire” (13). This history begs to be unearthed as the Constable admits at the outset, “I sees this Plantation from only a distance, ma’am. I know it from a distance only,” suggesting not only a personal unfamiliarity with the plantation itself but also a cultural ignorance of the plantation’s history (4).

Mary-Mathilda’s confession to murdering Bellfeels is, unsurprisingly, a roundabout tale as she must approach the event in question by way of the history of the island, in effect justifying her act. Sarge tells Mary matter-of-factly that in Bimshire, “Colonialism is the way things are done, the means,” explaining that the racism that persists on the island is the design of the Colonial Office. He does not acknowledge that colonialism is inherently tied to slavery (249). Mary responds, “I wouldda thought it had to do with slavery (249). Sarge responds, incredulously,

Mary-G, where you hear this from? You talking about the history of slavery in Bimshire? Or the history of slavery? I don’t know if there ever was slavery here, on the same level as Amurca. You’re telling me so, now. I never would have think that you was the person to know this. But then-again, you is the mother of a very learned man. And you hears things round your dinner table, from the mouths of men with power, and who travels (249).

He insists that “there was never any slaves in Bimshire,” telling Mary, “I don’t believe in this slavery business that everybody say was happening ’bout here. I don’t think it ever exist, in-true. [. . .] Not in a English colony, Jesus Christ. I know the English. The English won’t do a thing like that” (351, 330).
But Mary’s oral history shows or suggests “that there is no difference between those brutes who enslave us here in the Wessindies, and the ones that enslave other coloureds in Amurca” (353). Mary and Sarge’s conversation indicates that the history of slavery has an obvious but silent presence in Bimshire, and that the silence that surrounds it creates a sense of cultural amnesia. Mary’s son Wilberforce, for instance, learned about the island’s history of slavery only after leaving Bimshire; while at school on the island, “not one Master who teached him ever mentioned to him a word about this History of the Laws of Slavery! He left without knowing the history of . . . what-you-call-it? . . . the history of himself” (191). While studying at Oxford Wilberforce writes home to his mother with his recent realization that during his childhood they had “carried on like slaves [. . .], like slaves on a plantation [. . .] and were ignorant, and did not know the ironies of [their] behaviour” (31). Ironically, Wilberforce’s own name recalls the history of British slavery, for it was William Wilberforce, a British politician, who campaigned to abolish slavery in the British Empire.

Slavery did, of course, exist in Bimshire (Barbados), which was in fact the “first English ‘sugar island,’” beginning in the early seventeenth century and continuing to its abolition in 1834 (Mintz 155). In fact, to “‘barbadoes someone’ became a seventeenth-century expression for stealing humans to sell into slavery” (Mintz 52). After the abolition of slavery on the island, however, economic and social conditions were still based upon essentially forced labor, as plantations continued to produce and export sugar and rum; Barbados became independent of Britain in 1966.

Mary-Mathilda’s mother and grandmother have spoken to her of the slavery of their predecessors, offering an oral history that remains largely silent until Mary’s testimony allows it to surface. And though some of the island’s residents (represented in the novel by Sarge) doubt
the role of slavery in the island’s history, the island’s colonial status is felt everywhere. During the war Barbados suffers food shortages, called “the Hunger,” because of “Churchill wanting all the food for the Allies to fight the Nazzies” (363). Mary explains, “Churchill ordered the ships to stop [at the island], only to take-on fresh, clean water; and rum; and then run straight for Englund” (363). To Britain, during the time period of the novel, the island colony’s sole purpose was its sugar and rum production.

Mary-Mathilda explains that “The Europeans do whatever they like. Filled their greed and wishes with anything that they could lift and car-way, found in these parts of the world. Lay-claim to it. And anything they could put their two hands on, anything that was light-enough for them to lift and haul-away, they steal” (187). Their wealth is entirely dependent upon the toil of laborers and the resources of a land they have colonized; their motive is absolute profit, and their means of obtaining it is through absolute power over laborers.

Throughout the novel Mary-Mathilda’s testimony and conversation with Sarge reveal Bimshire as a plantation colony under the giant thumb of England’s rule. Paralleling this subjugation on a more intimate scale is Mary’s own object status; marked from childhood as Darnley Bellfeels’ mistress, her life from early on has been wholly subject to the whims of the plantation manager. Under Bellfeels’ thumb, Mary in effect becomes a “polished hoe,” polished whore, a human object for Bellfeels’ use. Bearing his only son, however, allows her to exact profit from this exploitative relationship, as Bellfeels then provides for all their needs—a fine house and all the trappings to accompany it—and Mary thus profits from Bellfeels’ exploitation of her through a marked elevation of her socioeconomic status.

Though the novel provides a prescient analysis of colonialism’s abuse of the field laborers who make sugarcane plantations possible and profitable, the novel focuses primarily on
the personal abuses Mary-Mathilda experiences. Her tale corroborates historian Gerda Lerner’s observation that “in the course of the agricultural revolution the exploitation of human labor and the sexual exploitation of women become inextricably linked” (52). Mary embodies the “inextricable link” that Lerner notes in her observation of women’s subjugation in agricultural economies, as Mary’s path of life is determined wholly by her use-value, or object status, first as a field laborer and then as a mistress of Bellfeels.

This connection is in fact acknowledged by Clarke through Mary-Mathilda, who observes:

“There is a distinct difference in the way Mr. Bellfeels sees me, and the way he was brought up to see me, from the way he see Mistress Dora Blanche Spence Bellfeels. Yes. One is a wife. The other is harlot. One is Mistress. The other is the whore. One was…”

“Did you say whore, Miss Mary?”

“Is there a difference, Percy?”

“Are you referring to your hoe?”

“They are both the same, and sound the same.”

“Well one is a thing; and the other . . .” (118)

That Mary-Mathilda had no choice in this matter becomes clear in a pivotal memory of Mr. Bellfeels, a field overseer at the time, tracing his riding-crop down the front of her body, prefiguring his sexual abuse of her. She remembers “the rich, strong smell of the leather, just like the leather in the seats and upholstery of the Austin-Healy motor-car that Mr. Bellfeels own... And the feel of leather of the riding crop, passing over my dress, all over my body, as if it was his hand crawling over my body; and I was naked” (11). She later remembers Bellfeels' lustful
gaze upon her, imagining him thinking of her as a “young, sweet delicious piece o’ veal, to feast on, at [his] heart’s delight” (59). Bellfeels’ sexual appetite, a craving for something “sweet,” suggests the consumption of sugar. Furthermore, the metaphor a “piece o’ veal” suggests the succulent tenderness of meat from a young animal earmarked, as Mary is, explicitly for early slaughter and consumption. Mary’s remark illustrates an acute awareness of her body as a sexual object to be used. Accordingly, she acknowledges at an early age the place of women in the social hierarchy as she relates a memory of visiting a local hardware store:

The afternoon that I asked Mr. Waldrond for the oil and the stain, when he told me how strange it was for me, a woman, to be interested in his profession, as if I was invading his sacred territory, it made me think of the place of woman in this Island. That thought hit me, hard-hard. It made me see that in this Village, now and in bygone days, and in Ma’s time, women were relegated (58).

But Mary-Mathilda is not simply Bellfeels’ sexual victim. Her position’s complexity, as she enjoys a wealth otherwise impossible for a black woman on the island, prevents the unequivocal condemnation of the corruption she is born into. Of her sexual vulnerability, she explains, “I was there,” she said, “To have, and to discard. To have, at a whim and a will. But, I still had some pleasure to go along with it” (103).

Though she is “relegated,” she nevertheless exercises power and authority by “overseeing” in her own right. As Bellfeels is an overseer on the plantation before his promotion to plantation manager, Mary also enjoys a privileged position of “overseer,” having “trained a powerful spying glass on the front door of Sargeant’s house,” allowing her to “[get] to know Sargeant in recent years from this distance” (95). During his visit, Sargeant ponders the placement of the Great House on a promontory, which affords Mary the ability to “record...
[villagers’] daily movements, to be the overseer of their private lives” (300). Bellfeels as overseer manages plantation operations; Mary is literally an overseer, using a spyglass to monitor other villagers, particularly Sarge. Her vantage point affords her power—the power of observation—so that she is no longer “a stranger to the truth, to the history, and to the actions of the powerful in this Island” (348). Her relationship with Bellfeels excludes her from common village life, and so this spyglass affords her with familiarity, albeit from a distance.

Mary’s physical distance from the village below serves to underscore her social and economic elevation in her Great House, with its containment of “the power and magnificence of wealth” in its formal parlor and “the cut-glass vases and cups and plates; and the Berbice and tub-chairs, and settees and couches made out of mahogany and cherry wood” (84). A sense of cultural refinement accompanies the opulence of Mary-Mathilda’s house, as she listens to “religious music, hymns and sacred songs” broadcast from England, consumes food and liquors imported from around the globe, and discusses European art and culture with Sarge (168-74).

Mary’s achievement of a sense of refinement is contrasted by Bellfeels, the very person who makes her position possible. Bellfeels is repeatedly described in terms of his proximity to the soil, with an odor of “wet, black soil,” a “sickening smell of dirt and wet dust, reminding you of something that is dead, perpetually rotting” (113). Bellfeels’ putrid odor suggests his baseness, coarseness, and lack of refinement, underscored by his treatment of Mary and other women, as well as his poor grammar and his large appetite (71, 457). Mary calls him a “low class bastard” as opposed to the “really rich, the really white people” of the island (33). Mary’s encounters with Bellfeels, which took place in the cane fields, left a “lasting smell of mould; a smell with the tinge of sweetness,” a “smell of mould, that closeness to the soil, that can’t be separated from natural things, nor from the stench of the soil itself” (65).
Her own lifetime of sexual abuse is thus intertwined with intermittent emotions of love and lust and a desire for power; she hates as well as loves Bellfeels and gains social status and power despite Bellfeels’ control over her life. She is truly, in the words of Deborah Barndt, a “complex combination” of victim and agent, as she perpetuates a culture of corruption through her complicity even as she desires to act out violently against it. She seems caught in what Val Plumwood calls a “mesh so strong, so finely knit and familiar” that her story is inextricable from Bellfeels’ (195).

* * *

Thus the trope of refinement evidenced in the novel’s treatment of sugar is echoed by Mary-Mathilda’s advance in status, suggesting that refinement is not to be interpreted as a simple process (cultural, nutritional, or otherwise) but as an ironic purification or elevation of status. But the trope of refinement can also be traced more intimately through Mary-Mathilda’s history to reveal a deeper and more troubling parallel of refinement between Bellfeels’ exploitation of Mary-Mathilda and of the larger plantation enterprise.

What becomes increasingly clear through Sarge’s memories of circulating rumors and then finally through Mary’s own admission, is that Bellfeels has not simply chosen Mary-Mathilda as his own; he regularly uses Mary’s own mother in the same way, and suspicions of Mary’s paternity are confirmed late in the novel; a wall in Mary’s home filled with family photographs, her “Wall of History” or “Wall of Shame,” betrays the “silent sin” of physical resemblance among Mary, Bellfeels, and their son Wilberforce. Bellfeels is not only Wilberforce’s father but also Mary-Mathilda’s father (291). A “resemblance which struck [Mary] always as the resemblance of the son ‘taking after his mother’” is actually the evidence of both the mother and the son taking after the father (431, 430). Though Mary’s mother does attempt to
tell her at one point, Mary remembers that she “wasn’t in the mood to hear that kind of story,” an unwillingness to confront her personal history in the same way that her own testimony confronts a more general ignorance of the persistence of human bondage on the island (434).

Upon realizing that Bellfeels has been “fooping [his] own daughter,” Mary’s mother is convinced “that Mary-girl was fixed. Was saved. Taken-care-of. […] And Ma knew that she herself would carry this damning, indigestible information within her heart, for who would believe such blasphemy, such, such wirthless behaviour” (430). Mary is literally the product of colonial abuse, the child begotten by Bellfeels’ rape of her mother, and in turn Mary bears a son for Bellfeels. Mary is tightly confined within a corrupt system, bound within what Plumwood calls a “master story.” Mary indeed confuses her own body with the property of another, Mr. Bellfeels, and though she resents and resists him, she continues to feel a complex affection for him as the father of her son.

This incestuous lineage, which makes her own son her half-sibling, metaphorically evokes the agricultural method of monoculture by which sugar plantations are made possible. In this way Bellfeels’ abuse of Mary mirrors the agricultural use of the plantation itself, as its vast acres are given over to the cultivation of a single crop, sugarcane. Conceived more broadly, “monoculture” is homogeneity, or a culture dominated by a single element. And critics of industrialized agriculture identify monoculture as a destructive practice, as it favors the genetic persistence of a certain few species at the expense of all others.

Through Mary, Bellfeels quite literally destroys the potential for genetic diversity inherent in human reproduction, begetting a child with his own child, with each generation concentrating and intensifying his own genetic potential. In this way Bellfeels is a force of patriarchal domination not only by his position as plantation manager, but through his incestuous
relationship with Mary, which genetically silences Mary’s maternal lineage because it is attributable to him as well.

Ecofeminist critics have elucidated a link between monoculture and violence toward women, citing models of development that privilege domination rather than cooperation. Vandana Shiva explains the connection: “The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity” (Shiva 164). This connection between agricultural monoculture and relegation of women to second-class status is evidenced by Mary-Mathilda’s lineage, which poignantly illustrates the correlation between agricultural practices and treatment of women.

In an attempt to bring gravity to Mary's life story, an omniscient narrator underscores her embodiment of the “master story”: “This is Mary-Mathilda's life. Paid for by Mr. Bellfeels. But in a more serious manner, in a more deep and romantic way, her life is paid for by her body. Has always been. It is therefore her life; and her life only. She owns it” (426). Thus Mary-Mathilda is both mastered and master; she has paid for her status and wealth (as Bellfeels’ mistress), but with her body--herself--serving as capital. She has been the means of exchange; she has been the commodity itself. The logic here becomes circular; Mary is at once person and thing, agent and property, master and slave. Agency and power, in her situation, are transitory and conditional.

Mary-Mathilda observes that Mr. Bellfeels “taught [her] to look at life as a matter of yields. Everything have its yield. Or its possibility of yields” (364). Her observation, of course, carries two meanings, “yield” meaning to submit or succumb, as well as to bear or produce. In the scope of agriculture, “yields” are a concern in both shades of the word's meaning, for a landscape must "submit" to human influence in order to bear produce. In light of the tradition of
women and agriculture, *The Polished Hoe* gives us Mary-Mathilda, who yields to Bellfeels and produces yields in the sugarcane fields; she also yields progeny, giving birth to his son Wilberforce.

**The Polished Text**

As *The Polished Hoe* reveals sugar, a kitchen staple and “raw material” for cooking, to be in fact a highly processed form of sugarcane, the metaphor of refinement can be applied not only to the novel’s subject matter but also to the novel’s style and structure. The text itself is a deceptively unrefined one, for Mary-Mathilda’s extemporaneous oral testimony suggests a rawness that obscures what is, in fact, a carefully constructed tale. Both Clarke and his protagonist tactfully allow the confession to unfold through Mary’s life story, which has the effect of transforming Mary’s admission of murder into an indictment of Bellfeels and for the lifetime of abuse that Mary has suffered.

Mary’s testimony suggests spontaneity through its lack of organization, as it rambles throughout the evening from one reminiscence to the next. Though Sargeant is ostensibly sitting by to record her statement in writing, Mary herself has not prepared a statement to deliver; rather, her testimony, which consists in large part of her jumbled life story, becomes a conversation with Sargeant as they together remember growing up on the island.

Indeterminacies pepper the tale, and the accuracy and veracity of Mary’s statement are repeatedly questioned as the constable and then the sergeant must struggle with their task of recording her confession of murder. Mary begins by framing the event, explaining that “at seven o’clock, the hour in question, it was like a full moon was shining, by which I mean, as the saying in this Village goes, a full-moon alters the way men behave—and women, too!—turns them into
lunatics,” her remark suggesting that her own behavior is atypical, or has been altered, and she may be turned into a “lunatic” (7). The constable attempts to clarify what she tells him, which contradicts what she earlier told Sargeant on the telephone:

Pardon me, ma’am. But on the telephone to the sub-station, in your preliminary Statement to Sargeant, Sargeant say that you say the night was dark, and no moon wasn’t shining. Is so, Sargeant tell me to write down your Statement, in my notebook, using your exact words. So, I hope that I not stating now, in-front-’o-you, what you didn’t state, nor intend to state, in your telephone Statement, ma’am? (7)

The issue of whether or not the moon was in fact shining or not is never resolved; as Mary explains, she may have simply used the detail as a metaphor: “what I mean by a bright night and the moon shining, is merely a comparison of my disposition towards darkness and light,” adding that “When there is a full moon, people behave strange. But tonight, with no moon at all, my behaviour was still strange, granted” (7).

Later describing a visit to America as a young woman, Mary begins to doubt whether she has in fact been there: “It could be that I was relating a story I read in a book….It is not those facts that I claiming to be true. The story itself is the thing” (210). She adds, “I see things when I sit-down in my chair, and I am studying. And I see things when I dream. And I cannot make a distinction between living-out a story, and reading a story” (211).

These moments encourage readers to doubt the veracity of Mary-Mathilda’s tale, complicating the immediacy and truthfulness that her conversational style suggests. Like Sarge, whose presence is for matters of the law, readers of the novel are prompted to ask, “So what really happened? Did she really kill Bellfeels?” The sensory details that permeate her memories,
like the pungent odor of the cane fields, and the detailed descriptions of mealtimes, suggest vividly lived experience. But the hazy details of Mary’s story, and her roundabout way of approaching the crime in question, continually remind readers that the text is Clarke’s creation and not simply Mary’s testimony.

The failure of this text, of any text, to faithfully record reality signals the difficulty of delineating truth from fiction. In addition the author suggests a broader parallel with the recorded and accepted histories of British colonial presence addressed in the novel. The “history” of Mary and Sarge that unfolds throughout the novel is inscribed by the history of Bimshire that these characters attempt to revise through their retelling. In both instances, the accepted history—the “what really happened”—inevitably rests on the authority vested in written texts, despite the inaccuracies and omissions of those written histories. As Sarge and Mary determine, the Bimshire history taught in the island’s schools, the “accepted” history, cannot offer a complete account of human history on the island—a result of historical bias as well as the unavoidable limitations of written texts. In a similar way, Clarke’s novel offers a “record” of events on the evening the novel takes place, and cannot help but to offer a particular story rather than the complete story.

At the novel’s outset Mary suggests the impossibility of grasping a clear and objective “true account” with the litany of names that she is known by throughout her life: “My name is Mary. People in this Village call me Mary-Mathilda. Or, Tilda, for short. To my mother I was Mary-girl. My names I am christen with are Mary Gertrude Mathilda, but I don’t use Gertrude, because my maid has the same name. My surname that people ’bout-here uses, is either Paul, or Bellfeels, depending who you speak to. . .” (3). Even something as simple as a name is made impossibly complex; Mary implies not only that she is called by a variety of names, but that
“Mary” is the only name she attaches to herself. Later in the novel Sarge remembers his youth, and watching Mary but never approaching her; Mary explains to him that “What you were seeing wasn’t me. You were looking at a person you had invented in your imagination, a person who, as you say, you couldn’t approach” (274). Mary herself is thus open to interpretation, or is “defined” or known differently by different people, so that her identity is destabilized and fictionalized, even in “reality.”

Mary’s awareness of the power of imagination in interpretation is key, for as the evening grows late, and the characters are fortified by glasses of rum, the story that unfolds is both vivid and overwhelming. She aims to leave “a legacy of words behind [her] so people will know,” though admitting that often an irrevocable distance exists between the truth and what people will believe (406).

Furthermore language, the novel suggests, fails to adequately convey “the truth as it occurs.” The novel’s shocking secret of Mary’s paternity is revealed not through explicit text, but is alluded to obliquely through descriptions of exchanges between Mary’s mother and Bellfeels, and of family photographs in Mary’s house. The “truth,” as it were, is strongly suggested but never stated. In fact, even Mary’s mother never knew the identity of her own father, opening the possibility of Bellfeels’ fathering her as well.

For readers, the single most important event of the novel is another admission that the novel never details: the murder of Bellfeels. Mary herself casts doubt upon its actual occurrence, insisting

I don’t want people to see my act in such a simple way. In such black-and-whiteness. But if I don’t leave something behind, anybody, anytime . . . tomorrow, next year, in the future and in the generations to come . . . will only know what
happened from word of mouth, and from the *Bimshire Daily Herald*; and the words from the lips of Village gossip. There won’t be nobody to tell the pure history of my act (101).

Here Mary explains her desire for a police statement to preserve her life story, suggesting that an oral history is insufficient. However, as she has already suggested, a written history is no assurance of historical accuracy. One could argue that the novel is her offering of a “pure history” of her act of murder; however, the murder itself remains obscured by Mary’s telling of it; the crime scene is never examined, and the victim is never revealed. After ostensibly recounting her act of murder, she says:

> And immediately, I regretted I had done it. And wished it was a dream. And I had dreamed about this so many nights in such graphic detail that I might very well have imagined I killed him; or that the dream had been so graphic, and so much like wishful thinking, that on waking from the dream, I did not have to carry out my intention that the dream had, by itself, already satisfied. (461)

Conflating the act of murder and her dreaming of the act, she suggests that in fact the dream and its “reality” are identical to her. Her speculation that she “might very well have imagined” the act “or that the dream had been so graphic…[that she] did not have to carry out” the murder implies that it is actually a product of her imagination.

All we have to go on, as readers, are her memories, which ostensibly provide just cause for such a crime. Consequently, Mary’s more “truthful” history of the island is complicated by the questionable veracity of the circumstances of her testimony itself. Late in the novel, as Mary and Sarge lay in the cane field, Mary dares him to divulge their evening together, because “Nobody will believe the truth,” for “People will only believe what they want to believe” (406).
This remark points to the conditions of the novel as a whole, rather than simply that moment within the novel; its readers are challenged to “believe the truth” as well as create that “truth”—a coherent, “believable” text—from the incomplete set of puzzle pieces provided by the fragmented narrative.

But beneath these numerous indeterminacies of Mary-Mathilda’s raw, unrehearsed testimony, a closer inspection reveals a degree of cleverness in the structure of the narrative. Mary’s life story is not extraneous information or “chaff,” seemingly unrelated to the actual murder in question, but rather becomes so compelling that, by novel’s end, readers are likely not to care whether or not she has murdered Bellfeels, or rather likely wish that she has in fact murdered him, because she could not possibly be considered guilty of a crime in light of his abuse of her. Bellfeels, as a silent antagonist throughout Mary’s story, is entirely deserving of his murder, whether or not it has actually occurred. Mary’s life history has catalogued a lifetime of sexual abuse, incest, poverty, and racism that characterize the plantation system, which Bellfeels embodies and represents. Bellfeels is certainly the guilty party, and has fully earned the fate that Mary-Mathilda designs for him through her testimony.

Mary’s long-winded confession rightly acknowledges that the crime at issue cannot be separated from her life story, which is inseparable from the history of Bimshire as a British colony and sugar plantation. And as Sarge can hardly believe Mary’s assertion that slavery ever existed in Bimshire, Mary’s narrative aims to amend historical omissions and to expose the many injustices in her own life.

The emptiness of Mary’s testimony—a criminal statement that is not supported by any empirical evidence, such as a victim’s body, a murder weapon, or the testimony of a witness—can be read as a textual iteration of sugar’s nutritional emptiness; the crime tale that lacks a
crime mimics the food that is simply calories and nothing more. For both, essence and substance are indistinguishable from one another. Sugar is pure carbohydrates: sweetness and calories. Clarke’s novel, which is predicated on Mary’s testimony, is in fact “pure fiction,” with no crime ultimately revealed.

Still, the novel itself is nothing if not substantive; at over 450 pages, this “empty” testimony is no lightweight. The novel’s economy, in light of its premise—over 400 pages to confess a crime that likely was not committed—suggests if not waste then excess. Mary’s statement is certainly not delivered efficiently or concisely, and in the end proves fruitless. Furthermore the effort of Sarge, her listener, as well as her readers, is considerable, following her with the promise of her tale’s culmination in the murder itself. In this sense, the resources consumed—Clarke’s efforts, the readers’ efforts, and the hefty tome that unite the two—are sizable, even wasteful. In a similar way, the island’s chief industry depends upon a crop whose growing season is amazingly long, often taking at least a year to reach sufficient maturity for harvesting. And for what? As already iterated, sugar and rum are edible, but otherwise nutritionally empty foods.

In the sense that “economy” implies organization or a systematic method of operation, the novel fails according to the definition, too. Characterized by the chronological disarray and roundabout nature of Mary’s narration, the novel is certainly not an economical text. What would seem to be the most important details—the details surrounding the alleged murder—are overlooked in favor of her long-winded, circuitous life story. Unlike a traditional sequential organization, Mary’s testimony instead suggests a spider’s web, which to all but its maker may appear to be a haphazard creation.
And like a web, the testimony reveals the inseparability of the elements of Mary’s life, namely that Bellfeels, her abuser and subject of her hatred, is also the source of her joys and “assets”: her son Wilberforce, her wealth, and comfortable status. And so finally, perhaps the text does suggest an economy at work: an exchange or payment for services rendered. “Fair exchange,” her mother told her, “is no robbery. Get something for it” (428). Just as Mary has been used—exploited—by Bellfeels and the colonial system she lives within, she takes advantage of her situation to become his well-provided-for mistress, living in a comfortable, finely appointed home at his expense. The author also prompts an exchange; his novel is a text of perverse sweetness. Bellfeels’ murder is both hoped-for and dreaded as the novel draws to a close, and Mary’s story is both a compelling rags-to-riches tale and a harrowing account of systematic subjugation and abuse.

Clarke and his protagonist Mary-Mathilda suggest that this exercise is necessary, for as Mary-Mathilda insists, “the story is the thing.” Here her story rewrites history, the no doubt male-authored and widely accepted history of the island and shoulder-shrug acceptance of an unfortunate period of history. Thus the novel exposes a dark—invisible—past. As sugar—as an industry and as a food—corrupts human health, physically as well as more generally, the novel itself metaphorically evokes and deconstructs the overarching enterprise. The convoluted narrative, with its suggestions and indeterminacies, undoes readers’ mastery of the narrative as its narrative attempts to undo mastery itself.
Both *A Thousand Acres* and *The Polished Hoe* illustrate the dysfunctional past—and present—of contemporary foodways, together depicting contemporary agribusiness and the antecedent colonial British sugar empire as promoters of environmental, as well as human, abuses. *A Thousand Acres* catalogues a cascade of problems associated with contemporary farming practices; *The Polished Hoe* looks back at global trade taking hold of Barbados and the Caribbean through the British sugar empire. Norman Rush’s *Mating* (1991) shifts this discussion from food production itself to the broadening global effects of food systems, exposing the imperial desires that continue to fuel world economies under the friendlier guise of “globalization” and analyzing the far-reaching effects of Western, particularly American, agricultural policies. This novel, winner of the 1991 National Book Award, critiques the effects of economic development, particularly of industrial food systems on developing countries—in this case, Botswana—and reveals the difficult irony of Western postcolonial reform efforts. Through the novel’s themes of mastery and surplus, *Mating* reveals a persistent imbalance of power and resources at the heart of global food distribution, despite widespread claims that economic globalization will more widely spread the wealth of prosperous nations.

Globalization’s effects on our contemporary food economy are most readily apparent to Americans through consistently low food prices and the year-round availability of all kinds of foods, regardless of origin or growing season. Produce that is harvested locally for just a few weeks each year is nevertheless available throughout the year at most grocers, and at prices that fluctuate relatively little. This of course requires remarkable transportation networks that ship
food across countries and between continents; this fact has, according to Brian Halweil, “become such a defining characteristic of the modern food system that most people accept it as the only way for us to be well fed. For those who can afford it, the wonder of eating exotic produce grown halfway around the globe emerges as one of the clearest benefits of the long-distance food system” (12-13). But the drawbacks are considerable; Halweil adds that shipping food globally “requires more packaging, refrigeration, and fuel, and generates huge amounts of waste and pollution. Instead of dealing directly with their neighbors, farmers sell into a remote and complex food chain of which they are a tiny part—and are paid accordingly” (Halweil 13). These hidden costs of our relatively inexpensive and widely available food have sparked recent popular interest in local agriculture; buying locally grown food, advocates insist, effectively slashes the energy required to get food from field to table, making food systems more environmentally and ethically sound.

However, many Americans fail to trace their foodways beyond their local food markets; the effects of our food systems on others abroad are practically invisible. What does globalized agriculture look like abroad, when viewed from other countries, particularly those that have comparably little economic clout compared to the United States? What happens beyond U.S. borders as our foodways are “to a great extent the products of global trade and global empire” (Anderson 208)?

Our own abundance of food obscures the woefully uneven distribution of food worldwide; some argue that this disparity between “haves” and “have-nots” is not only stark but continues to widen at an alarming rate. According to one source, “approximately one billion people are undernourished, and roughly the same number of people is severely overnourished, suffering from obesity,” even though enough food exists at present to feed the entire world
population (Anderson 209). This imbalance of wealth creates vulnerable economies as surely as it creates strong ones, for while some, like the United States, enjoy imported items that have never been as plentiful or affordable, other nations actually become less self-sufficient as foreign markets pressure and alter local food economies.

As this dissertation examines the ways writers have examined our foodways as a source of environmental and social concern in contemporary fiction, this chapter examines *Mating* as a novel that considers our foodways as a manifestation of economic globalization. Literary critics have begun to direct attention to the phenomenon of globalization, though they have not dealt specifically with globalization’s effects on food systems. Those critical of globalization target its many perceived evils, such as cultural homogeneity, consumerism, multinational corporate power, and environmental degradation; literature and literary criticism have largely been skeptical, despite general optimism in the United States that globalization will bring gainful employment to poverty-stricken areas of the globe while allowing Americans to maintain their current standard of living. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan asserts that globalization may well be simply new wine in old wineskins, in that it reincarnates rather than revises colonial-era abuses. He theorizes that “globalization takes the form of the dismantling of subaltern nationalisms by developed nationalism,” which he calls the “Darwinian manifesto of the survival of the fittest” (316). He posits that “successful and dominant nationalisms are rewarded, while subaltern and emerging nationalisms are penalized for wanting the very things that dominant nationalisms have successfully monopolized merely by getting there first” (317). In other words, economically and politically powerful nations continue to benefit from their privileged status, and colonial relationships are, in essence, reincarnated through global trade relationships.
However, critics have paid precious little attention, as yet, to globalization’s effects on what and how we eat. The widening availability of international cuisine has helped spark a recent culinary renaissance in the United States, and much recent writing (mostly nonfiction works, like cookbooks and food memoirs) has uncritically celebrated this development rather than provoking more critical analysis. But surely not all of globalization’s effects upon food and foodways are beneficial. Though the current availability and affordability of foods in the U.S. are unparalleled, a small but growing number of writers and critics question the global systems that make this bounty possible.

James Annesley has identified Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* as a “novel of globalization,” acknowledging that globalization “seems to defy easy definitions,” settling with the notion that it entails “‘engines’ or ‘drivers’ linked to technology, economics and politics” that effectively create “a world that either is, or appears to be, ever smaller and more homogeneous” (112). Annesley holds that *The Corrections* depicts globalization as “malign, inhuman, and corrupting,” an overall “destructive force” (113). The novel employs “complex sets of interrelationships to create a portrait of the all-pervasive and pernicious influence of the model corporation,” and in doing so recalls work by writers such as Pynchon and DeLillo (115).

*  *  *

I assert that Norman Rush’s *Mating* can, like *The Corrections*, be considered as a novel of globalization. Set in Botswana in the 1980s, *Mating* explores globalization’s effects upon the foodways of a developing African nation. The novel’s unnamed first-person narrator, a young woman studying nutritional anthropology, offers an account of putting her thesis research on hold in order to track renowned anthropologist and developmentalist Nelson Denoon to Tsau, his feminist utopian community, which is tucked deep within the Kalahari Desert. As the narrator
closes in on Denoon, she also witnesses the unraveling of Tsau as it falls victim to many of the same destructive impulses found at the heart of the traditional colonial, or global, enterprise.

Though *Mating* critiques the aims and methods of Western “improvement” of developing African nations, the novel’s pondering of globalism’s complexities remain couched in its iterations of the archetypal adventure and conquest tale and the romantic comedy. Through its intelligent, verbose, relentlessly recursive narrator, the novel reveals globalization’s complex and pervasive effects in a country likely categorized by most Americans as the global periphery.

Reviews of the novel have recognized its insight and artfulness as a novel. David Kaufman called the narrator “a purely disarming literary confection that is bound to bewilder yet delight readers far into the future” (643). Verlyn Klinkenborg described the novel as a “serious romance refracted comically through the mind of a startlingly individual narrator, a narrator on a campaign of intellectual self-betterment and self-analysis that will not quit” (45). Jim Shepard described it as “an allusively freewheeling first-person narrative that provides exhilarating evidence of an impressive intelligence at work and play.” Rush describes his work, which grew from his own experiences in Botswana, as “essentially comic and based around a story of adventure and a passionate love relationship” (Interview).

Though reviewers have overwhelmingly found the novel immensely readable, *Mating* has received surprisingly little critical attention; critics have for the most part ignored this Book Award winner. The single critical treatment of the novel thus far, Agbaw and Kiesinger’s “The Reincarnation of Kurtz in Norman Rush’s *Mating,*” reads the novel through Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,* exposing developmentalist Nelson Denoon’s Kurtzlike propensities and arguing that he “demonstrates how much Conrad continues to influence Western imagination of Africa and the role of the white man in the so-called ‘Dark Continent’” (49). However, much
more remains to be said about Denoon and the novel as a whole. Instead of simply recalling Conrad’s Kurtz, the novel also issues a cry for awareness of contemporary conditions in developing nations. Furthermore, Agbaw and Kiesinger pay little attention to Rush’s unnamed narrator, whose dominant presence complicates the reduction of the novel to a retelling (much like Smiley’s reimagination of King Lear through the voice of Ginny in A Thousand Acres). In her, Rush admitted to striving to create “the most fully realized female character in the English language” (Shepard).

Through this narrator Rush confronts globalization, a broad theoretical construct, in a palatable way and in keeping with the conventions of the realistic novel. Though the narrator does periodically address and criticize globalization (or its various components), she also illustrates the inherent, even insurmountable, difficulties of global relationships among wealthy and developing economies. Furthermore, through this narrator Rush is able to spotlight the global effects of food aid and increased food availability, and depicts an attempt at sustainable agricultural reform through Denoon’s Tsau. Food is not simply sustenance, the novel suggests, nor is it merely a “realistic” artifact required by a realistic novel. Through food—or global food systems—emerges a fundamental human appetite for more, for surplus and excess, and for power, which complicates not only globalizing economies but also efforts at developing more sustainable incarnations of traditional development.

“In Africa, you want more, I think.”

This desire for more is plainly acknowledged at the novel’s outset, as the narrator opens the novel by surmising, “In Africa, you want more, I think,” quickly qualifying this statement by explaining, “Obviously I mean whites in Africa and not black Africans. The average black
African has the opposite problem: he or she doesn’t want enough. A whole profession called Rural Animation exists devoted to making villagers want more and work harder to get it. Africans are pretty ungreedy—elites excepted, naturally. Elites are elites” (5). Her observation suggests that in developing nations like Botswana, elites—largely Westerners—want a piece of the pie. And, in turn, desire—a hunger for “more”—is normal and necessary. This desire is requisite for economic development, and therefore must be cultivated among native Africans as a basic element of economic progress.

This generalized desire for more figures initially, and quite fittingly, as a desire for food, which is the narrator’s subject of study and the central element of her derailed thesis project. Researching the relationship between eating habits and fertility patterns in “remote-dwelling populations,” she explains that “Botswana has almost the last hunter-gatherers anywhere” (5, 6). Apparently, “Normal-type food seems to have percolated everywhere, even into the heart of the Tswapong Hills,” effectively undermining her research project. (7). “One way or another,” she says, “people were getting regular canned food and cornflakes, or getting relief food, sorghum and maize, from the World Food Program. So nobody bothered with gathering much” (6). Her project had assumed that fertility of the women of the Tswapong Hills depended upon seasonal availability of food, but the prevalence of imported food means that seasonal fertility is a thing of the past.

In Everyone Eats, E. N. Anderson explains nutritional anthropology, the narrator’s academic field, as an interrogation of the full range of meanings that become attached to food in traditional and modern cultures. Food must be produced; farming has its own traditions and ways. Food consumption, everywhere, is associated with home, family, and security. Food
can also symbolize wealth and power, or sophistication, or identification with particular groups. (238)

This obscure academic discipline, ghettoized by academia as a “women’s field” until the 1980s, is still foreign to most beyond the university campus. But this discipline is a perfect fit for the novel and its narrator, who illustrates that eating is the most basic form of human consumption, both intensely personal and broadly cultural.

True to her habit of analyzing everything, the narrator offers her own rationale for her chosen field of study, explaining that

diet is always with me and the psychodrama of why is not mysterious. The script reads along the lines of needing urgently to know what it was about food that turned my mother into an exhibit and might, unless I prevented it, do the same to me. Everything is an artifact. I was in graduate school before I realized that all her innocence about how little she actually ate was a sustained lie, propaganda. So voilà, nutritional anthropology for me, which combined the two things most compelling to me, food and man. (30)

The narrator reveals that food is not only of personal interest (as it is to anyone who enjoys the pleasure of eating), but is also an artifact worthy of rigorous academic scholarship, something to be studied, analyzed, and examined from a certain critical distance.

Attempting to ignore her failed research project, she turns to various distractions, going “slightly decadent” by developing a generalized but powerful hunger for more (6). In a defining moment early in the novel, she notes, “There was an opulent sunset. I was standing under an acacia in full bloom and the words ‘shower of gold’ came into my mind, followed by a surge of feeling. I call it greed, but it was more a feeling of wanting a surplus in my life, wanting to have
too much of something, for a change” (10). Her hunger, or greed, perversely mirrors the appetites of her research subjects. They had begun receiving merely “regular canned food” or “relief food,” not an abundance of food by any stretch but enough to stabilize women’s fertility patterns. Conversely, the narrator’s appetite is clearly a hunger for extravagance and surplus, revealing her privileged status as a Western outsider in a developing African nation. This greed, or desire for surplus, soon manifests quite literally in her own appetite:

> What went wrong was the surplus I began to run. So many things came my way.
> I had virtually no expenses. I edged toward being extravagant in small ways.
> When I could get crème fraîche I bought as much as I could conceivably hope to eat before it spoiled. I bought some ostrich-eggshell-chip chokers. I tried to be less driven re eating leftovers. I was still in surplus. (13)

In this period of “Guilty Repose,” as she calls it, she admits, “I had begun letting my eating inch up” (41). Martin, a lean lover who “give[s] new meaning to the word ectomorph,” derides her, and other Americans, “for breeding a taste for luxury wherever they went” (41, 36).

Epitomizing this relish of delicacies—which runs counter to the subsistence diets she expected to find in her research subjects—she later obsesses about whether or not she has given up garlic in her choice to journey to Tsau. Deep within the Kalahari Desert, miles from any human habitation and where eating is simply means to survival, she “had the conviction, derived from nowhere, that there would be no garlic in Tsau. I felt I had to be able to look forward to garlic, by which I meant fresh garlic, not garlic powder or salt. I do inordinately love that herb” (155). She soon experiences relief that “there [is] indeed garlic in Tsau” when, meeting Denoon for the first time in Tsau, she notices the odor of garlic on his breath (174). At this point in the novel she is lucky to be alive after her desert trek, but instead she worries over garlic, illustrating
her fixation on the superfluous (garlic is a seasoning, not a nutritional staple) rather than simply what is necessary for sustenance.

The hungry, hyper-observant narrator’s musings on food consumption are humorous, eloquent, and often exhaustively thorough as she often delights in the availability of luxuries but does not question the economic conditions that make them available. The “normal-type food” that she finds is now widely available in Botswana botches her thesis project, but her food concerns largely end there. Throughout the novel she enjoys a removed and privileged position, acting as a de facto vector of empire even while she is a resident of Tsau, a project aimed at undoing imperial influence in a developing nation.

In fact, the “relief food” that in part causes her botched thesis is the result of grain surpluses among the globe’s most powerful nations, particularly the United States. These surpluses encourage global reliance upon fewer and fewer species of grains as three crops—wheat, corn, and rice—are increasingly grown at the exclusion of all others. As Richard Manning observes, “U.S. grain, free or otherwise, puts Third World farmers out of business, sacking local agriculture and local markets. Case studies going back to the 1950s demonstrate this in India, Peru, Egypt, Somalia, Senegal, and Haiti. This is one way we pay to hide the surplus that we have paid our farmers to produce” (134). Some would argue that these surpluses are a goodwill effort to “feed the world” beyond U.S. borders, but overproduction is more complex than that. Gene Logsdon, an advocate of agrarian reform, dissents:

The whole issue of ‘feeding the world’ seems specious to me. What does it mean, actually? All my life in farming I have heard government urge us to ‘gear up’ to ‘feed the world.’ It sounds so noble and we fall for it because we think it means we will finally make some money. Now I understand that the expression is merely
a euphemism for ‘Push American grain overseas and keep grain cheap here….’

We ‘geared up,’ we raised bumper, surplus crops and still people all over the world starved to death. Today ‘feed the world’ is the forked-tongue hypocrisy that mega-companies utter while they try to monopolize the food business. (161)

New production methods have allowed American farms to yield as much as four times more grain than by traditional methods, meaning that

Wheat, maize and rice are chronically in surplus worldwide….Yet we continue to grow more and more of these very crops, not because they are needed but because we know how to grow these crops—and these alone—abundantly, easily, and well. This is the situation that has caused the world to rely on three grain crops for more than two-thirds of its nutrition.” (Manning 97).

Furthermore, foreign aid—critics call it “grain dumping”—is widely considered to be a burden to development, often destroying local economies (Manning 172, 134). Cheap domestic grain means cheaper food for Americans, of course, and many have catalogued the effects of overabundant, cheap, starchy food in the American diet, such as the dramatic increases in incidence of obesity and diabetes (Manning, Critser, Nestle, Schlosser). Denoon is critical of both corporate capitalism and socialist “remedies,” asserting that “capitalism is strangling black Africa and socialism must bury her” (76).

Denoon’s seminal anthropological text is Development as the Death of Villages, in which he argues for what he calls “solar democracy,” an application of capitalism that will in theory preserve the integrity of Botswana’s villages by employing sustainable agricultural practices and the use of solar power as a primary energy source. Tsau, his experiment in solar democracy, is an “odd amalgam of collective and microcapitalist institutions,” but at its root is a commitment to
environmental and economic sustainability, for he believes his system can make the Batswana “rich, but only if [they] choose something better than being rich” (88, 85). Thus as the narrator’s thesis research is predicated on rural Africa’s insulation from Western economic influence, Denoon’s utopian reform efforts seek to keep Western economic influence at bay through careful incorporation of solar technology.

The narrator’s early, more personally focused attentions to food, which analyze her own consumption patterns and the food surplus she runs, allow for a broader scope of inquiry in Denoon’s utopian Tsau. Described by the narrator as the epitome of resourcefulness and efficiency, the village also offers food in plenty and variety; amazed by this, the narrator details the typical foods and eating habits. “In Tsau,” the narrator insists, “you could eat interestingly” (192). Though the “fulcrum of our diet was maize or sorghum porridge,” the storehouse stocked “everything you might want that the South Africans had ever bothered to can, from pilchards to lichee nuts” (192). At teatime in the village, “The point seemed to be for people to adjust to what was available each day, holding back from taking any large, personally satisfying amount in favor of everybody getting a little of whatever there was” (204).

Though imported commodities are available there, they come at a cost; the narrator explains that “credit values on these items were kept astronomical both to reflect what it cost to get them to Tsau and to encourage consumption of local and cheaper foods” (192). Overall the narrator is quite surprised at the influx of imported food in Tsau, as she had been during her thesis research in the Tswapong Hills, admitting she “had been expecting a vastly more restricted food spectrum” (192).

But demand for these products, among the villagers as well as the narrator, predictably increases. Tsau’s residents increasingly purchase imported commodities such as Pine Nut Soda
and Milk Stout, which are incredibly expensive but wildly popular nonetheless. The narrator emphasizes that the village “thrive[es] on these commodities, in terms of the work people [are] willing to exchange for them” (323), but Denoon remains discouraged by this trend toward the importation of goods, and particularly goods that are luxuries, not staples. He would much prefer Tsau to become, and remain, largely self-sustaining, but residents increasingly desire imported foods.

Denoon’s efforts are conflicted; he wants some imports to become popular, but not others. He wants what is good for residents, but gives little consideration to their personal desires and preferences. For example, he makes an unsuccessful attempt to promote the consumption of Marmite, a yeast spread, as a nutritional supplement. The narrator likens him to a hostess who has “put hard work into a gourmet dip that isn’t going over at all well” (232). Though Tsau is his brainchild, it becomes evident that Denoon cannot control the desires of its residents to the same degree that he has controlled the development of the village itself.

Denoon views the intrusion of unnecessary imported commodities as an obstacle to the creation of an ideal self-sufficient community, despite the fact that development itself largely entails the importation of ideas, materials, and resources from a wealthier or more powerful culture or nation. And this problematical importation is in fact illustrated in the novel quite literally by the arrival of two British Shakespearean dramatists, who are on what amounts to a goodwill tour of Africa. Their uninvited presence—a form of cultural importation—suggests importation of culture and food—and in turn prompts consumption of culture and food, through their dramatic performances and the feast that crowns their visit. Their visit to Tsau sparks Denoon’s ire, who considers Harold, a “British Empire loyalist,” to be a quintessential “vector of empire” (293, 271).
The dramatists’ time in Tsau prompts the narrator and Denum to host a farewell dinner on their last night there. As hostess, the narrator must decide "what canned delicacies to sacrifice for the occasion," ending up with "more a collation than a normal kind of dinner" (284). She describes the feast:

In looking at what I had wrought, I realized I had just been putting one thing next to another and come up with something signifying nothing. Also I had concentrated on what was quick. There were chapattis, toasted sprouts, tabouleh, the oysters, the French onion soup, goat's milk clabber to go with the tabouleh. There was no entrée, strictly speaking. I decided to boil some eggs. (284)

The evening quickly becomes full of irony for Nelson and Harold. The narrator notes that Harold, who is “floridly Catholic” (287), hides his homosexuality by pretending a marriage to his fellow performer Julia. Nelson is “masterly” in his defense of feminism. They eat food with a fervor, which is begun with Harold’s bottle of rare Scotch (285).

The significance of this hodgepodge feast is that the meal for these visitors is created in haste from canned, imported items that have commodity status in Tsau. During the meal the men become drunk and much food is wasted, ironically suggesting the imperialist impulses beneath the supposedly anti-imperialist intent behind Tsau’s creation in the first place. The scene underscores the impact of global trade even in remote, postcolonial locales. The men drink to excess and become chummy, “closer than ever,” despite their ideological differences (292).

Not only is the feast comprised exclusively of imported goods, but as the evening goes on, the diners consume a staggering quantity of food, suggesting that in Tsau it is difficult to eradicate the consumptive habits and acquisitive desires that fuel appetites and economies in much of the rest of the world. Justifying the event, the narrator claims, “People weren’t eating
sufficiently. In an inspired state I began a commedia, wherein I rifled our larder for every canned and jarred delicacy I had been hoarding” (294). She recognizes the significance of her actions, suggesting their wordless message was

All right, if you won’t eat what there is then what about this? And this? And also this? You prefer to just drink, but will you when you see this and this and this?

The joke ultimately was on me. I thought I was putting out a shaming over abundance of food, but drinking makes you hungry and virtually everything seemed to go—the mandarin orange segments, the anchovies, the hearts of palm, the white plums, the fig paste. These were treasures. (294)

Denoon even unearths bottles of wine he had buried, illustrating the difficulties he has living by his own idealistically strict standards in Tsau. Harold, Julia, Nelson, and the narrator are “stupidly full” by meal’s end (294). The wanton consumption of the evening runs counter to the sustainability upon which Tsau was founded, and suggests the vulnerability of such reform efforts—and “reformers”—to the importation of Western influence.

Denoon, who laments the increasing appeal of such foods among Tsau’s residents, is blind to the double standard that he (and the narrator) create by hoarding and then mindlessly, wastefully consuming them in bingelike fashion. These items are perfectly acceptable in the cupboard of Denoon and the narrator, even as Denoon wishes Tsau’s other residents would eat primarily locally grown food—as if Denoon and the narrator are not genuine residents of Tsau. Furthermore, these imported delicacies are, by Tsau’s standards, prestige or status foods, suggesting removed or privileged status among these outsiders. Their consumption of these foods likely contributes to what Anderson calls “status emulation” among Tsau’s residents, which leads, inevitably, to an endless progression” (Anderson 136). Anderson explains that
“Elite groups *always* try to mark themselves off by consumption of special-status or prestige foods…and upwardly mobile people try to rise in respect by being seen eating those foods” (136). Despite the characters’ reiteration that they are not “typical” Westerners in Africa, this meal suggests that Denoon and the narrator unavoidably enjoy elite status there as whites, and illustrates their consumption of prestige foods, contributing to the status emulation that becomes more common in Tsau. Though they seem not to intend this, in the end they simply cannot help themselves.

**The Power of More**

Food in the novel is elevated from a daily detail and cultural artifact to a key manifestation of multinational economies at work: that is, a means of transaction between nations that are geographically remote from one another. But the novel’s preoccupation with food manifests a larger concern that is likely more apparent to readers: the foreign economic and political clout that shapes development in second- and third-world nations. In the novel we see a critique of the powerful, capitalist West’s surplus food and capital as they make their way to Botswana. Through their influence, Botswana and Africa at large become part of the multinational market system, as a producer of goods as well as a growing target market for imported products. At the root of the problems Denoon and the narrator rail against is the influence of Western power, manifested as economic dominance, in developing Africa. Influx of foreign capital and destruction of the local agricultural economy create a Westernizing Botswana that both the narrator and Denoon vociferously condemn. However, a closer examination shows that these two white Westerners from academia embody and profit from this postcolonial colonialism even as they speak out against it. This irony underscores the difficulty of true
economic reform in the face of the allure of a profit. Beneath the complexities of multinational food systems and food consumption lies an imbalance of power. Despite the narrator’s and Denoon’s critiques of power structures, these characters nevertheless unwittingly participate in and benefit from them. As the narrator explains early in the novel, developmentalists and scholars are not immune from the allure of power. “Developmentalists are competing tooth and nail for project money to enact their theories someplace. This is the only way to know you’re on top,” she explains as she assesses the presence of anthropologists and development experts in Africa (54). Scholarship, too, is a form of colonization and ascendancy to power: “what you get is the joy of subsuming your predecessors and peers: they thought they were rivers but you turn them into creeks, tributaries to your majestic seaward flow” (236-37).

But though she criticizes much of Western influence in Africa, she is herself party to that same Western developmentalist perspective. She insists, “I liked the mall for its comédie humaine but hated it because it so completely incarnates the Western good idea of what Africa should become and because the South African merchandise the shelves are overflowing with is such shit yet so overpriced. South African shoe manufacture is my personal bête noire. It is risible” (111). However, before embarking on her trek into the Kalahari, she becomes frustrated by her inability to purchase tweezers for her cosmetic kit; on the journey, one of her pack donkeys runs away, taking her toiletry items. “Now I was supposed to present myself to Denoon with only the vaguest notion of how I looked,” she laments (147).

In other words, Africa itself is an exotic commodity from which she eventually profits. This is first apparent through her facilitation of other Westerners’ tourist urges, but soon reveals her own orientalizing tendencies. At the outset of the novel the narrator showcases her ability to foster others’ consumption of Africa as “dark continent.” Early in the novel she claims
There are barriers. Americans suffer the most. They come to Botswana wanting to be lovely to Africans. A wall confounds them. Behind it is something they sense is interesting. I could help them. … I could demonstrate that beneath the surface the culture was as other as anyone could ask. I would be being useful. Why did Batswana babies have woolen caps on during the summer? On the other hand, why did some Batswana shave their heads in winter? I knew. … I could bring them a sense of the otherness that was eluding them. (11)

Here she acknowledges the traveler’s desire to objectify others, asserting that she too can “play at this game” well enough to profit from her expertise in the study of Africa as an exotic land. On an excursion to Victoria Falls, which she is “in danger of never seeing before [she] left Africa,” she “not only wanted to get to Victoria Falls but to stay there in splendor at the Vic Falls Hotel, the way the colonial exploiters had,” justifying her tourism by explaining that “this was less greed per se than it was wanting to visit or inhabit a particularly gorgeous and egregious consummation of it” (18). Here she distances herself from her desire to be an elite tourist simply by acknowledging the desire itself for what it is, as if that absolves her from guilt. As a Westerner herself, she ironically separates herself from the tourists she observes.

The narrator’s admissions expose her own sense of privilege, and her notion of necessity differs markedly from that of most Batswana. Even though she scorns “the Western good idea of what Africa should become,” her vision of Africa likely includes similar areas for improvement, for she clings to Western amenities to which she is accustomed. Even her time at Denoon’s Tsau, with its technological innovations aimed at comfort and convenience, leaves her wanting. When Denoon proposes they stay there indefinitely, she balks. The final section of the novel finds her stateside, concluding her tale of conquest from the safety of the country she continues to deride.
In essence, Africa—and Denoon—become the narrator’s commodities, so that she profits from her experience just as other Westerners there do. Throughout the novel she plainly admits her hunger for employment, that “what I was trying to do with my anthropology was first to get a job in a halfway decent university and then get tenure. This was a Marxist analysis of my situation but it was correct” (33). Lamenting her lowly status as a student, she doesn’t want “to be a candidate anymore, not for a doctorate or anything else: I wanted to be at the next level, where things would come to me, accrue to me. It was acute” (10). She makes no secret of the fact that she wants a tenure-track academic job and the pay, prestige, and power that it affords. By novel’s end, the narrator indeed becomes a master figure in academia, creating an “academic monopoly” by using her experiences at Tsau to “ma[ke] [her]self a field of academic study with only one specialist in it” (468).

She calls her body of knowledge, which is more or less all things Denoon, a collection of “commodities,” and though she speaks out against “corporatism unbound,” she also enjoys “big power,” becoming a master figure in the academic realm, possessing the power attendant with such prestige. Thus the narrator maintains a conflicted sense of power and mastery for she recognizes and condemns traditional imbalances of power while she simultaneously benefits from and perpetuates them.

As a mouthpiece for Denoonism—for she is essentially mastered by Denoon’s body of knowledge even as she has become a master of it—she seamlessly joins his words with hers, and her audiences “love her for it” (471). Her message—or is it Denoon’s?—is there are “three major, dire, world-historical processes going on that your ideologies … are not letting you pay attention to”; these are (1) rampant corporatism, particularly the limited liability corporation; (2) wars of states against nations; and (3) “destruction of nature accompanying the ascent to absolute
power of the corporate system” (471). As corollaries she includes development, the “superimposition of market economies on traditional and unprepared third world cultures,” and “the jagged and belated but definite rise of women into positions of political authority” (471).

Contrary to Anderson, who reminds us of human subjectivity by asserting that “Anthropologists never get the full story. In fact, no human can possibly know ultimate truth about anything” (243), the narrator treats mastery as absolutely primary, despite her repeated insistence that she opposes systems of power. Her academic mastery is predicated upon the “remarketing” of herself as a subject of study to be mastered. As she sees it, “There is always new material to be integrated into the study of me. Each moment of thought demands multiples of moments of classification, analysis, parsing” (469).

Though Mating’s narrator claims that “However oppositional you are in a superpower, you partake in the routine misery being inflicted through its CIA or equivalents, secret wars, arms sales driving the third world mad and sowing dragons’ teeth unto the last generation,” she fails to recognize her complicity in Western influence in Botswana (357). And her critique of power is, in itself, a form of mastery or power: her commodities are her critiques of commodities. The irony of her confident proclamations and her gushing audiences is plain—these audiences desire to be mastered by her, as she made Denoon her master. Her audiences are consumers, however unwilling, that perpetuate these processes they are in turn railing against. There seems no way for them to step outside of their ideologies, just as there seems no way for our narrator to do the same; in turn, as an audience, readers of the novel are perhaps provoked to consider how they play roles in such systems. No answers are offered, to be sure, for no simple answers exist—the nature of such a problem is webbed complexity. She describes herself as “in the academic demimonde,” where she observes, “I seem to be all things to all women” (470).
Here a parallel between Rush’s narrator and *The Polished Hoe’s* Mary-Mathilda is readily apparent, as each woman’s success grows from her ability to exercise mastery. In so doing, they refigure themselves as commodities in a sense, and they participate in the systems of power that they at the same time stridently oppose.

*   *   *   *

Like the narrator, Denoon, as an economic reformer, fails to see the paradox of his efforts to create Tsau according to his plans and wishes. Although Denoon rails against the “great game played by whites called Running Your Country,” as a white American he participates in this game as well (69). Denoon demonstrates a conflicted desire to maintain power and a sense of mastery over the daily workings and future of Tsau even as he insists that the village is a feminist revision and rejection of traditional (male, Western) hierarchies of power. He cannot resist the urge to shape Tsau into *his* ideal utopian village, even as he insists that it must become the village of its female residents. In this way Denoon continues to rail against what he sees as wholesale Western plunder of postcolonial Africa, but remains blind to his own position of power and mastery and to his status as a white American male.

On the surface, Tsau, with its sustainable and renewable solar energy, sound agricultural practices, and collective labor system, appears to offer a potential success story. Property in the village is vested in the hands of women, demonstrating “that at least here something could be done about the economic disenfranchisement of women that was taking place in the society at large as it modernized” (175). Denoon is confident that Tsau will become a wealthy village, and eventually “men will be welcome, but by then the women will be where they should” (177). It is clear, though, as the socioeconomic structure of Tsau is revealed, that the traditional inequality of men and women in the culture has simply been reversed, so that women are granted power
and status that men worldwide have traditionally enjoyed; men, on the other hand, are denied them. Tsau is a “project for women,” specifically “destitute women from all over Botswana but mostly from the northwest, women cut off from their families for any one of a number of reasons and subsisting on one sack of mealie a month from the government” (175). Men “can only be non-voting members” of the community, and the narrator observes that “[t]hey seem to work like dogs” (186).

Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* analyzes the connections between subjugation of women and of the natural environment; her commentary reveals the conflicted nature of Denoon’s aspirations. Plumwood argues that the master’s logic of colonization relies on persistent dualisms that devalue women and nonhuman nature. This logic, she insists, is evidenced in a burgeoning contemporary global economy. Of the four stages of the colonization process she details—justification, invasion, appropriation, and incorporation—the global economy, or “global ‘Rational Economy,’” occupies the fourth stage, and the only options available to its subjects are incorporation into or elimination from the system (191). Plumwood explains,

> The objective is the implementation of the Cartesian dream of complete control over the other of nature and the final destruction of all resistance that the earth as other has to offer, as biotechnology and other mastering technologies repopulate the world with assimilated, artefacted life and the master science strives to harness all global energy-flows to the Rational Economy. (193)

Those in power, colonizers, seek to assert order and rationality on the natural world through the process of development, and the earth itself is treated as an object to be
instrumentalized and conquered. Following this line of thought, environmental devastation looms, almost inevitably, on the horizon. However, Plumwood concludes that

After much destruction, mastery will fail, because the master denies dependency on the sustaining other; he misunderstands the conditions of his own existence and lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of earthian existence. The master’s denial of dependency and his self-deception with respect to the conditions of his own life carry grave dangers, which include, of course, self-destruction. (195)

Finally, she claims that “the strands interwoven by this master story of colonisation form a mesh so strong, so finely knit and familiar it could almost pass for our own bodies, but it is an imprisoning web which encloses us” (195). She argues for individual recognition of these webs, and a subsequent commitment to creating environmentally and socially sustainable relationships to replace them.

Denoon is convinced that ecological sustainability is imperative for Tsau, insisting that the village “would prosper only if it, as a created or guest organism superimposed on a large organism, the desert, an organism that could be hostile, would or could prosper only if it took what it needed from the desert in order to be there, and nothing more” (313). A pivotal phrase for him is “Man is a parasite on soils” from a text called Soil and Civilization (82).

But he is also driven to create a village that generates wealth, and all wealth is reliant upon surpluses—of capital, of commodities, and the like—and herein lies the problem. He wishes to create a wealthy village while at the same time avoid the desire for more that helps create, and grows from, the amassing of wealth. Though Denoon acts upon concerns about sustained colonial influence in sub-Saharan Africa, he nevertheless cannot shake the colonizing
impulse himself: he attempts to right the wrongs of development with simply a new version of development under the guise of ecological and social sustainability. In fact, Denoon is called Rra Puleng by the villagers, which means “Rain-like Man or Man as Good as Rain,” but “Rain also means wealth, as in the unit of currency, the pula” (87). This name suggests the degree to which he is associated with the creation of wealth—and that wealth begins with the collection of rainwater in the arid Kalahari.

Denoon may be described as a “a radical decentralist” who advocates “an odd amalgam of collective and microcapitalist institutions” (88), but this decentralization is a fraught aim, for he wishes to remain a key player in the future of his utopian project rather than allowing residents to govern and manage Tsau themselves. Despite his principled efforts at giving its female residents power and authority over Tsau’s development, he becomes frustrated when his wishes and theirs collide.

In a regularly scheduled public debate in Tsau, one resident complains that Denoon “has made us to eat from a wheel,” referring to his efforts to encourage the use of a lazy susan during family meals because “the statistics about men hogging the food in the third world…are horrifying” (370, 371). The narrator explains, “I could understand Nelson’s feeling that here they were, engaged in wringing food and drink from bare rock, in a sense, and he was seeing it reticulated directly into a stratified consumption pattern which anyone seeing it from the outside would want to do something about” (371). When Tsau’s male residents rally for gun ownership (ostensibly to control a vervet monkey population), Denoon claims that “the oldest male racket ever invented was hunting,” and that the men would soon engage in “clandestine hunting instead of attending to the heavier work they were doing” (256). He insists that he’s attempting to “preserve for as long as [he] can what’s exceptional about this place so that something will
survive once the hacking and trimming start” (256). Though he intends for the village to continue without him once it is fully operational, claiming “he would be whatever Tsau wanted him to be, needed him to be” (380), the women who govern the village gradually but decisively exclude him from decision-making. Tsau becomes, as the narrator says to Denoon, “an organism trying to deal with [Denoon and her] as foreign bodies” (380).

Stubbornly galvanized by Tsau’s gradual steering away from his own wishes for its development, Denoon feels that further development, in the form of a “sister or daughter colony,” would solve Tsau’s problems, because “exchange would concentrate the public consciousness in Tsau on what Tsau truly was” (410). This solution of further development is ironic in light of his book Development as the Death of Villages, in which he indicts Western development methods (410). This is exactly what Denoon had founded Tsau in an effort to combat.

Late in the novel, Denoon’s hopelessly privileged position—as Tsau’s creator, orchestrator, and assessor—surfaces as he spends considerable time and energy creating a political diagram of Tsau’s residents, ostensibly for the narrator’s perusal. She fervently condemns the act, claiming

Your diagram is part of something I don’t like. These people have a right to be anything they want and for that not to be noticed or recorded by you except in passing. Are you an anthropologist? What is this?... You think you’re neutral, you think what you do is neutral because you’re not British or a Boer, because you’re American and we never did much in this particular neck of the woods. But it’s the strong and the weak, or that’s what this feels like to me. (306).
The narrator even observes, “We inhabit male outcomes. Every human settlement is a male outcome. So was Tsau, which was seventy percent complete when the first women moved in” (199). Because Denoon’s Tsau leaves the gender dualism wholly intact but simply reversed, Tsau illustrates the difficulties of solving “the problem of how to reintegrate nature and culture across the great Western division between them and of how to give a positive value to what has been traditionally devalued and excluded as nature without simply reversing values and rejecting the sphere of culture” (Plumwood 11). In his creation of Tsau as a village governed exclusively by women, Denoon falls victim to the simple logic of leaving gender dualisms intact and in turn failing to overcome them. By simply reversing the male-female dualism and privileging female rather than male status, Tsau breeds the same problems generated by the worldview he attempts to refute.

Ironically, even Denoon’s ability to elucidate and defend feminism, which is ostensibly his guiding doctrine, is praised by the narrator as “masterly” (291). His lectures on the “history of the oppression of women” are reproduced as a “master list of iniquities” against women, which is distributed to every household in Tsau (280). Thus Denoon is a master figure for feminist political and economic reform despite feminism’s core tenet being resistance to and revision of traditional forms of mastery.

In addition to Denoon’s position of power in Tsau, and his “masterful” knowledge of feminist theory and scholarship, he also masters the narrator; despite her own lip service paid to resisting institutions of power, and despite her own designs toward intellectual mastery, she allows Denoon’s thoughts, ideas, priorities, even language to master her. She acknowledges his mastery by telling him that he’s good at
getting people to do things you regard as improvements, better for them. You have great powers of getting people to do things the way you want. Only partly is that because the things you come up with are sensible in themselves. The rest of it has to do with something benign about you…You seem good. You seem unselfish….What you are operates cross-culturally, for some unknown reason. (344).

At one point Denoon claims that “despite apparent differences every society can be analyzed to show that women are in essence begin shaped to function as vehicles for male imperatives and the physical reproduction of male power” (291), critiquing a long-standing tradition of mastery. The narrator agrees, though she in fact becomes lost in “Denoonism” (88). She realizes that she “wanted Denoon in an increasingly absolute way [she] was losing control over,” even as she acknowledges, ironically, that “every society you look deeply enough into turns out to be yet another male conspiracy against women conducted with assistance from the victim class itself” (281). She becomes a mouthpiece for his thoughts and beliefs, functioning therefore as a vehicle for Denoon’s (male) imperatives; this becomes evident through the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between the narrator’s own thoughts and her recording of Denoon’s: “So much of my imagery comes from stories and asides of Nelson’s it shocks me. I don’t want it. It isn’t as though my own life hasn’t been fairly vivid in its own way” (406). She seems to acknowledge this as she wonders, “And what would I do when it turned out that the most interesting thing I could tell anyone was anything I was willing to divulge about the great social genius Nelson Denoon, who was rumored to have been very attached to me at one time?” (408).
Furthermore, Tsau itself, despite its founding as a utopia, is in fact predicated upon a literal, physical mastery: the mastery, through myriad technological advancements, of solar energy and rainfall. Denoon’s mission to create a self-sustaining village in the desert requires human harnessing, or mastery, of nature, bending the forces of the natural world to the will of humankind. He envisions the “free energy” of sunlight producing the power for “heating, cooling, cooking, transport, water pumping, any process you might name” (85). The “free energy of the sun” that Tsau is predicated upon, a “downpour of gold that no one stops to hold a bucket to” (85), is not truly free, but rather rendered usable only with sophisticated equipment made possible through funding by deep-pocketed foreign investors. In fact, “Enormous funds had gone into the setting up of the place. Tsau was no self-help settlement…This was enlightened surplus capital coming in to lift a whole subclass of people up onto a pedestal and saying Go” (196).

The desert, “an organism that could be hostile,” (313) is not simply an assemblage of raw materials ready and waiting for human use. The desert beyond Tsau takes its toll on Denoon. In a stereotypically male move, Denoon embarks alone upon an exploratory mission for the development of a sister colony for Tsau. In so doing, he exhibits a glaring disregard for the harshness of the surrounding Kalahari Desert; as Plumwood puts it, he “lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of earthian existence” (Plumwood 195). A tangle with a boomslang leaves him horseless, severely injured, and left for dead. More than a week later he returns to Tsau only because a pair of nomadic hunters happens upon him; he emerges from the experience with a radically humbled perspective on his role in Tsau.

_Mating_ ultimately suggests that developmentalist reformers face considerable obstacles when seeking to divorce themselves from the accepted ideologies underlying Western development efforts in Africa. Furthermore, the influx of food and other imported items that
results from globalizing markets are not necessarily beneficial to developing countries, but are not necessarily harmful, either; they do, however, complicate the creation of sustainable and local economies and call into question the practicality—and desirability—of such economic models. The desire for “more” tends to be cultivated among everyone involved.

**Textual Surplus**

I have argued that *Mating* illustrates the tension between sustainability, or “enoughness,” and the allure of more. Fortunately, the novel embodies, rather than simply interrogates, these desires. At first read, *Mating* appears to be a relatively transparent, realistic novel, giving readers of traditional fiction what they expect in terms of narrative conventions. Closer analysis, however, reveals a text that repeatedly calls attention to its own textuality through its narrator’s exhaustive detail of her thoughts and observations as well as that narrator’s increasing unreliability. Described by one reviewer as “encyclopedic to the extreme,” the novel is cast as the narrator’s attempt to “reduce everything about Denoon to writing, classify it, so [she] could learn Denoon the same way [she] ever learned any subject decently,” to “get the true dimensions of this man,” adding tellingly that this enterprise “did not seem bizarre to [her] in any way” (382). She studies him as if he is simply a field of academic study, and in the end she makes her own field of study from the “information” she amasses.

Attempting to include as many details as possible about—well, about *everything*—the narrator remarks, “My story is turning into the map in Borges exactly the size of the country it represents, but I feel I should probably say everything” (245). The novel is essentially her attempt to “map” Denoon, recording his physical dimensions in a literary rendering of geographic conquest. In doing so, her analytical tendencies prevail; *everything*, it seems, is ripe
for her exhaustive capacity to analyze. Furthermore, as the narrator points to her own tendencies toward textual surplus, the novel suggests that globalization is not simply a phenomenon that invites critical debate, but can also be read as a metaphor for the capacity of contemporary narrative (7). The abundance of text, of “information” provided by the narrator, allows her the privileged position of a master who essentially controls her audience’s perceptions and understanding by cornering the market on her experience; she becomes a global monopoly.

The narrator’s diarizing of her time in Tsau first seems an innocuous, if tedious, task; an anthropologist by training, her efforts to record her experiences is a typical and even expected act of someone performing field research. She claims to offer Denoon an informed but objective assessment of Tsau, for “He was so immersed in the project and so identified with it that his own reading of it would be suspect, to start with” (198). And for this narrator, “Everything is an artifact” (30). She repeatedly refers to her terrific capacity for memory throughout the novel, but her actions gradually give the impression that her assiduous notetaking, not her memory, provide her with the breadth of esoteric knowledge that is her trademark.

Recording information soon becomes an obsession for her. She offers journal entries from her time in Tsau, which she prefaces with the remark that “[W]hen I look at the journal…I know I was more than hyper. I must have been rather disturbed” (183). The “impure text” that follows is her decoding of “abbreviations and enigmatica,” microscopically-written, partially-encoded entries, which are “not completely intelligible to me without serious concentration and the effort to think myself back into the moments that led me to choose particular codes and evasions” (184, 183). Her concluding remark in this section of the text admits, “Before my past cleverness makes these entries impenetrable to me, I need to make a glossary—either that or forget the whole thing. I am already guessing at what I meant, here and there” (199). In short,
this narrator who calls attention to her own abundance of knowledge becomes an unreliable, even suspect, narrator whose text suggests fabrication rather than an honest or objective account.

As her narrative reliability wanes, the narrator is even singled out by a resident of Tsau who effectively punctures the narrative screen and makes her act of narration more obvious. During a community debate, this woman exclaims, “And you must make that woman stop with the writing, as I am not on for examinations, I am speaking my heart” (369). The narrator then admits, “The rest is sketchier than it should be, because I was stopped from noting things down in situ and it was a fair while before I could get back to reconstructing the event” (370). Denoon, she explains, “had at worst a quizzical attitude toward my diarizing: he was also flattered, at least that was the way I took all his Boswell references” (304). Undeterred, she is certain that “reducing [Denoon] to paper was the right idea” (384), and back in the United States, she explains, she had in essence captured Denoon, for “what there had been of him I had in my mind, in my memory, in my notes” (462). But her “Boswellizing” hasn’t stopped, as she admits, “There is always new material to be integrated into the study of me. Each moment of thought demands multiples of moments of classification, analysis, parsing” (469).

But the narrator is not the only one creating maps; she is not the only one attempting to study, objectify, and ultimately profit from her experiences. Denoon twice displays a similar propensity. As he begins to fall out of favor with Tsau’s residents, he immerses himself in the project of creating a geographic map of the village. The narrator describes his dedication to it as “semisacrosanct” when she found him “erasing perfectly good—I thought—sections and penciling in legends in handwriting even more microscopic than mine in my journal” (379). Earlier in the novel Denoon creates a political map of Tsau’s residents, an “affinal diagram, because families and tribes and other affiliations were among the attributes keyed” (305). The
diagram inexplicably angers the narrator, and her anger prompts Denoon to destroy his work by
burning it.

Lest we forget, though, that this entire text is Rush’s creation, not the narrator’s, even
Rush offers a map of Tsau. Preceding the title page is a simple map of southern Botswana
marking key locations in the novel, and the narrator’s journey from Gaborone to Tsau is marked
with a dotted line. So, as Denoon maps Tsau, and the narrator maps Denoon, Rush maps the
narrator’s tale. These mappings reduce their subjects to text, specifically tangible, physical texts,
and they illustrate the conquest involved at each level, as each mapper orders, defines (or
redefines), and objectifies the mapped subject through his or her act of mapping. As such, this
novel’s critique of the Western conquest of countries such as Botswana is complicated by
mapping performed by the main characters, and even the author himself.

Furthermore, the act of reading the text—the method by which readers process or digest
the novel—incorporates those readers into a metaphorical food pyramid as well. If we can
consider the text’s surplus or excess, then the readerly “appetite” that propels the reader also
reveals the ideological complexities of a globalizing world. For most readers, the novel’s distant,
unfamiliar setting and its narrator/tour guide promise an exotic feast, recalling the cultural
mastery promised by the narrator at the outset of the novel through her ability to “decode”
Botswana for Westerners.

The connections between these levels of textual consumption and the consumption of
Botswana by the free market West are not difficult to draw. The narrator’s efforts at
commodifying and controlling her experiences are a localized or personal playing out of the
commodification we see at large in the novel, illustrated particularly by the changing appetites of
the Batswana as a result of the incursion of Western/imported food. The narrator’s “help” to
Denoon—offering him an honest assessment of Tsau from an informed outsider—obscures her own desire to commodify, to profit from and to own, the experience. The West’s “aid” to sub-Saharan Africa, like the World Food Program, an introduction of global food markets (imported goods) may offer allure and stave off hunger, but have questionable motives as they change the appetites/desires and diets/infrastructure and integrity of local populations.

When readers process the novel, what exactly are they processing? At the end of her book the narrator suggests that her academic audiences find a sense of meaningful authenticity in her reliance upon text rather than images: “They loved it that I had no slides, that I could paint word pictures and induce people to experience Africa the way I had, vis. not as a picture-taking robot only there to reduce everything to visual documentation while the gists and piths of authentic local life evanesced unnoticed” (469). Claiming to be a mouthpiece for Denoon, “quoting [him] up and down” (469), she admits: “So much of my imagery comes from stories and asides of Nelson’s it shocks me. I don’t want it. It isn’t as though my own life hasn’t been fairly vivid in its own way” (406). Here immediacy and distance are conflated and doubt is cast upon the immediacy, and veracity, of her narration. What is “real,” and how mastery is recognized, becomes slipperier in this illustration of a globalizing world, and texts—like the contemporary novel—reflect this complex state.

The narrator’s audiences love her for the message she bears, even as it condemns their unwitting complicity in global development, what she calls “a true holocaust in the world” as the “superimposition of market economies on traditional and unprepared third world cultures by force and fraud” (471). And through the novel’s various surpluses—of food, of information, of power and wealth—Rush impresses a similar message upon his readers as they process the textual surplus of the novel. And like his narrator, who claims that “text is literally all I have,”
Rush nevertheless uses the book as a means of reaching an audience to inform as well as entertain. The novel’s concern with multinational foodways, and the surpluses they entail, suggests that our own culture’s excessive appetites deserve closer scrutiny, but also that that scrutiny is difficult at best within the overarching framework of an economic superpower (357).
Vandana Shiva, a renowned ecological activist, has asserted quite simply that the web of life is, in fact, a food web. Food is energy, the basis of life, and every living thing is, at the most fundamental level, something else’s food. If the environment is that which makes us, food is how the environment becomes us. But contemporary agricultural systems complicate this food web with intensive energy requirements and lengthy distances between food and consumers. Shiva and others increasingly advocate the reestablishment of “food communities,” or local foodsheds, that have been effectively erased by industrial production. Good farming and good food, Shiva insists, require ethical commitments to food that nourishes us as well as our local communities.

Two recent works by Barbara Kingsolver make the same argument for a valuation of local agriculture, addressing the social and ecological implications of American food webs. Her most recent novel, Prodigal Summer (2000), and the memoir that follows it, Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007), both squarely confront Americans’ food consumption, arguing for local foodsheds and against presumed economies of scale. Prodigal Summer offers an ecological look at food systems, attempting an optimistic revision of Americans’ fractured, problematical relationship with their food. Its three protagonists advocate ecological balance, harmony, connectedness, and local community. In Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, Kingsolver catalogues the benefits of local agriculture—recently touted as the most responsible, sustainable alternative to contemporary large-scale global agriculture—as she recounts her family’s diet overhaul with a yearlong commitment to as much locally-produced food as possible.
Considering the focus of my project—food and agriculture as they fit into a larger discussion of ecologically concerned literature—*Prodigal Summer* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* position themselves in the middle of this conversation. The former gives readers basic ecology lessons within the context of a conventional romantic novel as Kingsolver explains the many problems with current food trends. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* answers readers’ typical challenges to local agriculture, namely, “How can that work, exactly?” Taken together, these two works tease out the details of our food chains and make a case for eating as locally and sustainably as possible. As such, these are works of activism and advocacy, which use literary methods to educate readers and argue for social change in America’s foodways.

Advocates of local food consumption, dubbed “locavores,” insist that consuming locally produced food is a crucial environmental responsibility, as items produced locally don’t require as much transportation energy, are often fresher and healthier, and are less likely to require intensive chemicals and fertilizers. Local consumption means seasonal food consumption, too; though watermelons or blueberries may be available year-round in a supermarket, the costs of their production and transportation, from various locales throughout the year, are not simply high, locavores argue, but also unethical and unsustainable. Furthermore, purchasing local foods supports local economies. These items may have higher price tags than those at large supermarkets, but those cheaper foods, often shipped around the globe, locavores argue, are cheaper only because perverse economic policies allow agribusiness corporations to ignore the external environmental and social costs of their operations, indirectly or invisibly passing those costs on to citizens and consumers. Large scale monoculture production, which is often paired with transnational shipping of produce, often requires chemical inputs like herbicides and fertilizers, which inevitably leach into groundwater supplies. Irrigation practices required by
large-scale production encourage erosion, which further compounds environmental problems. This kind of farming also discourages crop diversity in favor of the perceived efficiency of monoculture. Varieties that can withstand transport and a long shelf life are favored, and qualities valued by consumers, such as flavor and nutritional value, are unfortunately sacrificed. Embracing local agriculture is a way to reclaim flavorful foods and healthy local economies, which have been casualties of Big Agriculture.

In response to growing concern over food systems, the popularity of local farmers’ markets has risen remarkably. The USDA cites an 18% increase in the number of farmers’ markets nationwide between 2004 and 2006; the 1,755 farmers markets reported in 1994 mushroomed to over 4,300 farmers markets throughout the U.S. by 2006 (Farmers). But local agriculture has its critics, of course, who argue that local economies simply cannot support local populations—that is, there is no way to grow enough food locally for everyone, and that it is therefore an unrealistic, even elitist, endeavor. In many parts of the country this is a valid concern, as climates and water supplies make local agriculture a formidable challenge. Others argue that local food is simply too expensive for low- and middle-income families. Still others claim that valuing local economies is a provincial attitude that jeopardizes the widespread progress and improvement fostered by a burgeoning global economy. However, a wider look at the local agriculture movement suggests that, with rising energy costs, transnational agriculture may eventually become cost prohibitive even if its adherents resist localism for various reasons.

In Prodigal Summer and Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, Kingsolver emphasizes the interconnectedness between humans and the surrounding world, arguing for an increased awareness of human impact upon ecological, specifically agricultural, systems. These two works illustrate the collaborative systems we live within, in that they advocate a spirit of ecocentrism,
which involves viewing humans as members of systems, namely ecosystems, rather than controllers of the earth and its resources. The social project of these two texts is to encourage readers to think ecologically about their own food chains.

Pro digal Summer, which follows Kingsolver’s acclaimed The Poisonwood Bible, has received considerable praise and attention from reviewers for its ability to weave insightful ecological discussions into its triad of summer love stories. Janet Maslin wrote that Kingsolver “means to illustrate the nature of biological destiny and provide enlightened discourse on various ecological matters” (“Because” 32). One reviewer for The Economist found the novel exhibiting “modest flair and an attractive sentimental warmth” (“Three” 8). Another called Pro digal Summer “a balm, a seductive glimpse of an abundant Eden near at hand” (Schwarzbaum). Gary McEoin, in a review for the National Catholic Reporter, credited Prodigal Summer with helping him develop “an enhanced awareness of the profound interrelatedness of all creatures great and small, of our dependence as humans on the plants and animals of whose existence we city dwellers are only vaguely aware” (19).

As the title’s allusion to the Biblical prodigal son suggests, the novel covers a summer of “extravagant procreation” in the rural, hilly area where Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee converge (51). The three discrete plotlines also converge as the novel progresses, each driven by a fiercely independent female protagonist who lectures fellow characters, providing them (and readers) basic lessons in biology, ecology, and horticulture.

The first narrative, marked by the recurring chapter title “Predators,” involves Deanna Wolfe, a reclusive park ranger and biologist whose research in graduate school explored pressures on predator populations. While living at a ranger station nestled in a national forest, Deanna meets Eddie Bondo, a young Montana sheep rancher spending the summer wandering
across the country hunting predators (in this case, coyotes). A romance between them quickly
develops, and their differing views on wildlife management provide discussions on predator-prey
relationships and how humans affect wilderness ecosystems.

The second plot line, “Moth Love,” follows Lusa Landowski, a young widow who vows
to keep the family farm viable after her husband, Cole Widener, dies in a trucking accident.
Cole’s death occurs while driving a tractor-trailer for Southern States, an agriculture
conglomerate; he had taken the job because it was impossible to make ends meet on the farm’s
meager income. After his death, Lusa faces the skepticism of her in-laws, as well as the cultural
and ideological barriers of small-town Southern life, as she remains on the farm, determined to
make a go of it.

A third narrative, “Old Chestnuts,” follows elderly neighbors Garnett Walker and Nannie
Rawley, whose methods of tending their respective tree farms differ starkly. Garnett, a retired
teacher, is wholly invested in resurrecting the American chestnut tree, which was exterminated
by a blight that swept through the United States decades earlier. He attempts this by selectively
cross breeding the American chestnut with the Chinese chestnut, a blight-resistant species.
Garnett, who freely uses herbicides and pesticides, is continually rankled by his neighbor Nannie
Rawley, whose livelihood depends upon her certified organic apple orchard, which must remain
free of synthetic chemicals.

The three interconnected plot lines share an ecological imperative, as each protagonist is
bent on educating other characters. Each story line also features a romance of sorts, and the
human tension at the outset of each resolves happily by novel’s end with a renewed emphasis on
or appreciation of communities and familial relationships by novel’s end. Readers and characters
alike have been educated on ecology and have been shown that alternatives to contemporary development, particularly to industrialized food systems, are possible.

As anyone familiar with Kingsolver’s work might expect, Prodigal Summer has not escaped comparison with her weighty and widely praised The Poisonwood Bible. Reviewers quickly recognized the stark contrast between the two, characterizing Prodigal Summer as an “altogether lighter and more easygoing affair than its immediate predecessor” (Gray 90). Some readers and reviewers have welcomed this contrast, taking pleasure in Prodigal Summer’s celebration of romance and the delicate complexity of the nonhuman world. One found the novel a “warm and intricately constructed book shot through with an extraordinary amount of insight and information about the wonders of the visible world” (Giles 82). But most reviewers’ kind allowances have failed to hide a sense of frustration with the text itself and with Kingsolver’s overarching rhetorical techniques. Jennifer Schuessler, in a review for The New York Times, lamented the novel’s simplicity, saying it is “an attractive fable, but it doesn’t make for the kind of psychologically complex literature Kingsolver is well capable of” (38).

Reviewers’ frustration with the text’s lack of depth is also a frustration with the author’s propensity toward preachiness. Paul Gray recognized the author’s “trademark didacticism,” for “she does not subscribe to the view that novelists with a message ought to send a telegram. It can be no accident that three of the four main characters in the novel have worked as teachers in the past and aren’t at all shy about giving lectures” (90). In The Economist, a reviewer assessed the novel as “perhaps too baldly schematic in its construction to be entirely satisfying as a novel” (“Where” 8). Another reviewer lamented that Prodigal Summer’s characters “have all the answers, and you can hardly read a chapter of Kingsolver’s lush prose without tripping on a potted lecture by a woman bent on setting a man straight” (Schuessler 38). Though Maslin
claimed the author “succeeds inspiringly” in developing an ecological consciousness among readers, the novel is nevertheless “landscape miniature with a didactic mission,” and she finds fault with its “strong, smart heroines dispensing information more commonly found in field guides” (8). Dean Bakopoulos gave the novel more credit, finding in it “proof that a social conscience and stunning fiction can coexist in the same book,” insisting that didactic fiction should not be dismissed outright, because “in many works, there is little urgency. This could be because most of the M.F.A. writing programs in this country disdain political or social themes, lest the message dilute the art” (41). But his remains a minority opinion; most reviewers have found *Prodigal Summer* in particular, and instructive novels in general, guilty of a heavy-handed cheapening of the literary form. Though critics largely insist that novels of quality and substance should refrain from overt didacticism, few would argue that novels never educate their readers. A novel can teach, but it is expected to do so invisibly.

The didactic capacity of this novel is the focus of my analysis here because, despite reviewers’ criticisms, Kingsolver has actually claimed that *Prodigal Summer* is her most complex and challenging work to date. Her assessment contradicts reviewers’ charges that the novel fails to challenge readers or offer them sufficient complexity. Thus, questions arise: Are reviewers missing something? Are Kingsolver’s aims and reviewers’ expectations simply at odds? Or is Kingsolver simply overconfident in a subpar work? I find this novel’s pedagogical aim—a mission to reach a popular audience and effect change—not a shortcoming but rather a critical element, deployed at a critical time in environmental history when the human role in environmental stability is being reevaluated on many levels. Furthermore, it is not the first time a novelist has heeded a call to write to a broad audience, as opposed to the smaller market of academic fiction, in response to contemporary social or political conditions. Though such fiction
is quickly lumped into the category of “muckraking,” critics must remember that any novel, however timeless its message, inevitably arises from a specific place and time. *Prodigal Summer* performs important cultural work in a time of urgency, appealing to a broader popular audience than most “serious” fiction in order to educate readers about environmental dilemmas in which we all play a part. This novel argues that the environmental and social implications of our food systems are simply too important to treat more subtly, or in a novel aimed at a smaller literary audience.

Kingsolver’s novel is not alone in confronting pressing cultural and economic issues of the time while writing to a broad popular audience rather than an intellectual one. Perhaps the most widely known of such American literary works, which I will call reform novels, is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which still receives alternating praise and condemnation for the same concern: the balance between literary artistry and cultural critique. A sentimental novel that rallied readers around the abolition of slavery, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been alternately praised and vilified for its service as a vehicle of social and political reform. The debate over its literary value endures, as critics continue to disapprove of its sentimentality and its lack of moral subtlety or metaphor while crediting its significant cultural work in the service of abolition, for it prompted an undeniable shift in public sentiment against the institution of slavery. Jane Smiley vividly revives the debate over the literary merit of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in “Say it ain’t so, Huck,” in which she reconsiders Stowe’s novel in comparison with Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As Smiley describes the reception of these two works, she asserts that Twain’s novel, despite its many shortcomings, has nevertheless been elevated to the status of Great American Novel (perhaps *The Great American Novel*) but that “it undoubtedly would have been better for American literature, and American culture” if Stowe’s
novel, one of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century, had been received as favorably into the literary canon (64).

The “mythic resonance” that critics such as Eliot have found in *Huck Finn*, Smiley claims, is transcended by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s “power of brilliant analysis married to great wisdom of feeling,” for Stowe “never forgets the logical end of any relationship in which one person is the subject and the other is the object” (61, 65). Stowe’s skill, Smiley contends, is in conveying her understanding that slavery is an economic system, but with profound and tragic human emotional and relational consequences (65). In other words, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a great novel, according to Smiley, chiefly for its confrontation of the evils of slavery, whereas *Huck Finn* is praised, wrongly, for dealing delicately with the issue; “[i]f ‘great’ literature has any purpose,” she says, “it is to help us face up to our responsibilities instead of enabling us to avoid them once again by lighting out for the territory” as Twain’s Huck does (67).

Smiley finds artistic craft as well as profound human insight in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* where critics have routinely found a sentimental text to be maligned. In a similar way, I find *Prodigal Summer* a more artful, and valuable, text than critics have allowed. As Stowe takes up the issue of slavery, Kingsolver takes up our fractured food systems as a societal ill, attempting to arouse public sentiment and issue a call for personal change as well as political and economic reform. The novel’s triadic plot structure allows Kingsolver to weave a theme of interconnected systems through which the novel suggests the absurdity of delineating discrete boundaries between ecological systems, recognizing the value of hybridity as well as the fluidity between life and death that characterize an ecological or ecocentric paradigm. Like Stowe, Kingsolver exhibits an understanding of the economics of institutionalized systems—in this case, systems of food production—as well as the human relationships affected by those systems.
What emerges first from *Prodigal Summer* is not overt didacticism but instead a thorough awareness of ecological systems. The plotline that opens the novel, “Predators,” forwards the notion of ecological systems as networks through a concern with food chains at their most fundamental level: predator-prey relationships and their role in ecological health. Deanna, a park ranger and wildlife biologist, monitors wildlife population trends and works to maintain a healthy ecosystem in Zebulon National Forest. Her work is complicated, for it must negotiate between the recreation interests of humans and the survival interests of wildlife populations; she maintains trails for wilderness enthusiasts but also must make sure people aren’t misusing the national forest land or endangering wildlife.

The coyotes that have recently taken up residence in the forest signal a healthy ecosystem: a forest that can support apex predators like coyotes is an ecologically healthy forest. Deanna says of predators, which are “the top of the food chain,” that “if they’re good, then their prey is good, and its food is good” (11). “Keeping tabs on the predators,” she says, “tells you what you need to know about the herbivores, like deer, and the vegetation, the detritivores, the insect populations, small predators like shrews and voles. All of it” (11). Deanna’s understanding of food chains leads her to protect the pack of coyotes, for as she sees it, the health of the entire mountain ecosystem is at stake. Unsurprisingly, Deanna’s enthusiasm for the coyotes’ presence is not shared by local farmers, who believe that the only good coyote is a dead coyote. Despite the fact that coyotes only occasionally kill small domestic animals, such as chickens, goats, lambs, and household pets, they are passionately vilified, and farmers often simply poison or shoot them.

As Peter Wenz argues in the article “Leopold’s Novel,” Deanna’s views clearly echo those of conservationist Aldo Leopold, author of *A Sand County Almanac*, who in his famous
and much anthologized essay “Thinking Like a Mountain” argues that keystone predators are crucial to the delicate balance within a biotic pyramid, so that no single population gains an advantage over others. Wenz explains that Leopold’s message, which can be traced throughout Kingsolver’s novel, is one of ecocentrism, in which “The ecosystem, a holistic entity, has value over and above, and in most cases more than, the value of its individual components” (107).

In the “Old Chestnuts” story line, Nannie Rawley emphasizes the same principles when discussing pest management methods with her neighbor Garnett Walker, asserting that “Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads” (216). Nannie’s and Garnett’s methods of pest control are at odds; Garnett relies on diligent use of herbicides and pesticides, whereas Nannie’s organic farm requires that no traces of such chemicals be found on her produce. In support of her chemical-free farming, she takes pains to explain to Garnett the Volterra principle, a theory that pesticide applications actually cause population surges among pest populations because pest populations (prey) reproduce more rapidly than their predators, which are also killed by pesticides.

The “Moth Love” plot line evokes a sense of ecological interconnectedness as well, as Lusa Landowski’s research background is actually integrated pest management, the very method of pest control that Nannie defends from Garnett’s criticism. Like Nannie, Lusa advocates methods of pest management that essentially work with nature by taking advantage of natural ecological relationships, rather than resorting to the use of synthetic herbicides and pesticides that pose risks to human health as well as to the surrounding environment.

These characters’ explanations of ecological relationships are undoubtedly to blame for critics’ derision of the novel as overly didactic, but this ecological foundation actually allows more artful iterations of interconnectedness to surface. The novel does not simply preach ecology
lessons, but rather these ecological connections are underscored by the crumbling and dissolution of numerous ecological, geographical, and relational boundaries as the novel progresses. A brief discussion of some of these boundaries reveals that Kingsolver’s novel is much more thoughtfully and intricately crafted than reviewers give it credit for. Though its convergence of plotlines is a typical stylistic device, the dissolution of boundaries evidenced in this novel suggests an appreciable degree of craft and an awareness of how large-scale ecological concerns may have consequences in the lives of individual readers, through familial relationships, food choices, career stability, and geographic factors.

The boundaries most readily apparent to readers are those between characters’ properties, illustrated most explicitly by the ongoing disagreements between neighbors Nannie Rawley and Garnett Walker over their adjoining property line. While Garnett sees in Nannie’s behavior a disrespect for property boundaries, Nannie insists that “people just adore fences, but Nature doesn’t give a hoot” (86). Garnett cannot stand the disheveled, overgrown road frontage they share, which Nannie asks the county to refrain from spraying with herbicide in order to protect her farm’s organic status. Garnett prefers a neatly kept property boundary between their farms and along the road frontage, but Nannie’s ecologically-sensitive view of what property boundaries entail mean that her property exudes a wilder, even unkempt appearance. Whereas Garnett religiously relies upon chemicals to keep pests at bay, Nannie points out to him that those chemicals, once airborne, easily drift into her own apple orchard; thus the clear property boundary Garnett values is much more porous than it superficially appears.

A tree that falls across the creek between their properties further obscures this boundary. Garnett confronts Nannie to determine what should be done with the tree and others threatening to topple. During this conversation, however, Nannie mentions to Garnett that several American
chestnut trees are still alive and bearing seeds on her property, a fact unknown to him as he has never trespassed on Nannie’s land. Their decision to share the cost of removing the fallen tree, and Nannie’s invitation to Garnett to use the chestnut trees as breeding stock in his chestnut breeding program, signal a tentative erasure of the longstanding boundary, more present in Garnett’s mind than in Nannie’s, let alone in reality, between their properties.

This blurring of boundaries can be traced through the other plot lines as well. In “Predators,” Deanna’s hybrid career is funded by the Park Service as well as the Forest Service, and she is charged with fostering ecosystem health in the forest as well as maintaining trails for those who use the forest recreationally. Here the boundary between the human realm and the realm of nature becomes problematical because of the coyotes she has recently discovered living nearby. The coyotes, protected while on National Forest land but not beyond, of course roam beyond the National Forest and are spotted throughout the local area. Garnett sees one while driving (392-93), and they are noticed on Lusa’s farm, too (392-93, 413). Furthermore, Deanna frequently finds people illegally hunting for game, ginseng, and morel mushrooms, which is illegal. Here the National Forest, which Deanna frequently considers her exclusive domain, becomes an increasingly porous and indeterminate space as wildlife strays beyond the forest’s bounds and people infiltrate Deanna’s private wilderness.

Zebulon National Forest actually abuts the Widener farm in the valley below; the property line remains invisible in a stand of old timber that unites the two. On the Widener farm, Lusa is not preoccupied with the farm’s boundaries but rather maintaining legal ownership, as she strives to keep the farm financially solvent and in the family. She also struggles for acceptance among the extended Widener family, who feel she has unjustly inherited the family farm from her husband Cole. In this case, Lusa gradually becomes accepted by the family, even
committing to adopt her dying sister-in-law Jewel’s children. This plot line, which revolves
around the farm’s rightful ownership—and keeping the farm afloat—culminates in Lusa’s
decision to eventually transfer ownership of the farm to her niece and nephew, Chrys and
Lowell. This grand gesture muddies the notion of ownership of the farm by distributing the
wealth—and responsibilities—of the family among several people, as well as incorporating Lusa
into the Widener family.

Furthermore, Lusa continually emphasizes the impossible distinction between the humans
and the natural world, insisting to her husband Cole, “You’re nature. I’m nature. We shit, we
piss, we have babies, we make messes. The world will not end if you let the honeysuckle have
the side of your barn” (45). Her academic research on moths and insects helps establish parallels
between moth behavior and human behavior, perhaps articulating Kingsolver’s tacit message that
humans are, after all, creatures of nature. Lusa insists that humans are nature, but the “Moth
Love” plotline suggests that we must also continually renegotiate our relationship with the
natural world. One illustration of this is the honeysuckle growing on the Wideners’ barn, which
Lusa will not let her husband remove because she enjoys its appearance and fragrance. By
summer’s end it has taken over the entire side of the barn, and she decides to trim it back after
all, suggesting that humans must inevitably “manage” nature, even while living according to a
generally ecocentric perspective (360).

Even the setting of the novel itself is characterized by a geographic blurriness. Various
reviewers have cast the novel as taking place in the hills of Kentucky, or Virginia, or Tennessee,
but actually Kingsolver never pinpoints a specific locale. References to mountains, towns,
creeks, and more distant cities suggest a general area of southern Appalachia, but the exact
setting of the novel remains hazy, set somewhere in the general area where Tennessee,
Kentucky, and Virginia coincide; the vagueness suggests the novel’s ubiquity as well as its fictional fabrication.

As the human-imposed geographic boundaries blur throughout the novel, and as the boundaries between the human realm and the natural world become more indistinct, the three plotlines become increasingly indistinguishable from one another, evident in small physical details as well as through relationships between characters. Deanna’s ecological wisdom is echoed by Nannie’s and Lusa’s knowledge of integrated pest management (ecologically sensitive farming). “Deanna’s” coyotes are spotted by Garnett and then later on Lusa’s farm as well. Chrys tells Lusa of a wild woman rumored to live in the national forest, alluding to Deanna (354). Lusa’s search for advice on goat husbandry prompts her to call Garnett who, it turns out, is Chrys and Lowell’s grandfather. Nannie Rawley was Deanna’s father’s longtime partner, and her farm is Deanna’s home when she decides to leave her post in the national forest. Deanna’s cabin and Lusa’s barn are made of sturdy American chestnut wood from Garnett’s family’s lumber business.

Even the notion of what constitutes an ecosystem is blurred as characters wrestle with being a part of, and apart from, the natural world. The novel as a whole argues for the importance of a local, community-oriented conception of an ecosystem, but Deanna’s pregnancy suggests that even an individual person can constitute an ecosystem. And as the “Predators” story line ends, Deanna leaves her cabin in the wilderness for Nanny Rawley’s home in the valley below, further suggesting, as Dana Phillips argues, that ecosystems are actually terribly difficult systems to fully articulate and understand. Not only are they dynamic, with members constantly moving into and out of relationships with one another, but an ecosystem’s vast number of moving parts works to deconstruct the very notion of a “system” at work (Phillips 66).
Like the coyotes struggling for a foothold in the forest and the chestnut trees that are all but extinct, Deanna’s stay in the forest, where she feels fully at home, is cut short by her summer romance with Eddie Bondo, a wandering bounty hunter. Nothing, this section of the novel suggests, is permanent, except for ecological flux, which makes understanding ecology, indeed all efforts at wildlife management, terribly challenging.

This blurring of boundaries allows Kingsolver to make the argument, particularly with “Moth Love” and “Old Chestnuts,” that we are fully a part of the food systems we rely upon. These invisible global food systems have recently been criticized by a number of nonfiction writers. Here, though, Kingsolver attempts to cast these conditions as smaller-scale personal struggles, as in Lusa’s struggle to keep a family farm solvent. Outraged by the perverse logic of growing “drugs instead of food” on “some of the richest dirt on this planet,” she is also determined to earn a living from farming something other than tobacco (122).

Nannie Rawley also contributes to the novel’s food message, as she, like Lusa, is determined to grow food in an environmentally-sensitive way. Both Nannie and Lusa must capitalize on niche markets—organic apples and naturally-raised meat goats, respectively—and both acknowledge that this kind of farming depends upon plenty of hard work, not simple panaceas. These women’s struggles to defy popular opinion evidence a conflict between “contemporary” and “traditional” agriculture, and in keeping with the novel’s emphasis on interconnectedness, they reveal that the most radical challenges to contemporary practices often come from traditional wisdom, not newfangled speculation.

These characters’ concerns highlight what is largely invisible, or not readily apparent, to many readers. Food, to the average consumer, is simply food; one cannot see the environmental

---

7 Eric Schlosser, Marion Nestle, and Richard Manning have all argued recently that these systems are deleterious to our environment as well as to general human health.
and social effects of industrial farming when scanning produce at Kroger. One cannot readily
discern pesticide residues on food, let alone the staggering transportation miles between farm and
grocery store. Kingsolver’s task is to make these concerns apparent—and real—to her readers.

*     *     *

As *Prodigal Summer* dismantles the illusion of human separateness, at the species as well
as the individual level, the novel also reveals a formal connection, with the novel’s thematic
concern. Kingsolver’s use of the medium of the novel is insightful, for it can be characterized
throughout its crafting (often by a single author) and transmission (to a single reader at a time),
as a form that privileges and capitalizes upon the human individual. However, *Prodigal Summer*
offers an alternate conception of the novel’s technological capabilities, for its attempt to
disseminate ideas can be likened to the work performed by a seed, which is designed for
dissemination and continuation of its message (genetic or otherwise). The germination of new
life, a central theme of the novel, parallel’s the novel’s ability to germinate new ideas in the
minds of its readers. This germination becomes a further manifestation of the erasure of
boundaries and borders that recurs throughout the novel.

The novel’s “season of extravagant procreation” witnesses a litter of coyote pups,
Deanna’s unexpected pregnancy, Lusa’s wildly prolific garden, as well as Garnett’s and
Nannie’s ongoing efforts in their orchards. And of course dissemination can have negative
connotations, such as the airborne spread of pesticides, the fungal blight that has eradicated the
American chestnut, and the rampant spread of plant and insect pests. The novel itself can be
likened to its coyote population, for in times of environmental stress, the coyote population
surges; so too Kingsolver’s novel answers a call of environmental stress, attempting to
disseminate and cultivate new ideas in the minds of readers who can in turn foster changes within their local environments.

**Animal, Vegetable, Miracle**

*As Prodigal Summer* explores American food systems in an ecological context, Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007) follows the novel in an attempt to formulate a vision of how eating locally might be practically accomplished by American consumers. Equal parts memoir, social commentary, and how-to, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* raises numerous objections to the standard state of our grocery stores and dinner tables and offers an even more direct appeal to popular readers to eat locally through developing a more active food conscience. In its focus, the text is similar to Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, but *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* focuses much more explicitly on providing a how-to guide by relating one family’s experiences.

As such, this book may be quickly dismissed as a “stunt memoir,” for it details the Kingsolver-Kopp family’s scheme to radically shift its eating habits for a whole year. But if it is a stunt, reviewers have failed to skewer it; reviewer Janet Maslin calls it a “wonderfully neighborly account of stunt eating” (“Because”). In this regard, readers may again note obvious similarities with Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*; Pollan’s account analyzes four meals, demonstrating the perversity of American food systems. Here Kingsolver’s family eats local for a year; the book, essentially, is a treatise along the lines of “How My Family Got its Food Back.”

Kingsolver’s isn’t the first memoir to describe the adventure of eating locally. Gary Paul Nabhan’s *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods* (2001), also a locavore memoir, is perhaps the forerunner of the localism movement, aiming to convince
readers that eating locally is possible, even deep within the arid Southwestern United States. Kingsolver acknowledges this and other adventures in local food consumption early in her text, but claims that her family’s is different: “We were thinking of a different scenario. We hoped to establish that a normal-ish American family could be content on the fruits of our local foodshed” (24). The previous attempts at localism, she implies, relied too much upon shock value to be taken seriously as transformative texts with broad reader appeal. Hers, however, is aimed specifically at “normal-ish” Americans, demonstrating that a more careful, ethical, and local way of eating is possible for non-extremist eaters, casting her own family as typical enough to gauge the feasibility of such an undertaking.

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle has been popular among readers and reviewers, who overwhelmingly consider it a “delicious” text, largely satisfied with it as opposed to the mixed reviews of Prodigal Summer. The rare reviewer has found the text an unpleasant read—Gerald Kreyche of USA Today calls it “a scold in the manner of hatchet-wielding Carrie Nation and the temperance movement of old”—but most find in it a satisfying balance of informative and enjoyable (80). Nina Planck, author of Real Food: What to Eat and Why, finds the text “both classy and disarming, substantive and entertaining, earnest and funny,” noting that its feat in literary inventiveness is reflected by its difference from other works in the same vein: “This field—local food and sustainable agriculture—is crowded with books in increasingly predictable flavors: the earnest manual, diary of an epicure, the environmental battle cry, the accidental gardener. Animal, Vegetable, Miracle is all of these, and much smarter” (75).

In this memoir, Kingsolver maintains a sense of the delight of food and eating, careful not to let it get lost among discussions of food production. Consumption of food remains in the foreground, and what may be called “food writing” satisfies readers’ appetites for discussion of
food itself. Throughout the year, Kingsolver takes care to highlight the delicious aspects of local agriculture, of her own region as well as farther afield. For example, morel mushrooms, which “defy all attempts at domestication,” require early spring hunting, or “molly mooching”; they are a wild delicacy, only rarely available at farmers’ markets (and expensive when they are) (78). In a later chapter, the author explores cheesemaking, explaining that her family makes much of its own cheese, showing that it’s not only possible but fun and delicious. She rhetorically asks “What kind of weirdo makes cheese?” and then proceeds to answer the question by recounting a visit to Ricki Carroll, author of *Cheesemaking Made Easy* (131). A trip to Italy detailed late in the novel allows for more celebration of food and eating, through a glimpse at how “food is the point” in Italian culture, and eating locally is far from a newfangled idea (242, 244). Italians love food and embrace it as a fundamental aspect of their culture.

But the memoir does not simply revel in memories of meals enjoyed; the context often provided by Kingsolver’s didactic protagonists in *Prodigal Summer* is offered here in part by the author’s husband Steven Hopp, an environmental studies professor, who provides social and political commentaries that flesh out the social, economic, ecological context for the family’s endeavor. Hopp’s short essays explain cultural and political conditions that have contributed to the current conditions that have precipitated their project of eating locally. Brief discussions of Monsanto and genetically modified crops, globalized food systems, the massive federal farm bill, and even local food shopping recommendations put the endeavor at hand into a broader cultural context for readers who may be unaware the issues surrounding American diets, and that localism is a response to far-reaching conditions (50, 66, 206, 348).

Kingsolver’s daughter Camille offers another perspective, shedding light on how a younger person confronts these issues. Camille’s perspective is largely practical, like a “how-to”
guide accompanied by a seasonal cookbook, as she offers recipes and weekly meal plans that take advantage of seasonal produce. This section provides readers with the nuts and bolts guidance to try their own hand at eating according to local seasons and availability. Her meal suggestions illustrate that seasonal eating need not be serially monochromatic, and her perspective as a young college-age person offers a point of view that has been virtually absent from discussions of eating locally.

A large part of the appeal of this text is that it’s not about farming or food production, though that is precisely what Kingsolver’s family does, growing much of its own food. It’s about eating. (And when have Americans not enjoyed eating?) It’s about meals and cooking, about undoing Americans’ “alimentary alienation” (131). Kingsolver compares American attitudes to food with Italians’, suggesting an us-and-them contrast. What is glossed over, or overlooked, is the sheer magnitude of manual labor required to make it all happen—the unglamorous aspect of feeding one’s own family—like weeding. Those trips to the farmer’s market are scarce after recounting that first, early spring visit. The book condenses a whole year into a concise, easily digestible narrative and ensures entertainment, humor, and sustained interest for readers. What Kingsolver focuses on isn’t the gardening—the agriculture—but the eating. Since this is the way most readers will relate most easily to the topic of food, it works well. She focuses on the more entertaining and intriguing aspects of her family’s year of local food.

Through the text’s conversational tone Kingsolver conceals a carefully crafted effort to offer a palatable message to everyday readers and popular audiences. Her thesis—that a return to eating locally is in individuals’, and our country’s, best interest—is a reformulation of the basic message at the heart of the work of Wendell Berry, who has for years been writing essays, fiction, and poetry that advocate a return to agrarianism. Kingsolver’s book reiterates Berry’s
insistence that “Eaters must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used” (208).

As a reformulation of Berry’s agrarian gospel, Kingsolver’s two works discussed here are designed to be more palatable—more accessible—to everyday readers and popular audiences, with their focus on eaters and eating, not simply on farmers and farming. The connections made in Prodigal Summer between wilderness ecology, family farming, and consumer food choices are brought closer to home, and celebrated, in Animal, Vegetable, Miracle as Kingsolver’s family suggests that changing a family’s food habits is not only possible but satisfying. Readers of Mating, The Polished Hoe, A Thousand Acres or even Ozeki’s novels may shake their heads upon reading either of these texts, for the subtle complexity found in the former works is largely absent. But with both of these works Kingsolver in fact seems to eschew subtlety in an effort to make previously obscure conditions plainly evident for readers. Planting thoughts of food revolution in the minds of readers, she suggests, is precisely what writers are capable of—and are called to do.
Chapter Six

The Meat and Potatoes of Ruth Ozeki’s: *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*

Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*, though a lighthearted, enjoyable read for many readers, suggests that a novel driven by contemporary issues—like food production and consumption—faces the substantial challenge of balancing sociopolitical commentary with aesthetic merit, for a text’s political acuity can easily overshadow its literariness. Two novels by Ruth Ozeki—*My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003)—attempt to rebut this charge against the issues novel. Each offers sociopolitical commentary that is every bit as urgent as Kingsolver’s while retaining the creative depth of a more serious literary novel. These novels exhibit a deftness—a complexity, and a sense of textual layers—that satisfies readers’ aesthetic sensibilities while still offering prescient cultural critique, and their grappling with issues of food consumption makes them particularly worthy of discussion. Though not the most recent of the novels discussed here, their relevance is still intense: *My Year of Meats* takes on the abuses endemic to the American beef industry, and *All Over Creation* calls for increased consumer awareness of genetic engineering in agriculture.

Both *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* have received favorable attention from reviewers, who have noted Ozeki’s focus on American foodways as well as her craft as a writer. Laura Shapiro, reviewing *My Year of Meats*, found the novel “a genuine novel, and a deft one,” pointing out its acknowledgement of its own textuality, and of the power of texts, as a particular strength (65). Another reviewer considered the novel an illustration of the author’s “capacity to sustain a strong vein of human interest while synthesizing multiple layers of reflection and insight into the details of her main character’s work and life” (Kelly 100).
Reviewers have found *All Over Creation* to be not as rigorous and well-crafted a novel as *My Year of Meats* but still worthy of praise and attention. Anne Stephenson, reviewing *All Over Creation*, compared the novel to “Barbara Kingsolver’s lighter novels,” though it “places a serious subject (humankind’s urge to control nature) in the hands of likable people who, despite their flaws, are the best messengers of all” (5D). Elizabeth DiNovella likened the novel to Michael Pollan’s nonfictional *The Botany of Desire* (2002); she found the novel “lack[ing] the taut storytelling that made *My Year of Meats* such a fun romp,” but she also highlighted the novel’s larger question—“humanity’s quest for control over life” as played out by agribusiness and their public relations efforts (43).

These novels’ scope and fervor at times suggest investigative journalism, hearkening to Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*. Ozeki’s readers are subject to detailed explanations of the workings of her issues, and the narratives mimic nonfiction with their references to relevant actual texts. Echoing nonfictional prose, *My Year of Meats* offers itself as a work of documentary fiction as well as a work about the nature of documentary and truth-telling. And *All Over Creation* closely follows an agribusiness corporation’s attempts to market genetically modified crops, closely mirroring the Monsanto Corporation’s failed efforts at promoting GM potatoes. Despite their concern with issues, however, both novels nevertheless call attention to their own textuality, undoing the sense of transparency that is characteristic of much “realistic” contemporary fiction. Instead, these novels acknowledge the tension between texts, information, and the world beyond the printed page, speaking to the power of texts to shape public opinion on pressing issues, and construct our fundamental notions of reality. Ozeki’s understanding of the creative latitude afforded the novel as a genre becomes apparent. In this respect, her aims do not differ substantially from Kingsolver’s in *Prodigal Summer*. But *My
Year of Meats and All Over Creation foreground rich connections between the corporeal world of food and the more conceptual world of texts, connections that in turn allow an important theoretical conversation to flourish.

My Year of Meats

The aptly titled My Year of Meats follows a year in the life of its protagonist Jane Takagi-Little, a documentary filmmaker, as she makes “documentaries about an exotic and vanishing America for consumption on the flip side of the planet” and gradually discovers the silent and largely invisible horrors of the meat industry in the United States (15). Jane lands a job producing and eventually directing My American Wife!, a television series designed to increase beef export sales to Japan by promoting meat-eating among Japanese housewives. This meat infomercial is thinly disguised as a documentary revealing “typical” American culture to Japanese women. Jane, who “believed, honestly, that [she] could use wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth,” becomes increasingly uncomfortable with her work as she learns more about the perversities of the industry, ultimately realizing that she cannot continue her work on My American Wife! in good conscience (27).

Intertwined with Jane’s narrative is the story of Akiko Ueno, wife of Joichi Ueno, Jane’s misogynist boss. Joichi works for the advertising agency responsible for the BEEF-EX account and My American Wife!, and simultaneously hopes the show will “help” his wife by “put[ting] some meat on her bones” (20). Akiko’s life with her husband, like Jane’s work on My American Wife!, becomes increasingly untenable; overbearing Joichi, who wants a male heir, becomes increasingly abusive, blaming her for her failure to become pregnant. Joichi’s abuse of Akiko mirrors the abuse Jane discovers at the heart of the American beef industry. By novel’s end, both
women escape their ties to BEEF-EX and Joichi: Akiko leaves her husband for an independent
life in the United States, and Jane creates a media sensation with a documentary exposé of the
beef industry, which effectively undermines BEEF-EX’s marketing campaign. In both
frametales, freedom from oppression requires these female protagonists’ freedom of creative
expression, thereby suggesting the important role texts and media play in shaping one’s reality as
well as more broadly influencing public opinion. The objectivity at the heart of documentaries,
and the objectification at the core of the meat industry, are shown to be fictions, or fabrications,
and fiction, as suggested by these novels, is an apt medium for undoing this “objectivity.”

The Meat We Eat

For many readers My Year of Meats echoes Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation (2001), an
exposé of the fast food industry’s history, marketing, and production methods. Schlosser asserts
that “A nation’s diet can be more revealing than its art or literature” as he goes on to examine
closely the beef and potatoes that become the hamburgers and french fries of the ubiquitous
American fast food meal (3). His aims run parallel to Ozeki’s, it seems, as he tries to uncover
what lies beneath the alluring surface of American fast food, explaining his work as one of
revelation in the public interest:

Hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much
thought, unaware of the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of their purchases.
[. . .] The whole experience is transitory and soon forgotten. [But] people should
know what lies behind the shiny, happy surface of every fast food transaction.
They should know what really lurks between those sesame-seed buns. As the old
saying goes: You are what you eat. (10)
Unlike Schlosser’s no-nonsense investigative journalism, Ozeki’s fictional account of a zany year in the life of a documentary filmmaker does not offer up straightforward shock and awe, but instead employs a more layered, and entertaining, approach that exposes the evils of the industry but also illustrates connections between the meat and the message: reality and attempts to convey the urgency of that reality. Unemployed and desperate for work at the novel’s outset, protagonist Jane Takagi-Little quickly drafts a proposal for My American Wife!, which she acknowledges is “a little excessive” but describes the absurd endeavor quite aptly:

Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode of My American Wife! must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It’s the meat (not the Mrs.) who’s the star of our show! Of course, the “Wife of the Week” is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America. (8)

Joichi Ueno insists that My American Wife! is a documentary, despite the fact that its sole purpose is to sell American beef to Japanese consumers. The Beef Exporter and Trade Syndicate, or BEEF-EX, a “national lobby organization that represented American meats of all kinds,” serves the interests of “livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups” by aiming to expand American beef exportation and increase American beef consumption among Japanese viewers, or, in their words, “to foster among Japanese housewives a proper understanding of the wholesomeness of U. S. meats” (9-10). My American Wife! achieves this through day-in-the-life depictions of
“typical” American housewives and families who show audiences how to prepare authentic American beef entrees and offer a glimpse of their everyday lives. Though it’s a highly fabricated, elaborately scripted program, Japanese viewers are assured that the program is “produced ‘virtually entirely’ by a real American crew, so the America conveyed was authentic, not one distorted by the preconceptions of jaded Japanese TV viewers” (28).

But of course the “typical” wholesome American culture BEEF-EX strives to depict is not typical at all, instead rife with stereotypes and omissions of all kinds. As Jane’s frustration with the program increases, she repeatedly undercuts Joichi’s and BEEF-EX’s aims by proposing and filming episodes that ignore BEEF-EX’s mandate for “typical” Americans: attractive, clean, wholesome, middle- and upper-class white families with two or three children.

Instead Jane searches for “transgressive” families, in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and diet; she features or attempts to feature African-Americans, Mexican immigrants, a lesbian couple, and a family with a severely handicapped daughter, and their featured meals stray from beef, instead consisting of chicken, pork, lamb, and even entirely meat-free. Jane’s attempt at filming an episode with Helen and Purcell Dawes, who are African-American, is snuffed by Ueno, who insists on the white Thayer family; Becky Thayer is “a gourmet cook and an antiques collector, and the [family’s] bed-and-breakfast was her hobby” (105). Ueno’s preference of “picture perfect” American families omits a “hidden” America that Jane eventually reveals in a meat industry exposé. These episodes predictably jeopardize Jane’s job, though television ratings suggest that they are very successful with Japanese audiences.

The subversive aims of the cartoonish BEEF-EX attempt not only to obscure “real” American culture with idealized images of a fictional “typical” America; they also obscure the real conditions of beef production, which create obstacles to American beef exportation: global
scrutiny of livestock conditions, questionable feeding practices, intensive hormone and antibiotic use, and the brutality of the industrial slaughterhouse. These conditions, of course, must remain invisible to consumers in order for meat to remain appetizing. In *My Year of Meats* beef consumption in general and *My American Wife!* in particular are inevitably complicated by what Jane learns of the real conditions of beef production in the United States.

Thus the wholesomeness celebrated by *My American Wife!* belies an industry driven by profit and predicated upon abuse. American beef is revealed as fundamentally unwholesome; it’s junk food in the truest sense. The cheap, abundant beef that is cast as a foundational aspect of American culture is in fact unhealthy as well as unethically produced; statistics suggest that Americans have the highest per capita meat consumption of any nation in the world. Large-scale beef operations rely upon “‘growth-enhancing’ drugs, hormones, and other pharmaceuticals” administered to cattle fattened in typically squalid feedlot conditions (206). In turn, this abundance (overabundance) of meat contributes to “a host of modern human health crises. . . . [T]he ‘diseases of affluence’—the heart attacks, strokes, and stomach cancers caused by too much meat in the diet—are killing Americans, Europeans, and increasingly the Japanese” (206).

What Jane learns renders *My American Wife* not only inaccurate, but perverse, as the “whole concept of ‘wholesome’ [is] turned on its ear” (29). Wondering “why Americans are so uniformly obese,” she asks a rhetorical audience “Are we *all* so ignorant about diet and health? [. . .] Or is there something else?” (123). The vague “something else” she discovers in the evils of meat production, reminiscent of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. Tipped off by Helen and Purcell Dawes, a prospective family for a *My American Wife!* episode, Jane learns that hormones used in the poultry industry cause men to develop effeminate characteristics, like a change in voice and gynecomastia. What the Daweses allude to is substantiated later by an “Important Documentary
Interlude,” wherein Jane directly addresses readers in a brief history and explanation of hormone use in the meat industry. Hormones have been used to increase productivity, forcing animals to gain weight more quickly and male animals to develop “plump breasts and succulent meats” (124). But she also explains that diethylstilbestrol, or DES, was also foisted upon pregnant women to “prevent miscarriages and premature births” (125). This, she shows, is a sham—the hormone actually offered women no such prevention—but still it was prescribed for two decades. In fact, studies increasingly showed that DES greatly increased not only infant mortality risk, but also cancers and deformations in daughters of women who had taken DES during pregnancy. Jane explains that “Trace residues of these drugs [continue to] end up in the beef we eat, along with concentrated doses of herbicides used in cattle feed and pesticides and insecticides needed to control the rampant fly populations in feedlots” (206).

Beef production is also shown to entail deeper perversities than the various hormones and other chemicals used. A visit to a feedlot reveals the unnatural “recycling” of feeding cattle recycled paper products, cement, manure, “by-products from potato chips, breweries, liquor distilleries, sawdust, wood chips,” “by-products from the slaughterhouse—recycling cattle right back into cattle,” and even plastic hay pellets, which are cheaper than regular hay and can be recovered, recycled, and fed to cattle again (258-59). A visit to a slaughterhouse nearby reveals that it’s “no place for sightseein’” (280). Jane describes the experience as “like walking through an invisible wall to hell. Sight, sound, smell—every sense I thought I owned, that was mine, the slaughterhouse stripped from me, overpowered and assaulted” (281).

Thus Jane reveals a gulf between food production and food consumption, and American consumers’ lack of knowledge is exposed as she (and Ozeki) reveal what has remained largely hidden to the meat-consuming public. This food is not as it appears, and consumers of this
“wholesome” American staple remain ignorant of the conditions of meat production. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams observes that this is no accident: “Geographically, slaughterhouses are cloistered. We do not see or hear what transpires there,” for our “patriarchal culture surrounds butchering with silence” (49). When Jane confronts Ueno about the “unsavory side to the meat industry,” he ignores her concerns, quickly and unconvincingly explaining that a Meat Affirmation Task Force promises the “high quality of all meats” (213). Jane, and the reading audience, remain unconvinced.

But Jane’s investigative research of the beef industry’s sordid underside also prompts her to acknowledge her complicity. In a conversation with herself, she exposes her conflicted aims: “What am I hoping to accomplish? Am I trying to sabotage this program? I need this job. I can’t afford to get fired now. On the other hand, I can’t continue making the kind of programs Ueno wants, either. What am I supposed to do?” (210). She certainly needs the employment, but by producing shows that promote “tasty meats” like Coca-Cola Roast, she simply forwards BEEF-EX’s agenda and promotes the beef industry with its unethical, even dangerous, motives and methods.

**Like a Piece of Meat**

On the surface, American culture generally finds nothing inherently wrong with the consumption of meat. But the novel’s pairing of this industry with repeated instances of domestic and sexual abuse urges readers to recognize connections between them. Though for a casual reader these themes may seem unrelated, a link quickly becomes clear, especially when attention is paid to the language Ozeki uses to describe these abuses.

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Carol Adams examines ideological connections between violence toward women and the violence that is meat-eating. She begins with the observation
that “rendering of animals as consumable bodies is one of those presumptions that undergirds our attitudes,” namely that “people should eat animals and that meat is good for you” (14). She continues:

Rarely is this cultural text that determines the prevailing positive attitudes about consuming animals closely examined. The major reason for this is the patriarchal nature of our meat-advocating cultural discourse. Meat’s recognizable message includes association with the male role; its meaning recurs within a fixed gender system; the coherence it achieves as a meaningful item of food arises from patriarchal attitudes including the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked. These are all a part of the sexual politics of meat. (14)

In My Year of Meats these dual abuses emerge; as Jane uncovers the abuses of the beef industry, that industry’s most vociferous advocate, Joichi Ueno, is revealed to be a violent and abusive husband. Akiko’s resulting anxiety is manifested as bulimia and amenorrhea, which angers Joichi even more, and his abuse of her escalates to rape and sodomy. Akiko’s chief role, according to Joichi, is to bear him a son, and her failure to do so renders her a piece of meat, a “sterile, useless woman” (239).

Ueno even attempts to rape Jane, assaulting her after an evening of drinking. Jane ushers Ueno back to his hotel room after an evening at a club. Pretending to be drunk, he falls against Jane and pins her down, whining that his wife is a “fruitless woman” and he “want[s] to make [a] baby” with Jane (110). This proposition, Jane recounts, “gave me the jolt of strength I needed to jam my knee into his groin and my knuckles into his windpipe and roll him over. I stood up. He lay on the ground, writhing and moaning” (110).
The connection between abuse of women and of animals is the objectification inherent within these abuses. Adams explains that “Sexual violence and meat eating, which appear to be discrete forms of violence, find a point of intersection in the absent referent,” in which a subject (a woman, or an animal) is objectified, becomes an object, and is thus “present” but absent as a subject in the abusive relationship (43). Adams identifies a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption that are common to the oppression of both women and animals, linking sexual violence and the slaughter of animals for meat:

Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. The oppressor then violates this being by object-like treatment: e.g., the rape of women that denies women freedom to say no, or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living breathing beings into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation, or brutal dismemberment, and finally consumption. (Adams 47)

Monica Chiu, in “Postnational Globalization and (En)Gendered Meat Production in Ruth L. Ozeki’s My Year of Meats,” examines the novel’s exploration of these parallel abuses, arguing that this “comic novel” calls for a “serious rethinking of globalization’s end results” for it “alerts its readers to a fragmentation of culture and of bodies, specifically those of women, minorities, and, I might add, animals” (120). Shameem Black’s “Fertile Cosmofeminism: Ruth L. Ozeki and Transnational Reproduction” similarly stresses the feminist political focus of My Year of Meats, asserting that it “seeks to extend the conceptual tactics of activism,” and that “In doing so, the novel suggests a crucial role for literature in the development of cosmo-feminism” (227).
As Joichi’s violence toward Akiko and Jane suggests a link between rape of women and meat consumption, Jane’s visit to a slaughterhouse makes this link visible through a description of slaughter in a cow being killed in gendered, even sensual terms:

The worker put his hand on the cow’s arched neck to steady her [. . .]. [He] was talking to her all the while, saying, “There now, girl, calm down, it’s gonna be all over soon,” and then he did the most amazing thing. He bent down and looked straight into her bugging eye and stroked her forelock, and it seemed to calm her. And when he straightened up again, he used the upward movement of his body to sink the knife deep into her throat, slicing crosswise, then plunging it straight into her heart. (284)

The chemical or biological violence Jane discovers further connects meat-eating with the rape of women, as the violence is not simply and overtly physical but also subtle and invisible. As slaughterhouses are hidden from sight, so too are the hormones (and other substances) used by the meat industry, and the fact they have been foisted upon unsuspecting multitudes of American women.

Jane’s work as a faux documentarian for the beef industry is complicated not only by her conflicted motives, but also by her gradual realization that she has personally suffered the beef industry’s indiscriminate use of hormones. The “complete sham” of prescribing DES to pregnant women hits close to home as Jane concludes that her own infertility is very likely the result of her mother’s being prescribed the hormone during her own pregnancy (125). Though DES is now illegal (within the novel and presently in the United States), she notes that “95 percent of feedlot cattle in the U.S. still receive some form of growth-promoting hormone or
pharmaceutical in feed supplements” (126). These drugs persist as residues, tainting cuts of beef sold and consumed by an unsuspecting American public.

These connections between meat production and human reproduction echo those elucidated in Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, as industrial “inputs” intended to increase productivity have the unintended and devastating effect of rendering women infertile. As I have discussed regarding *A Thousand Acres*, the tragic irony is made plain: agriculture—the ostensible goal of which is to feed and nourish—becomes perverted into an industry whose aims run at cross purposes with those of consumers. These texts recognize a deeper underlying perversity, however, in an industry that not only enforces artificial fertility among crops and livestock in order to maintain maximum productivity, but that literally destroys women by rendering them infertile, unable to produce a subsequent generation.

**The Meat of the Message**

So far I have explored two levels of interpretation for *My Year of Meats*. On the surface, the novel offers commentary on hidden evils of the industrial meat industry, and beneath this call for awareness, “sexual politics,” as Carol Adams calls them, emerge: parallels between cultural acceptance of the slaughter of animals and the abuse and objectification of women. I would now like to discuss a third, more metaphorical, level on which *My Year of Meats* may be read, as a text about reality and fiction, objectivity and fabrication, documentary and narrative. In addition to the novel’s overt thematic concerns, it also examines language as a critical tool, and the novel as a powerful text, for providing voices of dissent and critique. The “meat of the message” is thus both literal and metaphorical, as the novel examines meat and the messages surrounding it. Read in this way, the novel is a rumination on the relationship between truth and fiction. Though they are commonly considered opposites, *My Year of Meats* suggests that the relationship
between truth and fiction is much more complex, and that documentary and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, substance and essence are not easily bifurcated, raising questions pertinent to readers and consumers alike: What is “real” or “the truth”? And what are we really consuming?

With the introduction of My American Wife!, an infomercial, Ozeki acknowledges the tension between truth and fiction, and between reportage and persuasion: the “documentary” is actually a commercial for meat. This tension is evidenced in contemporary media, which is easily and frequently co-opted by corporate and commercial interests for their own (not simply informative) aims. In the novel, the Network insists that “the America conveyed was authentic,” but Jane explains that this authenticity was a fiction, for “of course it wasn’t real at all” (28). Readers can easily draw parallels between My American Wife! and the seemingly endless spate of contemporary “reality television” programs, such as The Real World, Survivor, American Idol, and Project Runway, in which “real people” (as opposed to actors) are the focus. However, the fundamental “authenticity” they promise is virtually absent because of the constructedness they entail. The unscripted “actual events” they depict are not so much “reality” as “unscripted drama,” for the conventions of television drama dictate the fabrication of a sufficiently dramatic plot.

Typical of television and movie production, the scenes of My American Wife! episodes are filmed out of sequence and then constructed into a linear narrative during the production process. During the filming of the show’s first episode, American wife Suzie Flowers’s husband reveals that he has had an affair, abruptly walks off screen, leaves the show—and his marriage. But the post-production editing of the episode neatly sews up the incident with an out-of-sequence scene, shot earlier, of Suzie and Fred kissing, suggesting that his admission of infidelity created nothing more than a brief spat. In reality, devastated Suzie hounds the
production office for a copy of the episode because “it’s all [she’s] got left” of her marriage (36). The picture-perfect “reality” of the Flowers presented by My American Wife! obscures their suddenly fractured marriage, and the transposition of these two scenes underscores the fictionality of true “unscripted drama.” In reality, the fictional drama of My American Wife! creates very real drama for Suzie Flowers, as the show prompts the failure of her marriage.

The featured meat of the Flowers episode, Coca-Cola Roast, is also a farce; the Coca-Cola bottle contains Pepsi, not Coca-Cola, because the local grocery had run out of Coca-Cola. It’s “not the real thing at all,” Jane admits to her office producer, Kenji (30). Her admission ironically alludes to the beverage company’s slogans, such as “It’s the real thing” and “Can’t beat the real thing.” Joichi, who forces Akiko to watch episodes, later insists that “It’s the truth. It’s a documentary program, isn’t it? What is there not to believe?” (128).

Jane claims that she could “do a much better job” and make the episodes “more real” if she was given more creative latitude, suggesting what the novel bears out: that “real” is often a matter of interpretation, and furthermore that texts play a part continually creating and commenting on reality (29). The novel’s focus on the production of a documentary commercial suggests that fiction and “reality,” or “truth,” are subjective, and that fiction, though a highly constructed form, can indeed convey and evoke reality—or cultural truths—quite effectively, perhaps as effectively as documentary film, which is typically considered nonfictional and therefore more truthful and accurate genre.

Jane’s mounting rage at the abuses of the beef industry culminates in her final My American Wife! shoot in which she goes straight to the source, featuring a family that owns and operates a typical large-scale feedlot operation. Jane’s work culminates in the production of her own documentary exposing conditions at a feedlot and a slaughterhouse, using stomach-churning
footage of the feedlot, the chemicals administered to the cattle, and the kill floor of the processing facility where cattle become beef. This documentary subsequently sparks a “feeding frenzy” among news media, and “in addition to the beef scandal, [BEEF-EX marketers] found themselves at the heart of a media controversy over the reliability in television and the power of corporate sponsorship to determine content and truth” (358).

At novel’s end, Jane admits:

I had started my year as a documentarian. I wanted to tell the truth, to effect change, to make a difference. And up to a point, I had succeeded: I got a small but critical piece of information about the corruption of meats in America out to the world…And maybe that is the most important part of the story, but the truth is so much more complex. (360).

Throughout the novel, Jane exposes the complex relationships between documentary and truth and between truth and fiction, highlighting the potential artificiality of documentary work and throwing a wrench into the notion that “seeing is believing.” Instead, what is true is often hidden from plain sight, and what is visible is often far from the truth. “Truth,” she says, “wasn’t stranger than fiction; it was fiction. Maybe sometimes you have to make things up, to tell truths that alter outcomes” (360). Truth, Ozeki seems to be saying through her protagonist Jane, must at times be conveyed by means that are not traditionally considered to be vehicles of truth. The novel suggests that “objective” media, like documentaries, are easily co-opted for persuasive ends and that therefore we must explore the political potential of fictional texts. The novel, after all, is a work of fiction, an imaginary creation. And fiction can be alternately defined as fabrication, even untruth.
It is likely no accident that the concerns of this fictional text can be united in the concept of fabrication. Livestock are slaughtered and parceled out into various cuts of meat at “fabrication facilities”; Jane and her film crew visit a meat fabricator in their search for the hidden truths of the meat industry. The word “fabrication” implies that meat is created or crafted, rather than simply being a product of an animal raised for human consumption. This image is not exactly the simple, unadorned, wholesome, and delicious image of meat that the beef industry is hoping to convey.

A variant meaning of fabricate is in fact “to fake or forge,” as in a document or signature. The deeper look into the industry offered by this novel reveals that both the meat and messages surrounding it are constructed, even fake, as the surface appearances obscure the hidden motives and methods. BEEF-EX’s message is fabricated, and as meat production occurs at fabrication facilities, the novel is a site of production of messages and truths. Considered from this perspective, perhaps it is no surprise that the novel departs from the convention of the single unbroken narrative. Though much of the narrative is written through the perspective of Jane Takagi-Little, the novel is actually comprised of a variety of texts, including emails, scripts, journal excerpts, articles, and even product warning labels. The play between the various texts exposes the novel itself as a textual construction or fabrication, contrasting My American Wife! (fiction disguised as truth) and paralleling Jane’s own creation of a truth-seeking documentaries that will expose the worst of the beef industry. This fiction that grapples with notions of truth acknowledges the influence of texts in our construction of “reality” from various angles.

Not only does the novel reveal the fabrication inherent within any notion of lived reality, but also within our broader acceptance of objective history. The novel interrogates accepted historical fact and draws a parallel between the abuse and objectification present in the novel and
the power and dominance of historical accepted narrative. This skepticism of history suggests the power of language in constructing official versions of history and the importance of deconstructing such narratives.

The historical text that prompts this skepticism in the novel is Frye’s *Grammar School Geography*, an actual geography text from the early twentieth century. Halfway through the novel, Jane pilfers the book, a relic from her childhood she calls “antique pornography,” from her hometown public library, because “it was the least [she] could do” to rescue the children of her hometown from such a flawed view of history and from the exceptionalist attitudes that persist in American culture. She sees the text as imbued with a spirit of “man versus life,” “[his] REASON, his industries and commerce, versus the entire natural world. This, to me, is the dirty secret hidden between the fraying covers” (154). The “dirty secret” of the American beef industry is thus traceable to texts like Frye’s *Geography*, which present ideologies of wholesale human dominance and entitlement as simple fact and potentially perpetuate them to following generations.

Ozeki also employs Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*, a journalistic recording of Japanese Heian court life, as an historical framing device that lends context and cultural weight to the novel’s concerns and methods. Shonagon provides Jane’s vocational motivation, for Shonagon was also a “great female documentarian” who wrote from the privileged perspective of an insider, going where few were able (14). “She inspired me to become a documentarian,” Jane explains, “to speak men’s Japanese, to be different. She is why I chose to make TV” (15). The novel imitates *The Pillow Book*, but it’s not just a source of characters’ inspiration; it also serves as a framing device or skeleton for the novel as a whole; its twelve chapters ostensibly record observations for each month over the course of the year, and each of Ozeki’s chapters is prefaced
by translated portions from Shonagon’s text, which suggest parallels and connections with Jane’s own observations.

Though at times the novel’s premise oozes absurdity, its author also takes great pains to imitate the realm of textual documentary or nonfiction. A bibliography follows the body of the novel, headed by an author’s note: “Although this book is a novel, and therefore purely a work of my imagination, as a lapsed documentarian I feel compelled to include a bibliography of the sources I have relied on to provoke these fictions” (363). But, as if reminding readers that this bibliography is not a part of Ozeki’s text, but the narrator’s, it is signed “J.T.-L.,” the narrator’s initials. The author’s note preceding the novel can also be assumed to be part of the text created by the documentarian narrator rather than Ozeki. Though the bibliography is part of a fictional work, it is not fabricated: the list of works by writers Peter Singer, Jim Mason, Jeremy Rifkin, and others are all actual texts, ostensibly offered so that interested readers may research the novel’s issues further if they so desire. A short list of notes, which follows the bibliography, also written from the perspective of Jane, offers dictionary definitions of capital, stock, and cattle, suggesting the intertwined nature of their definitions.

Explaining the difficulties of creating a documentary from the slaughterhouse footage, Jane admits in frustration that creating a narrative is the difficult part: “It’s good footage, but I can’t seem to edit it. It’s too complex, you know? I can’t find the story” (331). Jane explains that the documentary, unlike My American Wife!, was “a real documentary, the first I’d ever tried to make, about an incredibly disturbing subject” (334). Her admission signals the effort involved in constructing texts that forward “truth” as well as fiction, for the presence of narrative is necessary for both.
Documentary, and fiction, can do very important work, this novel suggests, to combat ignorance of important truths. Much like documentary, fiction—as the creation of a narrative—has the power to influence via storytelling. Reaching an audience is key, making them want to learn more, for “information about the toxicity in food is widely available, but people don’t want to hear it” (334). Jane explains that her ignorance of the beef industry may well be considered “less as a personal failing and more as a massive cultural trend, an example of doubling, of psychic numbing” (334). She works to make this ignorance less possible, or less likely, through the novel, and Ozeki thus uses the novel as a cultural catalyst, taking advantage of its potential to change people’s minds and their eating habits.

All Over Creation and the Power of Dissemination

Ozeki’s second novel, All Over Creation (2003), recalls the Biblical prodigal son with estranged daughter Yumi Fuller’s return to her parents’ Idaho potato farm after a twenty-five year absence. Her return, with a brood of variously-fathered children in tow, is an emotionally confused, guilt-driven attempt to care for her dying father and dementia-addled mother. Yumi’s personal struggles share focus with the looming specter of genetic engineering in the world of potato farming. Her father, Lloyd Fuller, is a retired potato farmer; he and his Japanese war bride Momoko run a small heirloom seed catalog business. A group of young activists who oppose genetically modified foods deem Lloyd a visionary and soon flock to the Fuller farm. The novel culminates in a standoff between the agricultural status quo—those who accept the economic necessity, if not the outright superiority, of genetically engineered crops—and a motley gang of critics, who fittingly call themselves the Seeds of Resistance. As an environmentally conscious novel, All Over Creation argues for the intrinsic value of biological and genetic diversity,
encouraging readers to take a hard look at “human mastery” in the modern-day agribusiness practices of monoculture farming and genetic engineering.

The ubiquity of monoculture farming is represented in the novel by the Burbank Russet potato, Luther Burbank’s triumphant contribution to American agriculture, the most commonly grown and consumed potato in the United States. We know the Russet Burbank potato as the ubiquitous baking potato, found in supermarkets and restaurants throughout the country and the primary potato used in baking and frying. Like most vegetables we now eat, the Russet Burbank potato is not a naturally-occurring vegetable but the product of horticultural improvement: it is a product of cloned reproduction, essentially, which is made possible chiefly through human control (agriculture), and this selective breeding has made it overwhelmingly dependent upon chemical inputs like pesticides for its continued success. Lloyd Fuller was at one time one of the most successful potato farmers in the county, but market forces have forced him out of potato farming and into near bankruptcy. Momoko Fuller’s seed garden provides a foil for the ubiquitous potato with its “wildly promiscuous” open-pollinated vegetables, fruits, and flowers. Daughter Yumi’s variously fathered children offer a human iteration of Momoko’s garden in this novel that shuns sameness in favor of diversity. The novel argues that genetic diversity in plant and human life is intrinsically beneficial, thus casting the efforts of agribusiness to “play God” as all the more menacing.

*All Over Creation* picks up where *My Year of Meats* leaves off by taking on the other realm of contemporary agriculture in the U.S.: the realm of plants. Susan McHugh labels *All Over Creation* a “transgenic plant fiction,” explaining that genetic modification of plants is “even more conspicuously absent than animal slaughter in contemporary American literature and popular culture” (33). The novel’s *Bacillus thuringiensis* version of the Russet Burbank potato, a
close parallel to the relatively brief history of Monsanto’s NewLeaf potato, McHugh claims, offers a valuable glimpse into the “intersections of food production and human reproduction” and “the far more pervasive dangers of homogeneity to culture and agriculture (27, 34).

With its focus on the reproduction of living things as well as ideas, *All Over Creation* seems to echo Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* in its thematic focus on dissemination. But Ozeki’s novel keeps more theoretical concerns in mind, instead advocating the decentralization of information by making connections between genetic diversity and the diversity of information sources. Through this examination of dissemination, agriculture is examined in its broadest sense, and monoculture and large scale agriculture are cast as detrimental in theory and practice.

If *My Year of Meats* ruminates upon how texts construct truth—the meat of the message, as it were—*All Over Creation*, most broadly conceived, deals with the dissemination of truths and information. Most literally, the novel revolves around dissemination in a biological sense—the dissemination of seeds’ genetic information, and the human impact on genetic diversity through genetic engineering. But dissemination is also explored more broadly, in terms of broadcasting or dispersal, particularly of information. As we now find ourselves in what many have labeled the Information Age, this novel’s focus is timely and apt.

The novel’s topical focus is timely, for public skepticism has mounted over the potential human health risks of transgenic foods. Though agriculture is, as Richard Manning puts it, “nothing but a determined effort to keep nature from taking its course,” genetic engineering of crop seed and plants heightens the degree to which humans intervene in natural processes (*Grassland* 268).
This concern is evidenced in public skepticism surrounding Monsanto’s Roundup Ready crop seed upon its introduction to the marketplace. This seed enables no-till crop planting, which on the surface is a good thing—less tilling means less topsoil loss, which in turn means better soil composition, or healthier soil. However, Roundup Ready seed enables this exclusively through applications of Monsanto’s Roundup herbicide (glyphosphate) to keep weed growth among crops minimal. Of course, this herbicide would just as easily kill the crop itself if the crop seed were not altered genetically to resist the herbicide. Roundup Ready crops are designed to withstand Roundup applications while all other surrounding plants succumb to the herbicide. Though glyphosphate is less toxic than other standard herbicides, it is still toxic to humans, and is the most common cause of illness among farm workers. Furthermore, its use undermines the health of the soil itself and poses a potential health risk to those who eventually consume the produce.

The public’s concern with genetically modified crops, such as Roundup Ready seed, is a fear of an invisible menace. These genetically modified food items aren’t shrouded by elaborate packaging, and we purchase them with a what-you-see-is-what-you-get mentality. But as Ozeki suggests, this isn’t the case at all; the dissemination of food also entails the dispersal of numerous unpalatable chemicals and substances too. Our food may contain residues, contaminants, or genetic modification, and we’re usually none the wiser, for regulations do not require any disclosure on the part of farmers or supermarkets.

Human meddling with plant genetics is nothing new, to be sure. Horticulture is a history of cross-breeding, hybridization, and the improvement of food crops for qualities like taste, transportability, pest resistance, size, uniformity, and color. Throughout the novel, recurrent references to Luther Burbank and his *Harvest of the Years* remind readers of his work in
primitive cloning (56-57). Potatoes are heterozygous, meaning that ensuring a consistent crop is possible only through planting cuts or sets, not seeds. Gardeners plant corn, carrots, beans, and other vegetables from seed; pieces from a previous year’s potatoes are planted, which then germinate the next crop of potatoes. Potatoes’ “complex array of chromosomes” mean that reliable, predictable cultivation requires vegetative propagation (Manning Against 77). And homogeneity, while it ensures uniformity, also invites trouble; Richard Manning explains that “each new crop is a clone of the last. If you had the sensibilities of a pathogen, you would see enormous opportunities in this” (77). Monoculture is thus a blessing and a curse. It allows for uniformity, consistency, and volume—in short, agricultural efficiency—but it also increases plants’ vulnerability to a whole host of threats, such as environmental shifts, pest infestations, and blights.

Monoculture, the exclusive planting of one type of plant, is the chief planting method of contemporary agriculture. Picture a vast field of corn or soybeans or sunflowers stretching to the horizon; that’s monoculture. Monoculture, proponents argue, is the primary reason that American agriculture has been the success that it has, enabling economies of scale through efficiency and standardization. But All Over Creation counters this adherence to monoculture and the recent embrace of genetic technology in agriculture by embracing genetic variety and biotic diversity. The Fullers’ farm, where the novel takes place, has slowly shifted from a vast monoculture potato farm to a small mail-order seed business that has grown from Momoko Fuller’s sprawling seed garden, characterized by its profusion of diversity, as opposed to her husband Lloyd’s monoculture russet potatoes (111). The seed garden features heirloom fruits, vegetables, and flowers, many of which have nearly been lost as fewer varieties, and hybrid varieties, have gained acceptance among growers. Unlike the potatoes, which are essentially
genetic clones of the previous generation of potatoes, the seeds from Momoko’s garden are rather genetically diverse offspring. The squash in particular are “wildly promiscuous,” so much so that blossoms are taped shut and carefully pollinated by hand in order to prevent cross-fertilization. The shift in enterprise, from potato farming to seed farming, came about as the Fullers’ potato farm became clearly unprofitable, speaking to the difficulties facing contemporary farmers and positing that a shift away from monoculture may be a solution.

The genetic engineering that is the target of *All Over Creation* is largely an extension of monoculture agriculture that involves the alteration of plants’ genetic composition. Two fundamental ways in which genetic engineering has been employed are through pesticide incorporation and terminator technology. Bt potatoes (called NuLife potatoes in the novel) produce their own pesticide, Bacillus thuringiensis, a natural microorganism found in soil, in every cell of the plant, even in the potato itself (98-99, 271). This improves plants’ resistance to pests—a monoculture environment makes them highly susceptible—but it also means that this toxin is eventually ingested by the humans who consume the potatoes. The potato is officially categorized as a pesticide, not as a plant or vegetable. Geek, a software engineer-turned-activist and the novel’s most vocal source of technical information, explains the use of Bt in this way is potentially hazardous: “Organic farmers use it topically, and very sparingly, and that’s the point. These are very high concentrations. . .Do we know what happens to people who ingest that much?” (271). In other words, it may be an advantageous method of pest management for farmers, but its potential harm to consumers is still not known. “Natural,” in other words, is not synonymous with “safe,” and what’s best for farmers in terms of increasing crop yields and profits is not necessarily best for consumer health.
The other method of genetic engineering explored in the novel is “terminator technology,” which prevents farmers from saving seeds for next year’s planting. The agricultural version of planned obsolescence, terminator technology means a plant destroys its own embryo and thus ensures only one generation of plant life. This, in turn, ensures that farmers must purchase seed to plant each year, which makes them much more financially dependent upon seed companies. Geek explains terminator technology as an effort “to protect the corporation’s intellectual property rights over the plant” (266). The seed is thus not only potential food, but intellectual property, and its commodity status lies in the technology that created it. The potential of this technology is not lost on him; the fear is not only of its development, but its dissemination. It “crosses the line between genius and insanity,” he laments. “Think what could happen if that gene escapes” (266).

Ozeki explains these matters largely through characters’ dialogue, much of which comes relayed through the Seeds of Resistance, a scruffy group of dissident youth who traverse the country in a biofueled motor home dubbed “Spudnik.” The Seeds’ activist efforts culminate in cartoonish stunts that humorously call attention to the very real contemporary controversy over genetically engineered foods. The outrageousness of the Seeds’ actions mirrors the absurdity of the very real agricultural methods they target, and though they take their work seriously, they provide the novel’s comic relief and prevent its message from becoming overly didactic.

At a protest staged in a supermarket, one Seed dresses as Mr. Potato Head, inciting fear among shoppers with simple facts broadcast via the supermarket’s commandeered public address system: “As of 1997 over thirty genetically engineered crops were approved by the U.S. government for sale, including potatoes that are genetically spliced with a bacterial pesticide and tomatoes crossed with fish genes to increase their resistance to cold” and “Approximately sixty
to seventy percent of processed foods now contain some form of genetically modified corn or soy” (92). As shoppers nervously scan their carts for suspicious items, readers likely list their own grocery store purchases with a bit of concern.

In another instance Geek, costumed as Daisy the Dairy Cow, approaches Yumi as she is collecting her children from school. The flyer, which he “dug [from] a woven basket that hung on his foreleg,” is later read to Yumi by her son Phoenix, who finds the information “so disgusting!”: “It’s this stuff called bovine growth hormone, and they shoot up cows with it” (134). Throughout the novel this frenetic band of young activists issues a call for awareness and resistance among their fellow citizens; as they do so, their message reaches readers though the Seeds’ methods are ridiculous.

Despite the humor they provide, the Seeds allow Ozeki to explore a theoretical and complex concern with the dissemination and control of information. “Spreading the word” is the Seeds’ mission and their primary method of activism. They stage events in supermarkets, plaster stickers throughout supermarkets’ frozen foods warning customers of the possible presence of genetically modified contents, and distribute leaflets in public places. Their website rails against agribusiness corporations, detailing their mission as well as charting their travels around the country. In doing so, the Seeds continually create and rely upon a network of likeminded people. During the Seeds’ brief sojourn to San Francisco, Frankie marvels that his fellow activists “knew everyone, and all these people [at a communal house in Oakland] were their friends” (255). The theoretical importance of the notion of dissemination is not lost among all characters, as Geek explains that “seeds are like language,” and that the genetic code is a “complex set of instructions” which “allows the plant to create its own food, which makes it grow” (124).
Fear of dissemination of transgenic seeds and foods, which pose a threat to traditional, more “natural” agriculture, is what drives much of the novel, but dissemination is also the *modus operandi* of the Seeds. The Seeds see themselves as “a network of cells. . .we’re part of the underground. . . .The Spudnik’s one of the links, keeping people connected, you know? Keeping information and energy flowing, but most of all working on outreach. It’s all about dissemination” (257). The Seeds, like the Fullers’ seed business and the open-pollinated heirloom plants themselves, continue and flourish by their ability to travel throughout the country, network with likeminded people, and spread their message of resisting technofoods and embracing a nature more conventionally defined. When they return to the Fuller farm after a sojourn in San Francisco, they are described as having “colonized the entire downstairs” of the Fullers’ home (281).

The Seeds’ actions reveal a crucial parallel between the dissemination of media and of genetic information that is not, at first glance, readily apparent. Both, in fact, are vehicles of information, and the novel suggests that stifling the flow of either media or genetic information is inherently problematical. Because language, in its broadest sense, conveys information, texts such as novels serve as vehicles of information. Thus the novel itself takes part in this dissemination. *Geek* takes this parallel a step farther, indirectly suggesting the educative potential of texts in an explanation of plant genetics and the mutualism between human and plant that agriculture is predicated upon:

Each one [seed] is a complex software program, and so are we. And the really wild part is, we’re all interactive! We can all *learn*, Frankie, and that’s the marvel! The pea trains the farmer, and the farmer trains the pea. The pea has learned to taste sweet, so that the farmer will plant more of it. Vegetables are like
a genetic map, unfolding through time, tracing the paths that human appetites and

desires have taken throughout our evolution.” (124)

He describes the specter of genetic engineering as “changing the semantics, the meaning of life
itself” (124). Later, when describing the wealth of genetic information contained in the Fullers’
seed operation, he alludes to Yumi’s occupation as a college literature professor, describing the
collection of seeds as “a library containing the genetic information of hundreds, maybe

thousands of seeds—rare fruits and flowers and vegetables, heritage breeds many of them, and
lots of exotics. These seeds embody the fruitful collaboration between nature and humankind, the
history of our race and our migrations. Talk about narrative!” (162). Seeds hold the potential of
genetic and biological diversity, and understanding them as texts or information casts genetic
engineering as a rewriting of genetic history, not merely an addition to historical record but an
erasure of natural genetic variety.

But the difference between texts and seeds is still considerable. Yumi absorbs this, soon
afterward explaining to readers that “Every seed has a story, encrypted in a narrative line that
stretches back for thousands of years” (171). But the seed offers a different kind of narrative.

“Book information,” she explains, “is relevant only to human beings. It’s expendable, really. As
someone who has to teach for a living, I shouldn’t be saying this, but the planet can do quite well
without books” (171). Seeds, on the other hand, “contain the information necessary to perform
the most essential of all alchemies,” which is to create food and oxygen for the rest of us,
allowing life to continue (171).

As monoculture and genetic control are the target of All Over Creation’s sociopolitical
focus, the novel’s characters aptly exude diversity, variety, and a “wildly heterozygous” nature
that is generally celebrated. Lloyd’s wife Momoko Fuller is his World War II Japanese war
bride, and their daughter Yumi, a cultural hybrid, stands out in the homogeneous town of Liberty Falls, Idaho, where her “exotic” appearance meant that she was perpetually viewed as a cultural outsider, regularly cast as the Native American in her school’s annual Thanksgiving play. Her three children, each the product of a different relationship, are also “wildly heterozygous,” like her mother Momoko’s garden, and suggest that Yumi “spread her seed” across the country, mimicking her mother’s seed garden as opposed to her father’s uniform potato fields. Continuing the metaphor, Yumi has made her home in Hawaii, the most tropical and exotic state in the nation, where the growing season is long and diverse flora and fauna flourish.

Diversity and exoticism are also suggested by the Seeds of Resistance, who likewise lack physical and ideological uniformity. Though united around the common cause of modern foodways, the Seeds—Lilith, Y, Geek, Charmey, and Frankie—exhibit fundamental differences. Whereas Geek’s dialogues suggest disgust with contemporary agriculture on a broad ideological level, young Frankie joins the group simply because he enjoys the thrill of participating in their protests. Lilith considers the issue from a feminist perspective, and Charmey possesses a more practical, domestic concern with the importance of cooking and eating healthy, tasty food and fostering a sense of family. The variety and diversity of opinions among them are cast as healthy and beneficial; nonconformity is accepted and fostered, rather than glossed over or stamped out.

Despite the novel’s unwavering derision of the “dark side” of agriculture, agribusiness is not simply demonized, which saves the novel from ideological simplicity. Conventional large-scale farming is given a human face in Cass and Will Quinn, who have purchased the Fuller farm and will soon take full possession of it. Cass Quinn was Yumi’s childhood friend and neighbor; she and her husband Will, who are second-generation potato farmers, struggle with keeping the farm viable. Their difficulties suggest that farming is not simply an either-or proposition of
pesticides or no pesticides. The Quinns’ efforts suggest that uncritical use of pesticides, herbicides, and other “inputs” is a risky practice at best, but in the interests of the economic viability of the family farm, these methods cannot simply be rejected outright. Farmers like the Quinns are caught between agribusiness and its detractors, and their financial dependence upon farming brings practical concerns to bear in what remains a heated ideological battle.

That information should be decentralized and disseminated is suggested formally by the novel’s multiplicity of points of view. Though this novel offers sufficient continuity and narrative unity so as not to alienate its readers expecting a conventional novel, various points of view prevent a single narrator from dominating the text. This collective narration suggests the novel’s espousal of decentralization as a formal element. Most sections are written from a third-person point of view, alternately privileging the perspective of one of the main characters. The fact that no single narrative stance dominates speaks to the notion that narration—a form of power in which information is interpreted and ordered according to a particular version of truth—can function as a collective effort.

Decentralized dissemination of information also carries a critique of the notion of objective history and praises collective authorship. Elliot Rhodes (whose comical abbreviation, E. Rhodes, is not missed by the Seeds), who was Yumi’s young and seductive junior high history teacher, admits to the adult Yumi: “What you think of as history is just someone’s spin of a set of events. It’s only a matter of who’s more skillful at getting his version on the public record” (226). Both Yumi and Elliot grapple with the history they share—decades ago, Elliot had seduced fourteen-year-old Yumi, who became pregnant; Elliot arranged for her back-alley abortion. Their uncanny reunion decades later occurs because Elliot now represents the public relations firm promoting Cynaco’s NuLife potato. Their memories of the brief relationship
(which was the cause of Yumi’s running away from home and never returning) differ markedly; Cass’s memories of the events provide yet another version.

As Yumi’s childhood history teacher and now an agribusiness spin doctor, Elliot and his narrative presence prompt reflection on how history is created, recorded, and remembered. Yumi’s adolescent infatuation with him, which is rekindled upon their reunion decades later, fades as she realizes that even history teachers have ulterior motives: what brought Elliot to Power County, Idaho, years ago wasn’t a belief in the importance of teaching history but his desire to avoid the Vietnam draft. Thus history is not static and objective, but is largely dependent upon who wields power and influence, and what their motives are. Elliot’s mission as a public relations person is to promote Cynaco’s NuLife Potato line through questionable tactics; a “proactive management strategy” is intended to quash negative media coverage and any public dissent over genetically engineered crops (84, 326).

The power of public relations and media coverage is evidenced when the tables turn: Elliot is foiled by an article (written by a former lover) exposing Cynaco’s underhanded methods of spinning media attention in its favor, an article that fuels an even angrier outcry over the NuLife line. Thus the novel provides commentary on the power of texts in the constant competition over the drafting of history through the simple recording of events as they occur. Even “news,” the author suggests, is subject to spin; the media shape, rather than simply record, reality. And the novel, through the Seeds, suggests that a key way of combating the spin of those interests who hold the most power (in this case, genetic technology proponents) is dissemination and decentralization of media. Textual diversity is crucial, so that no one information source wields undue influence. Cynaco, represented by Elliot Rhodes, seeks to control public sentiment regarding NuLife potatoes by snuffing out public criticism and casting promotional information
as “news.” This tactic backfires when Cynaco’s methods are exposed by an investigative journalist—one of Elliot’s former girlfriends. Elliot’s insistence late in the novel that he “didn’t mean for things to turn out this way” suggests the lack of control inherent in the dissemination of media, as information moves in mysterious ways once it leaves the possession of its creators (304).

By novel’s end, the notion of dissemination is refigured in the decentralization of characters and information in a variety of ways. The Fuller family, which owned one of the largest farms in Power County during Yumi’s childhood, is now landless as the Quinns assume ownership of the farm. Lloyd’s death prompts Yumi to return to Hawaii with her three children as well as her mother. Yumi will ostensibly continue her work as a realtor, essentially disseminating real estate, facilitating the sale and purchase of homes (but likely not owning one). The Fullers are not only not homeowners; they are in a sense disseminated, returning to Hawaii, a remote location distant from the nation’s mainland.

Lloyd and Momoko’s seed business has become decentralized too; the Seeds reinvent Fuller Seeds as part of their “New Garden of Earthly Delights,” which is part seed-sharing network, part heirloom seed business. The internet is a “perfect vehicle for dissemination,” and management of the site can be performed remotely (354). Numerous gardeners throughout the country pledge to contribute seeds saved from their selected varieties of plants, thus sharing the responsibility of disseminating the seeds to customers. The website provides the means for networking. At novel’s end, Yumi commits to running the website, and her friend Cass will distribute the seeds that remain at the Idaho farm (413).

Dissemination is not simply beneficial, however; it also holds the potential for great harm, which becomes clear late in the novel. The Spudnik explodes immediately following
Lloyd’s funeral, and the cause is never determined, whether “an accident, random and tragic,” or a “rogue element.” Charmey, who was napping inside, is killed, essentially obliterated—virtually no remains are found. Rodney Skeele, a Pinkerton spy employed by Elliot, is the likely “rogue element” responsible for the explosion, for the Seeds’ “Garden of Earthly Delights,” a website offering ecofeminist-themed pornography, incites the anger of the community’s Tri-County Interfaith League of Family Values, including Skeele. Narrating these events as they unfold, Yumi explains, “Geek would say that when you release an agent, randomly and carelessly, into an environment, it follows that all hell breaks loose, but even Geek was blindsided. ‘I expected a fallout,’ he said, broken and bewildered. ‘Just not like this’” (375). Of course “releasing an agent” refers to many things at once—Skeele the Pinkerton spy, but also the information contained on the Seeds’ website, as well as the genetically modified potatoes themselves. Geek’s assessment of the tragedy cannot help but provide comic relief, as the “fallout” of course is literal: the little debris remaining from the Spudnik was sent airborne and rained down upon the surrounding area.

Though at times the novel smacks of farce and comedy—the Seeds’ pilgrimage to Lloyd Fuller, whom they cast as an undiscovered guru, is a case in point—the overall message of All Over Creation is serious and insightful, dispelling the notion that the issue-focused novel must inevitably suffer for its cause. The novel’s acknowledgement of the importance of dissemination of information across a wide range of spheres—informational, agricultural, human, and textual—emphasizes networks, or an “interconnected wheel of life,” that is a tenet of ecological thinking. Through the exploration of genetically modified food and agriculture, All Over Creation simultaneously embraces tradition and continuity (in terms of biological diversity and the promotion of life) as well as the possibilities of technological innovations: the power of the
media, particularly the internet, remains central. The intersection of the two provides the tension of the narrative: the potential of humans to modify the natural order. In this respect, the novel’s focus is akin to that of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* in its optimistic celebration of unadulterated natural processes and human attunement to them. But *All Over Creation* illustrates a particular savvy in its compelling theoretical connections between the natural and the technological world, blurring the boundaries in order to suggest to readers that neither is wholly good nor wholly bad. This novel suggests a much more theoretical dynamic between humans and nature than does Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*, for Ozeki places greater emphasis on the power of texts and the media to shape history, to inform readers, and to effect change.

In *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, Ozeki withholds her judgment of American consumers, but her work suggests that at least weaving the controversies surrounding American beef and genetically engineered foods into her novels may help spark awareness and develop public opinion among a relatively uninformed audience. In both novels she casts a critical gaze upon the media power held by corporate interests, who hold sway and can control what is disseminated to audiences and consumers. For both meat and genetically engineered vegetables, producers are not required to divulge the history of the food—the hormones, genetic alterations, pesticides, fertilizers, or other additives employed. Food origins are largely shrouded in mystery; sometimes a country or state of origin is identified, but this information is almost *never* divulged in the case of meat. The novel, according to Ozeki, is a means of social commentary and of educating readers. I would argue that readers are more likely to take these issues seriously because of the creative way in which Ozeki herself handles them. The metaphorical and theoretical connections she draws between meat, power, and truthful discourse, and between agriculture, dissemination, and information networks suggest an understanding of the profundity
of these issues and their mammoth implications for the ways humans survive and thrive in this
globalizing, technology-intensive world.

Ozeki’s two novels, along with the previous works by Smiley, Clarke, Rush, and
Kingsolver, collectively assert that fictional texts can serve “documentary” aims, educating
readers through narrative, and that fiction can often render the intricacies of pressing cultural
issues more vividly and powerfully than popular news media. These novels are as much about
the capabilities of texts and information, and the networks and systems they create, as they are
about the world beyond the page and the earth beneath our feet. Though recent writers of
nonfiction have been lamenting the ills of our contemporary foodways, arguing for new policies
and new ways of thinking about eating, my analysis shows that to these fiction writers, such
concerns are hardly new. With the exception of Kingsolver’s memoir Animal, Vegetable,
Miracle, these texts refrain from offering solutions, instead focusing their energies on teasing out
the complexities of food systems that remain largely invisible to the American public.

As these novels help readers notice foodways that were previously invisible, their
discussions of food consumption open avenues for considering the work that texts, particularly
novels, perform in responding to and shaping our lived realities. Their interrogation of themes
such as systems and layers, consumption, refinement, and dissemination reveal profound
connections between the world of creative texts and the world of immediate environmental
consequence. The deep parallels that can be traced in each text, between the work of the novel
and the world beyond the novel, beg for consideration by contemporary ecocritics, who are more
likely to acknowledge the impossibility of keeping the natural world cordoned off from the
human realm. Every food choice, every act of consumption, these novels suggest, incorporates us
into vast and intricate networks, through which the human-nature relationship is constantly
renegotiated. This relationship, these texts suggest, must be interrogated, just as relationships shaped by race, gender, economy, and historical narrative have already been taken up by literary scholars.

As Lawrence Buell observes of texts that deal with toxic environments, “the nature that toxic discourse recognizes as the physical environment humans inhabit is *not* a holistic spiritual or biotic economy but a network or networks within which, on the one hand, humans are biotically imbricated (like it or not), and within which, on the other hand, first nature has been greatly modified (like it or not) by *techne*” (45). Though Buell is not discussing agricultural landscapes, his argument for an expanded conception of nature applies to these novels, for they simultaneously underscore the human ability to effect change as well as humanity’s inevitable biological nature. And, as suggested by the texts I have discussed here, novelists have recognized the novel as a technology well-suited for the exploration of such a vast environmental concern as our contemporary foodways, which are global in scope as well as intensely individual and personal. The novel affords readers a sense of depth and intimacy lacking in typical news media, and also allows theoretical interrogations, such as the reevaluation of accepted histories, to flourish. Rather than relegating such fiction as activism, I hold that such novels not only demonstrate the novel’s enduring formal relevance in the “sound byte” age, but that they challenge both popular and literary audiences to reconsider the aims and importance of imaginative thought in the face of such pressing cultural questions as what we are fed, by whom, and at what cost.


Stephenson, Anne. “Characters Flit All Over Creation.” Book review. USA Today 1 May 2003: 5D.


