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The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

by Suzanne W. Jones

In your father's day all the farmers around here were doing fine. Now they have to work night shifts at the Kmart to keep up their mortgages. Why is that? They work just as hard as their parents did, and they're on the same land, so what's wrong?

—Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*

At the same time some southern studies scholars are positioning the U.S. South in a larger cultural, historic, and economic region that encompasses the Caribbean and Latin America, some southern environmentalist writers, such as long-time essayist and novelist Wendell Berry and activist-turned-memoirist Janisse Ray, are finding a pressing need to focus on smaller bioregions and the locatedness of the human subject.¹ These writers believe that agribusiness and consumer ignorance are driving small farmers out of business and that clear-cutting timber and farming practices dependent on chemicals are threatening local ecosystems.² Best-selling novelist Barbara Kingsolver has joined their ranks. With her most recent novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000), Kingsolver returns to her home region and her academic roots to explore both the crucial ecological issues that most interest the South's environmentalist writers and some of the transnational questions that currently preoccupy literary critics. Setting her novel in southern Appalachia,³ where she grew up and where she now owns a cabin, she fictionalizes problems that she has

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since published impassioned essays⁴ about: failing family farms, fragmented communities, ecosystems out of balance, and rural-urban, insider-outsider tensions.

In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver's academic training in evolutionary biology and ecology, her abiding concern for community and family, and her intimate knowledge of a particular place combine to produce no less than a blueprint for saving the small family farm and for restoring ecological balance in a southern Appalachian bioregion that is struggling to survive. Kingsolver, who is at the height of her verbal powers in this novel, employs elaborate Darwinian conceits to link human and natural worlds, both to show how they are connected and how they are similar in needing variety to sustain the health of a complex interdependent ecosystem. Near the end of the novel, Kingsolver places an important Darwinian principle in the mouth of the organic apple grower, Nannie Rawley: "There is nothing so important as having variety. That's how life can still go on when the world changes" (390). And the world of southern Appalachia has changed dramatically. The majestic chestnut trees that once provided a livelihood for some and shelter for many have succumbed to an Asian fungal blight, farming can no longer be relied on to support a family, rural people commute long hours to work in factories or to supplement meager farm income, and their children know little about the ecosystem they inhabit.

Kingsolver thinks of place in much the same way as Arif Dirlik, who has argued that to focus on the groundedness of places through ecology and topography is "not to return to some kind of geographic determinism or bounded notion of place" or to posit an "immutable fixity." For Dirlik, place is the "location," "where the social and the natural meet, where the production of nature by the social is not clearly distinguishable from the production of the social by the natural" (18). He argues that "[a] place suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extralocal, all the way to the global" (22). As Darwin pointed out, difference becomes an important resource for survival. In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver employs non-native human and animal species to suggest solutions to local economic and ecological problems in southern Appalachia.

At the same time Kingsolver reveals how introducing exotic species into the southern landscape can harm the nonhuman ecosystem, she demonstrates that not all exotics are necessarily invasive—thereby providing biological background for the human social parallel that she sets up. Certainly kudzu, which has no natural enemy in the South, and the

Asian fungus that has killed off the American chestnut are damaging, invasive species. But some exotic species, such as Asian daylilies, which escaped from flower gardens, now beautify the roadside without taking over the fields and pastures. Other non-native species such as the Chinese chestnut have been imported on purpose by retired agriculture teacher Garnett Walker because their resistance to fungus may prove beneficial in breeding a blight-resistant American chestnut hybrid. To give one more prominent example, forest ranger and wildlife ecologist Deanna Wolfe does not judge coyotes, which are migrating to southern Appalachia, “invasive” as most readers might expect, because her research shows that coyotes will help restore the imbalance in the ecosystem caused by the loss of larger predators (wolves and mountain lions) in this habitat.⁵ With such examples from the natural world, Kingsolver breaks down simplistic oppositions between natives and non-natives, preparing readers to see the beneficial nature of the human exotic that she introduces in the character of Lusa Maluf Landowski, an urban intellectual with ancestral roots in Poland and Palestine and a family religious heritage of Judaism and Islam.

Rural Appalachia is wary of variety but not totally averse to change. Kingsolver ironically points out that southern Appalachia suffers as much because of the agricultural changes farmers have embraced as because of their resistance to change. Insecticides that the local U.S. Agricultural Extension Service has promoted to protect cash crops such as tobacco are harming other crops, killing the beneficial pollinators so necessary to organic orchard growers like Nannie Rawley. The high cost of chemical herbicides and insecticides has driven many farmers out of business, and more than a few inhabitants of the fictional town Egg Fork have succumbed to cancer. Kingsolver suggests that imbalances in the natural environment caused by human ignorance are creating complex environmental problems that few understand. She uses her main female characters—Nannie, Lusa, and Deanna—to teach these lessons, both to her readers and to the locals, emphasizing the need for an environmental ethic of care to bring balance to the ecosystem and prosperity to local farmers.⁶

The Widener family farm is bordering on extinction. The farm can no longer support the extended family because the drop in governmental price supports has diminished tobacco’s profitability. But Cole Widener, the only family member willing to experiment with new crops, has not found a legal crop more profitable than tobacco. His experiment with growing such vegetables as cucumbers and bell peppers for an

urban population fails because nearby markets are not large enough to make perishable vegetables maturing at the same time an economically viable alternative. When Cole learns of a potato-chip factory in Knoxville, he hopes that potatoes, which store and ship almost as well as tobacco, might become his cash crop, but the variety that grows best in his soil has too much sugar to make good potato chips. So Cole falls back on tobacco, but he must supplement his farm income by hauling grain for the agricultural conglomerate, Southern States. Wendell Berry would say that Cole's agricultural practices have failed because he has not come up with "good local solutions to local problems" (*Citizenship Papers*, 159). And yet Cole is far from the stereotypical provincial farmer. Hoping to find ways to improve his agricultural practices and thus keep the family farm solvent, he enrolls in a workshop in integrated pest management at the University of Kentucky, which is where he meets Lusa.

Kingsolver shows the importance, indeed the necessity, of human variety in an ecosystem when Lusa takes over the farm after Cole's death in a hauling accident. Because Lusa is a "religious mongrel" (438) with a knowledge of Judaism and Islam that the locals do not possess, she knows that the holy days of these religions will converge during her first year of farming and create a demand for goats, necessary for the religious celebrations. Conscious too of the health risks associated with tobacco, she decides not to plant tobacco but to raise goats and sell them to a cousin in New York. To her surprise and that of the Widener family, she succeeds. And at the same time she provides a good solution to another local problem, for the county is overrun with unwanted goats that the children have raised for a 4-H project.

But this happy ending is neither a final solution to the vicissitudes of small family farms nor a conclusion facily produced. Following Wendell Berry's rule of thumb, Kingsolver has Lusa recognize that "good" farming practices will always require flexibility, or the "ability to adapt to local conditions and needs."⁷ Lusa is not so naïve as to think that goats can become her sole cash crop; she knows that next year "she might raise no goats at all, depending on the calendar" (438). Instead she contemplates growing grass seed to take advantage of the fact that the U.S. government, in trying to rectify an ecological mistake, has begun to pay people to plant native bluestem grasses in place of the previously championed non-native fescue, which has destroyed the habitat of native birds such as the bobwhite. Kingsolver has Lusa think like a bioregionalist, rather than an agri-industrialist, and in so doing highlights current problems in agribusiness practices, which ignore bioregional differences

in favor of supposed universal solutions. The novel illustrates how some of the worst so-called “solutions” to agricultural problems, such as the use of broad-spectrum insecticides, have been dispensed by the county Agricultural Extension Service agents with the imprimatur of the U.S. government.

As Martyn Bone has pointed out, Kingsolver’s agrarianism is not the subsistence farming praised by the *I’ll Take my Stand* Agrarians, nor is Egg Fork’s failing agricultural community emblematic of “the pastoral idea of farmers at one with Nature” (246). Bone argues that the farming advocated in this novel “is not just post-Agrarian or even postsouthern: it is transnational” (248). Certainly Bone is right that this novel takes an important transnational turn with Lusa’s immigrant background and Nannie Rawley’s Mexican migrant apple pickers. Kingsolver’s agrarianism does not come with a capital “A.” At the same time, however, although Kingsolver’s view of present and past farming practices is more complex and nuanced than that of the Agrarians, it shares some characteristics. As she says in her foreword to Norman Wirzba’s *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, “the decision to attend to the health of one’s habitat and food chain is a spiritual choice. It’s also a political choice, a scientific one, a personal and convivial one. It’s not a choice between living in the country or the town; it is about understanding that every one of us, at the level of our cells and respiration, lives in the country and is thus obliged to be mindful of the distance between ourselves and our sustenance” (xvii). In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver certainly advocates growing subsistence crops along side cash crops. Lusa cans and freezes organic fruits and vegetables from her large garden in order to avoid shopping at Kroger, and she patiently explains to her niece Crys why purchasing less flavorful and healthful foods from a supermarket chain is problematic—they come from who-knows-where and are grown under who-knows-what conditions. The community of Egg Fork has not yet become a transnational space, with big box stores that have made the town’s architecture placeless and have driven all the local merchants out of business. Indeed the Amish farmers’ market is thriving because of their much sought-after homemade baked goods as well as their pesticide-free produce and that of invited organic growers like Nannie Rawley.

But Kingsolver suggests that the Wideners’ dependence on Kroger has diminished the quality of their food and changed the nature of their relationship with the land. Crys and her brother are more closely connected to the worlds they see on television than to their own habitat, a

point Kingsolver makes when Crys cannot identify the butterflies that captivate her. This single example cannot support the spiritual and ideological weight that Lusa attributes to it. But Kingsolver clearly shows throughout the novel that not understanding the interconnections between the natural and the human world damages the ecosystem, as Nannie's argument with Garnett about broad-spectrum insecticides and Deanna's argument with western bounty hunter Eddie Bondo about coyotes demonstrate. In other words, although these farmers are not living a pastoral ideal, Kingsolver thinks they could and should be trying, for the good of themselves and their ecosystem.

Thus Barbara Kingsolver's larger point is as much ecological as it is agricultural. She uses principles of ecology to question and to illuminate human behavior, and not just the Widener family's actions but Lusa's own. To survive and prosper, this rural farming community, which has become an endangered species, needs more information about the interconnectedness of their world. At the same time Lusa, whom the locals view as the "outsider," needs to understand the properties of non-native species, like herself, in order to live in happy relation to the natives. If the insiders, like Garnett Walker and the extended Widener family, have identified Lusa as the Other because of her non-Christian background, her bookish ways (she openly reads Darwin for pleasure), her urban roots, and her feminist practices (she does not change her name when she marries), she too has stereotyped and distanced herself from them because of their accent, their rural folkways, and their lack of formal education. This stereotypical response on both sides causes problems in Lusa and Cole's marriage.

Philosopher Norman Wirzba suggests that a world view which has perceived soils, waterways, and forests as "simply resources to feed cultural ambition" has led to "an animosity between the country and the city, each side claiming for itself moral purity or human excellence": "Farming folk have routinely described their way of life as conducive to peace, balance, and simple virtue, and the ways of the city as promoting strife, ambition, and greed. City folk, on the other hand, have considered cities as the entry into sophistication, creativity, and enlightenment, and farms as places of ignorance, provincialism, and limitation" (6). *Prodigal Summer* attempts to deconstruct these simplistic oppositions. Lusa is not simply a "city person" as her husband and his family pigeon-hole her, but someone who spent her childhood "trapped on lawn but longing for pasture" and "sprouting seeds in pots on a patio" but "dreaming" of the expansive garden she realizes on the Widener

farm (35, 375). Deanna Wolfe was raised on a farm in Egg Fork, but as the local forest ranger she practices what she has learned from her degree in wildlife ecology at the University of Tennessee. When Deanna first gets to know Eddie Bondo, Kingsolver writes, "She was well accustomed to watching Yankee brains grind their gears, attempting to reconcile a hillbilly accent with signs of serious education" (11). Like Eddie, Lusa brings the same prejudices to Zebulon County.

In order to raise goats successfully, Lusa must critically examine her own practices⁸ as an aloof and rather condescending urban outsider, who because she has an advanced degree in biology assumes she knows much more than the locals. Kingsolver gives Lusa what Wendell Berry has called the "provincial . . . half-scared, half-witted urban contempt for 'provinciality,'" a contempt for farmers that Kingsolver herself encountered when she left Kentucky.⁹ At the beginning of the novel which opens at the beginning of summer, Lusa fights with Cole about his desire to pull down the fragrant honeysuckle vine crawling up the side of their garage; by the end of the novel and the end of that summer Lusa discovers that he was right to be concerned because the vine has completely devoured the garage. Lusa realizes that honeysuckle, which to her urban sensibility looks lovely and smells heavenly, is in her new rural habitat merely "an invasive exotic, nothing sacred" (440).

Throughout *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver is at pains to point out that some things in life can be known from experience, without the abstract knowledge of scientific theories. Deanna is proud of the fact that her farmer father, who never went to college, knew as much about the natural world as many of her professors. Cole's knowledge of how invasive honeysuckle is in his environment is another example. Lusa acknowledges the error in her own thinking after his death: "*You have to persuade it two steps back everyday*, he'd said, *or it will move in and take you over*. His instincts about this plant had been right, his eye had known things he'd never been trained to speak of. And yet she'd replied carelessly, *Take over what? The world will not end if you let the honeysuckle have the side of your barn*. She crossed her arms against a shiver of anguish and asked him now to forgive a city person's audacity" (360). In the course of the novel, Lusa must face up to the fact that she has romanticized some aspects of rural life, like the honeysuckle, and underestimated others, such as the difficulty of farming and the knowledge of local farmers.

Before Lusa can even begin to call herself a goat farmer, Kingsolver orchestrates the plot so that she must seek the expertise of Gar-

nett Walker, the retired local agriculture teacher and former 4-H Club leader. Garnett is famous for his attempts to cross-breed a new strain of chestnut that will withstand the blight and infamous for having overseen the 4-H Club project that led to the county-wide goat surplus. By engaging this crusty old loner in her enterprise, Lusa forges links within Egg Fork that have been broken, connecting Garnett with her niece and nephew, Crys and Lowell, who are his grandchildren but whom he does not know. Garnett is estranged from his wayward son, who has divorced the children's mother, Jewel Widener. Such a gradually revealed connection is only one of the many threads that Kingsolver carefully and cleverly uses to knit Lusa's, Garnett's, and Deanna's lives together and to link their three seemingly separate plot lines.¹⁰ Lusa's successful venture raising goats depends on interdependence in the community and in the family. To help with the day-to-day physical labor, Lusa hires her nephew, Little Ricky.

Before Lusa can be accepted as a member of the community and the family, she must overcome their local bias against raising goats and their rural prejudices against city people and against farm wives operating outside the domestic sphere. Lusa, who had expected to be "a farmer's partner" when she married Cole (42), finds that his family and their neighbors expect otherwise. But Lusa's fiscal success raising goats goes a long way toward elevating her status in the community, no matter her transgressions of the usual gender roles. Lusa proves herself in ecological terms to be more like the Asian daylilies that bloom throughout Appalachia in July than the Japanese honeysuckle that engulfs the barn—she is non-native, but not invasive. Indeed her arrival, like that of the coyotes in the nearby national forest, begins to right an imbalance in the ecosystem. First, Lusa pulls the Widener farm out of debt with her successful goat venture. Then, she promises a loving home to her niece and nephew whose mother is dying of cancer and whose biological aunts do not want the children because they say Crys acts like a boy and Lowell like a girl.

In the final accounting I think Kingsolver succeeds in showing readers that farmers, indeed everyone, need to be more place-conscious. To use Dirlik's terms, Kingsolver shows readers what a "place-based" imagination has to offer. Her ecologically enlightened characters—Deanna, the wildlife ecologist and forest ranger; Nannie, the organic apple grower; and Lusa, the entomologist turned farmer—prosper because they understand both the human and nonhuman ecology of their bioregion.

Kingsolver is less successful in showing how individuals such as Garnett Walker, the Widener sisters, and the western rancher Eddie Bondo

can become less “place-bound.” Kingsolver resolves the problems Lusa has relating to her sisters-in-law by revealing their misunderstandings to be based more on misconceptions than absolute ideological differences. By having Lusa decide to change her name to Widener, Kingsolver finesses one “place-bound” issue that concerns the family, Lusa’s feminism, which she has exhibited by retaining her maiden name. Lusa takes the Widener name when she decides to commit her life to a farm that she knows the locals will always call the Widener place. Her decision to leave the farm to Crys and Lowell means that the Wideners no longer have to worry that the farm will go out of the family (307).

Physical desire, propelled by pheromones, seems to be Kingsolver’s rather too-easy, though biologically explicable, way of bringing ideologically different humans together to debate crucial issues—from Lusa and Cole to Deanna and Eddie. But Kingsolver does not suggest that full understanding, much less an ideological change, necessarily follows dialogue, even if sex is involved. During their short marriage, Lusa and Cole argue daily about the best farming practices and Eddie never buys Deanna’s thesis that coyotes breed more prolifically the more they are killed, although he does respect her enough not to hunt coyotes in southern Appalachia. Indeed their relationship ends after he reads her thesis about coyotes. Kingsolver does seem to suggest that physical attraction works best in the ideological conversion of youth. Seventeen-year-old Little Ricky is an easy convert to Lusa’s innovative farming practices and an eager listener to her lessons about the world’s religions because he is smitten with his beautiful young aunt.

The pairing of Nannie and Garnett is the most unbelievable in the novel. Garnett mellows because of his growing dependence on his spunky seventy-something neighbor, but her Unitarian beliefs, feminist ideals, and organic-farming practices incense him. Garnett, a religious fundamentalist, believes humans have dominion over the earth and so thinks nothing of the consequences of using herbicides to keep his property weed-free and broad-spectrum insecticides to protect his hybrid chestnut seedlings. Garnett is a perfect example of Dirlik’s “place-bound” individual: “disguising and suppressing inequalities and oppressions that are internal to place,” blaming internal dissension on outside agitators (feminists, Unitarians), and in the face of facts, clinging to fanciful, often faith-based, points of view (Dirlik, 6). Certain he is right; Garnett does not think about how his choices affect others. As a result, he has been at odds with his neighbor Nannie over the needs of her organic orchard (to be free of the insecticides and herbicides he uses in

close proximity to her land), and he has withheld from her the discontinued shingles that he has discovered in his barn, which he does not need but which she could use to patch her roof. Despite the heated ideological sparring that goes on between them, Kingsolver wants readers to believe that Nannie's neighborly care for Garnett's health and her frequent appearance in shorts in her orchard combine to spark his physical attraction and a manly desire to protect her. In having Garnett finally decide to give Nannie the shingles, Kingsolver does not go so far as to suggest that their budding friendship will alter their ideological differences about evolution, feminism, or the use of malathion, only that Garnett is becoming less self-centered—a primary step, to be sure, in perceiving one's world ecologically.

Kingsolver's greatest success in this novel is in helping readers to see the human and nonhuman interdependencies in an ecosystem. Kingsolver has said that "this is the most challenging book" she's "ever given" her readers, one whose complexity she believes some reviewers have missed by focusing too much on the humans and not enough on the flora and fauna.¹¹ Kingsolver understands the tendency of any species to be self-centered and attempts to reach those readers, like Garnett, who persist in anthropocentric thinking. Nannie makes an ironic point by telling Garnett, "I do believe humankind holds a special place in the world. It's the same place held by a mockingbird, in his opinion, and a salamander in whatever he has that resembles a mind of his own. Every creature alive believes this: The center of everything is *me*" (215). The similarity between humans and animals that Kingsolver calls attention to here is repeated in multiple ways throughout the novel.

Prodigal Summer is a metaphor-laden book because Kingsolver is out to change the way readers perceive themselves and their relationship to the natural world. Paul Ricoeur has argued that "a metaphor may be seen as a model for changing our way of looking at things, of perceiving the world. The word 'insight,' very often applied to the *cognitive* import of metaphor, conveys in a very appropriate manner this move from sense to reference" (150). As if to help readers understand the value of metaphor, Kingsolver sets up a situation in which Lusa makes light of the Appalachian people's saying that the "mountains breathe": "she had some respect for the poetry of country people's language, if not for the veracity of their perceptions" (31). After living in the shadow of the mountain and experiencing the air currents, Lusa realizes that their personification is apt: "the inhalations of Zebulon Mountain touched her face all morning, and finally she understood. She learned to tell time with her skin, as

morning turned to afternoon and the mountain's breath began to bear gently on the back of her neck. By early evening it was insistent as a lover's sigh, sweetened by the damp woods, cooling her nape and shoulders whenever she paused her work in the kitchen to lift her sweat-damp curls off her neck. She had come to think of Zebulon as another man in her life, larger and steadier than any other companion she had known" (33). In this example, Lusa, the scientist, learns Ricoeur's lesson about metaphor: "poetic language is no less about reality than any other use of language but refers to it by the complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language. . . . in another respect, it constitutes the primordial reference to the extent that it suggests, reveals, unconceals—or whatever you say—the deep structures of reality to which we are related as mortals who are born into this world and who *dwell* in it for a while."¹²

The "deep structure" Kingsolver wants to reveal is the complex ecosystem in which humans live but about which they know far too little. In an attempt to disrupt an anthropocentric world view, Kingsolver personifies animals and animalizes people. For example, the coyote pups are "children born empty-headed like human infants," and they live in a "family" (200). The novel concludes with a chapter from a coyote's perspective in which readers experience the acrid odor of crop-dusted farms and the sweet pleasure of Nannie's organic orchard. When the coyote thinks of prey, she does not fixate on Lusa's goats, as Eddie Bondo and some readers might expect, but squirrels and mice. Similarly, Kingsolver reveals the animalism of humans, both through her metaphors (Eddie marks his "territory" when he urinates off Deanna's porch; Cole's beard is like a "nectar guide" for Lusa's kiss, 26, 38) and the revelation of little known biological facts (women cycle with the moon when exposed to its light, and like female animals they emit a scent when they are fertile). As Lusa points out, smell is a "whole world of love we don't discuss" (237). Through Kingsolver's use of metaphor, she suggests that the natural world could give humans "insight" into their own behavior, and she reminds readers that humans are but one species among many in the world they dwell in. At the same time that Kingsolver gives some animals voices, she does not anthropomorphize animals or romanticize their behavior. For weeks a snake coexists with Deanna and the baby birds she nurtures, preying on the pesky mice in her cabin, only to eat the baby birds at summer's end. At the same time that Kingsolver gives humans animal instincts, she does not strip them of their capacity to

reason. The newly widowed Lusa does not have sex with Cole's nephew Little Ricky, despite her powerful attraction to him: "We're not blood kin,' he argued. 'But we're family,'" she said (416).

Much of the pleasure of this text, which increases on second and third readings, comes from developing an attention to detail and from observing how intricately Kingsolver has connected these details, not just metaphorically but structurally through her braided narratives. Learning to observe and understand interconnections is an important ecological lesson that readers absorb through the novel's form by doing—by actively making unheralded connections—rather than by passively listening to the characters' Rachel Carson-inspired orations about keystone predators, evolution, and broad-spectrum insecticides.¹³ Granted these overt lessons emerge organically because Kingsolver's main characters are teachers, but many of the same "lessons" in this novel of lessons about ecology are taught indirectly.

Readers gradually become aware of the human and nonhuman connections among the novel's three seemingly separate but intertwined narratives at the same time that the characters make them aware of interconnections in the southern Appalachian bioregion. In the human world, these connections range from the serendipitous to the poignant. The stained green brocade armchair on Deanna's porch was one of a matched pair once in the Widener family's living room; its mate, still in the Widener farmhouse but moved to the bedroom, has become Lusa's favorite reading chair. Garnett's grandfather felled the huge hollowed out chestnut that serves as Deanna's home away from home in the woods. The old woman who gives Lusa such sage advice at Cole's funeral is Nannie Rawley. Lusa longs for a friend who shares her views, and readers come to see what Lusa does not know by novel's end, that among the locals, whom she has stereotyped as environmentally ignorant, are two women who share her knowledge of and passion for ecology, Deanna and Nannie. As regards the non-human world, for example, by novel's end readers have pieced together information from the three separate narratives to learn that pesky cockleburs abound not because God has made "one mistake in Creation" (213), as Garnett suggests, but because the Carolina parakeets that once ate them are now extinct. However, Kingsolver shows that an ecological imbalance may be corrected. Coyotes are taking the place of the extinct red wolves, Magnolia warblers have returned to the Zebulon National Forest now that their habitat has been protected from clear cutting, bobwhites are also coming back, perhaps as Deanna suggests because of the passages the coyotes are open-

ing in the tight clumps of fescue, and Nannie Rawley's organic orchard is "the best producing orchard in five counties" (420). In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver demonstrates that both the survival of the Widener farm and the well-being of the southern Appalachian ecosystem depend on understanding the complex interconnections between human and non-human worlds, between natives and newcomers, between the local and the global.

NOTES

This essay will also appear in *Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South Since 1920*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman (Amsterdam: VU UP, 2006).

1. According to Judith Plant, "Bioregionalism calls for human society to be more closely related to nature (hence 'bio') and to be more conscious of its locale, or regions, or life place (thus 'bioregion'). . . . It is a proposal to ground human cultures within natural systems, to get to know one's place intimately in order to fit human communities to the earth, not distort the earth to our demands" (132). Plant's "Learning to Live with Differences" appears in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997).

2. Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977) is still considered "the definitive contemporary statement of agrarian concerns and priorities," and Janisse Ray's recent memoir, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1999), which won the American Book Award, is required reading in Georgia's public schools and in a number of college environmental studies programs.

3. The novel is set in the fictional town of Egg Fork, in the vicinity of the Virginia-Kentucky-Tennessee borders.

4. See Kingsolver's essay collection, *Small Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) and her Foreword to *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 2003). Kingsolver also published an earlier collection of essays, *High Tide at Tucson* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

5. In her acknowledgments (x), Kingsolver cites the source of her coyote research as Mike Finkel, "The Ultimate Survivor" in *Audubon* (May-June 1999): 52-59. For an analysis of coyotes in urban and suburban environments, see Mary Battiata, "Among Us," *Washington Post Magazine* (16 April 2006): 6-11, 17-21.

6. This environmental ethic of care is not gender specific, although to some reviewers it has seemed so, perhaps because of the prominence of these three female protagonists. See for example, Jeff Giles' review in *Newsweek*, 30 October 2000, 82, and Susan Tekulve's review in *Book*, November 2000, 69. But Deanna's father is enlightened, Little Ricky proves a willing listener to Lusa's new ideas, and early in his career Cole wants to learn new farming

methods. For a comprehensive analysis of the land ethic in *Prodigal Summer*, see Peter S. Wenz, "Leopold's Novel: The Land Ethic in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*," *Ethics and the Environment* 8.2 (2003): 106–125. He argues that Kingsolver echoes Aldo Leopold's call for "a land ethic [that] changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (106). The quotation is from Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), 240. See also Plant, "Learning to Live with Differences."

7. Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoad, 2003), 159. Berry attributes this rule of thumb to agricultural scientists like Sir Albert Howard and Wes Jackson, whose guiding principle is "harmony between local ways of farming and local ecosystems," as opposed to agri-industrialists who assume universal applicability (159).

8. In "Women in Agriculture: The 'New Entrepreneurs,'" *Australian Feminist Studies*, 18.41 (2003), Margaret Alston argues that in order to make women more visible in agriculture, women must change the language and the way they view themselves, must question the lack of women in agricultural leadership positions, and must critically examine their own practices and customs, making sure to value their daughters' desires to be farmers (169–170).

9. Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, 110. In her Foreword to *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, Kingsolver says she repeatedly encountered the belief that all farmers are "political troglodytes and devotees of All-Star wrestling" (x).

10. Garnett's neighbor is Nannie Rawley, the only mother-figure Deanna has ever known. Deanna's father has had a long-term affair with Nannie after Deanna's mother's death in childbirth; he would have married Nannie if she had said yes.

11. "Prodigal Summer Questions and Answers," www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp.

12. Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphysical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling" in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1979), 151. In suggesting that a metaphor can yield insight about reality, I do not mean to suggest that Kingsolver thinks metaphoric and scientific discourses are the same or are apprehended in the same way. In explaining metaphoric apprehension, which involves making similar what is different, Ricoeur reminds us of the "semantic impertinence or incongruence" that is inherent: "In order that a metaphor obtains, one must continue to identify the previous incompatibility through the new compatibility" (146). I would like to thank Richard Godden for suggesting that I read Ricoeur.

13. This is not to say that these lessons, often delightful, are not enlightening to many readers. My students have said that they have a better understanding of ecology because of this novel.

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