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Deconstructing Exploitative Systems and Restoring a Balanced Biosphere: An Ecofeminist Posthumanist Reading of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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BALANCED BIOSPHERE:
AN ECOFEMINIST POSTHUMANIST READING OF JANE SMILEY'S *A
THOUSAND ACRES* AND BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Aubrey A. Laughlin

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LITERATURE

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December 2016

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ABSTRACT

DECONSTRUCTING EXPLOITATIVE SYSTEMS AND RESTORING A
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Although many scholarly articles have provided ecofeminist insights and critiques of *A Thousand Acres* that connect the abuse of women to the abuse of the land, few have dealt specifically with the link between the treatment of women and the treatment of nonhuman animals. In the first chapter of this paper, I argue that associations between women and nonhuman animals in *A Thousand Acres* sustain the constructed reality of patriarchal communities. Similarly, *Prodigal Summer's* narratives center around females and nonhuman animals, but also provide a broader focus that emphasizes the interconnectivity of the entire biotic pyramid and optimistically holds that education, empathy, and a collective ecological conscience can reweave a balanced web of life. Thus, *Prodigal Summer* lends itself to a more expansive posthumanist critique, which offers an overarching perspective on the intersectionality of all things while warning against the human propensity to view themselves as closed systems. Therefore, in the second chapter of this paper, I argue that Barbara Kingsolver uses the three prominent female characters of the novel (Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie) to educate both their own social circles as well as Kingsolver's readership about the importance of balance within the biotic pyramid.

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“We can clearly see how it is that all living and extinct forms can be grouped together within a few great classes: and how the several members of each class are connected together by the most complex and radiating lines of affinities.” –Charles Darwin

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe...Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [the delusion that we are separate from everything else] by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” –Albert Einstein

“[E]cofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life. These new stories honor, rather than fear, women’s biological particularity while simultaneously affirming women as subjects and makers of history” (xi). –Diamond and Orenstein

Ecofeminism

In July 2012, feminist animal scholars Lori Gruen and Kari Weil, in conjunction with the journal *Hypatia*, hosted a symposium on “Animal Others” or “Feminists Encountering Animals.” The views expressed at this conference represented the fields of feminism, ecofeminism, animal liberation, animal studies, posthumanism, veganism, animal rights activism, and environmentalism, and addressed the theories, connections, and actions associated with the treatment of women and the treatment of nonhuman animals¹ (Gruen and Weil 492-493). According to the conference hosts, these disparate fields still hold a “clear commonality,” which includes “engagement with the experiences of other animals, and sensitivity to the intersectional contexts in which [one] encounter[s] them” (Gruen and Weil 493). Greta Gaard (borrowing from Harper’s *Sistah*

¹ “Nonhuman animals” is a term especially used within the aforementioned studies to emphasize the connection between humans (human animals) and animals (nonhuman animals). I will use this term throughout this essay, as it deconstructs the dichotomy of human/animal, and emphasizes the collective state of all living animals, both human and nonhuman.

Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society and Kemmerer's *Sister Species: Women, Animals, and Social Justice*), emphasizes that animal ecofeminists and vegan feminists have "a self-in-relationship to other animals (including humans) and environments (specific trees, rivers, plants, as well as places)...[and] see their own liberation and well-being as fundamentally connected to the well-being of other animal species" (521).

In *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*, Patrick Murphy states that "the development of an ecological feminism (ecofeminism) has begun [the] process of explicitly intertwining the terrains of female/male and nature/humanity, which have been artificially separated by philosophical linearity for far too long" (7). *A Thousand Acres* deals with the results of a culture that is anything but positively connected – rather, the relationships between humans, nonhuman animals, and the land are divided, poisonous, destructive, and built upon a patriarchal discourse of domination and oppression. According to David Brauner in "'Speak Again': The Politics of Rewriting in *A Thousand Acres*," Smiley describes a misogynistic culture in which "the female is figured as the Other, and everything associated with her is tainted by fear, suspicion, and intolerance" resulting in ongoing "mental and physical abuse" (663).

Deborah Fink in *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*, says that the agrarian myth has taken "only secondary and derivative

notice of women” (22, 189).² This argument proves true in the Zebulon farming communities of both *A Thousand Acres* and *Prodigal Summer*,³ where men run the lives of women, and where a “manless” woman is viewed and treated “as a child” (*Prodigal Summer* 112). Both novels are set in places called “Zebulon.” In *A Thousand Acres*, the setting is 1000 acres of farm land in Zebulon County, Iowa. In *Prodigal Summer*, the setting is a portion of the Appalachian mountains in the Kentucky-Virginia-West Virginia area (Zebulon Mountain), and the farming community of Zebulon Valley/County in the valley below. Although biblical scholarship has debated the etymology of the Hebrew term *Zebulun* (זְבֻלֹן), the most recent accepted scholarship in this area links this word to a northwestern Semitic root common in 2nd millennium BCE Ugaritic texts, which served as a title for the god Baal.⁴ *Baal* also means “lord” and is the same word used for “husband,” demonstrating that the man is the lord of his house, wife, property, etc., and addressed as such by his household. In addition, various demographic groups of the ancient near east made regular crop and animal sacrifices to the god, Baal. In *Prodigal Summer*, Garnett Walker III says that his grandfather named Zebulon Mountain “modestly choosing Zebulon from the Bible, even though some still call it Walker’s Mountain” (82), so the name in Kingsolver’s

² See also Jack Kirby’s article “Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley.”

³ For a complete etymology of Zebulon and Baal and their biblical references, see *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, page 259.

⁴ See Christopher A. Rollston’s article “Prosopography and the זְבֻלֹן Seal”..

novel originates from the Hebrew term above. However, whether Smiley and Kingsolver intentionally chose the name of their settings based on the meaning of the word Zebulon is unclear, but the etymological connection seems appropriate for the themes and stories of both novels.

In “Ecofeminism and Wilderness,” Linda Vance states that philosophically, “ecofeminism holds that the patriarchal domination of women runs parallel to the patriarchal domination of nature. Both women and nature have been controlled and manipulated to satisfy masculinist desires...[and] denied autonomous expression and self-determination” (60). In “Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals,” Lori Gruen argues that the “categories ‘woman’ and ‘animal’ serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive ‘other’ in theoretical discourse (whether explicitly so stated or implied) has sustained human male dominance” (61). Where humans end and nonhuman animals begin will always be an “incomplete, fluid, and indefensible” notion (Jenkins 505), but ontologically and epistemologically, “what (or who) beings are determines how we are ethically obligated to respond to them” (Jenkins 506), and therefore, one’s view of the human-nonhuman animal relationship will likely have major practical consequences. As such, I will focus on this specific relationship in my analysis of *A Thousand Acres*.

Posthumanism

In “Introduction to Focus: Posthumanism,” Zahi Zalloua states that “humanism refers to a set of beliefs that place the human subject at the center of reflection and concern” based on theories as ancient as “Protagoras’s view that ‘man is the measure of all things’” (3). He traces humanist movements through the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras, arguing that “Pico inaugurated the humanist myth of the self-made man” and that “Descartes and the Enlightenment foregrounded man’s reason and agency” (3). This gave birth to the Cartesian subject – “an autonomous and rational subject that was to serve as the metaphysical bedrock of the many humanisms to follow” (3). Much like the “post” in “postmodernism,” the “post” in “posthumanism” does not simply signify “after,” but implies a desire to move beyond the precepts of a previous concept – in this case, a limited anthropocentric view of the world.⁵

“Posthumanism,” is a bit elusive and varied in definition, as it has quickly developed many sub-categories with their own unique practical and theoretical applications, especially in the areas of science, globalization, sexuality, and the

⁵ In *New Media Theory: Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing*, Sidney Dobrin states that “posthumanism identifies a moment of inquiry in which the human subject is called into question via its imbrications with technologies such as cybernetics, informatics, artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation, psychotropic and other pharmaceuticals, and other bio-technologies, as well as species interactions” (3). According to Sam Schwartz in his review of Matthew Taylor’s *Universes without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature*, works of science fiction are often favored by post humanist literary critics for the “example[s] they offer of post humanism as a form of advancing beyond the kind of embodied subjectivity that posits the human body as a closed system that is cut off from, and seeks to dominate, a world of objects” (125).

nonhuman animal.⁶ In many ways, it has become an umbrella term that includes theories such as ecocriticism, animal studies, bioethics, thing theory, post-colonialism, and actor-network theory. For the sake of clarity, I will be primarily referencing Cary Wolfe's redefinition of posthumanism as distinct from the concepts of "transhumanism," "antihumanism" and even "posthuman" in general. Although Wolfe began publishing works about posthumanism in 1995,⁷ he most fully develops his nuanced concept of posthumanism in his book *What is Posthumanism?*, published in 2010.

Relying heavily on Deconstruction and the works of Jacques Derrida, Wolfe denounces the notions of anthropocentrism and speciesism, challenging readers to adopt "a new and more inclusive form of ethical pluralism" (137) regarding nonhuman animals and the environment. By citing numerous examples of human and nonhuman animal behaviors, conditions, and developments that blur the line between the species, Wolfe challenges the fundamental beliefs that underpin our definition of what makes us human. Referencing the earlier works of thinkers such as Marx, Foucault, Butler, Haraway, and many others, Wolfe demonstrates how the theory and practical

⁶ See Ivan Callus, Stefan Herbrechter, and Manuela Rossini's article, "Introduction: Dis/Locating Posthumanism In European Literary And Critical Traditions"; Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Kenneth Mossman's book, *Building Better Humans?: Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism (Beyond Humanism: Trans- and Posthumanism/Jenseits des Humanismus: Trans- und Posthumanismus)*; and Emmanuel Aretoulakis's article, "Towards A Posthumanist Ecology."

⁷ In *What is Posthumanism?*, Wolfe says that the first time he used this term (or any derivative thereof) was in 1995 in an essay entitled "In Search of Post-humanist Theory: The Second-Order Cybernetics of Maturana and Varela," which was published in a special issue of *Cultural Critique* called "The Politics of Systems and Environments."

applications of posthumanism have gained momentum in the past few decades, and developed into what is possibly becoming the preferred worldview of both present and future generations.⁸

Sorina Higgins notes in “What is Posthumanism?,” that “Wolfe’s goal is not to undermine the existence or value of human beings. Rather, it is to call into question the universal ethics, assumed rationality, and species-specific self-determination of humanism” (n. pag.). Like Derrida before him, Wolfe questions and “destabilize[s] traditional binaries such as nature/culture, landscape/architecture, viewer/viewed, presence/absence, organic/inorganic, natural/artificial, and, really, human/nonhuman” (Higgins n. pag.). Wolfe criticizes the current state of bioethics, charging that its foundations are still anthropocentric, and that it is polluted with prejudices, namely speciesism:

Of these prejudices, none is more symptomatic of the current state of bioethics than prejudice based on species difference, and an incapacity to address the ethical issues raised by dramatic changes over the past thirty years in our knowledge about the lives, communication, emotions, and consciousnesses of a number of nonhuman species. (56)

Although many of Wolfe’s works focus on how humans view and treat nonhuman animals, he emphasizes that posthumanism addresses issues of specicism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and more, as these - *isms* are all based on prejudices concerning the Other.

⁸ By way of a few examples, see Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"; Katherine N. Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*; Neil Badmington's edited collection *Posthumanism*; and Elaine Graham's *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture*.

Since *A Thousand Acres* focuses on the grievous consequences of an androcentric patriarchal system that mistreats women, nonhuman animals, and the land, an ecofeminist critique is most useful in analyzing the many connections between the abuse of women and the abuse of nonhuman animals and the land in this novel. Although many scholarly articles have provided ecofeminist insights and critiques of *A Thousand Acres* that connect the abuse of women to the abuse of the land,⁹ few have dealt specifically with the link between the treatment of women and the treatment of nonhuman animals within this novel. The scholarship thus misses parallels that are unique to these two groups – parallels that result from patriarchy’s manufactured link between women and nonhuman animals in both form and function. In the first chapter of this paper, I argue that associations between women and nonhuman animals in *A Thousand Acres* sustain the constructed reality of patriarchal communities. Ginny is eventually liberated by recognizing and exploring these connections and experiencing alternatives to oppressive androcentric biases. By analyzing Ginny’s direct associations between herself and nonhuman animals, and by juxtaposing the patriarchal farming community’s view and treatment of human and nonhuman animals with that of the Ericson family and Jess Clark, I will

⁹ See, for example, Malmgren, Carl D. “The Lie of the Land: Heartland Novels by Smiley and Kinsella.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.2 (1999): 432-456; Ozdek, Almila. “Coming Out of the Amnesia: Herstories and Earth Stories, and Jane Smiley’s Critique of Capitalistic Ownership in *A Thousand Acres*.” *New Directions in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Andrea Campbell. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008. 62-73; and Rozga, Margaret. “Sisters in a Quest – Sister Carrie and *A Thousand Acres*: The Search for Identity in Gendered Territory.” *Midwestern Miscellany* 22 (1994): 18-29.

deconstruct this theoretical discourse of patriarchal dominance – a system based on subordinating and exploiting both women and nonhuman animals as inferior beings.¹⁰

Similarly, *Prodigal Summer's* narratives center around females and nonhuman animals, but also provide a broader focus that emphasizes the interconnectivity of the entire biotic pyramid and optimistically holds that education, empathy, and a collective ecological conscience can reweave a balanced web of life. Thus, *Prodigal Summer* lends itself to a more expansive posthumanist critique, which offers an overarching perspective on the intersectionality of all things while warning against the human propensity to abuse and dominate that occurs when humans view themselves as closed systems.¹¹ Therefore, in the second chapter of this paper, I argue that Barbara Kingsolver uses the three prominent female characters of the novel (Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie) to educate both their own social circles as well as Kingsolver's readership about the importance of balance within the biotic pyramid. The end goal of these parable-like tales is to change how people view the world, emphasizing empathy for all living things and a responsible land ethic, so that

¹⁰ This is similar to Derrida's theories in *Dissemination*, which Tore Hogas summarizes as follows: "Jacques Derrida provides a way to deconstruct...hierarchies, in a process that may be described in three phases. First, the entity that creates signification - the center of the system - is identified. Second, the operations of this center are shown to establish a violent hierarchy of center versus margin and thus to exclude all other signification. Finally, the center can be decentered, which opens for all previously excluded signification in non-hierarchical free play" (66-67).

¹¹ See Schwartz, Sam. Review of "*Universes without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* by Matthew A. Taylor" page 125.

humans can repair the present inequalities and restore balance to the biosphere as a whole.

Chapter One: *A Thousand Acres*

A Thousand Acres is a modern-day retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, told from the daughters' perspective rather than the father's. Instead of a kingdom that is to be divided amongst three daughters, Larry Cook (Lear), in a rather inexplicable act, decides to turn over his one-thousand-acre farm to his three daughters: Ginny (Goneril), Rose (Regan), and Caroline (Cordelia). After multiple tragic deaths (Rose, Pete, Ginny's unborn children, etc.) and a traumatic back-story of abuse and incestual rape, the Cook family farm collapses under unpaid debts and is reclaimed by the bank. Larry Cook continues to live his life in pride and arrogance until his heart attack in the cereal aisle of the grocery store.¹²

Larry Cook is paradoxically both an abuser and the most well-respected farmer in Zebulon County, Iowa. In an interview with Suzanne Berne, Jane Smiley notes that society views "daughters and children as owned things," and expresses that she "felt, viscerally, that a habit of mind exists in our culture of seeing nature and women in much the same way" (36). Carr describes this mentality as "the self-reinforcing triple tendency of Western culture to imagine non-human 'nature' in feminine terms, to believe human females 'closer to

¹² Larry's manner of death (a corn/grain farmer dying in the cereal aisle) is one of the many dark ironies that emphasize an almost karmic sense of tragedy in this novel.

‘nature’ than males, and to exploit women and ‘nature’ in similar or parallel ways” (121). Exemplifying both Smiley and Carr’s observations, Larry Cook habitually abuses women, nonhuman animals, the land, and even his belongings as a result of shared “lessons” that have been passed down through the generations (343) – lessons which teach that wives and daughters are possessions for Larry “to do with as he pleased, like...the hogs” (191).

1.1 The Beast(s) Within: Ginny as a Sow, Horse, Dog, and Three-Legged Freak

Ginny pictures herself as being, or having within herself, three different nonhuman animals (a sow, a horse, and a dog), as well as a deformed three-legged freak. These particular creatures are significant within the context of farm life; additionally, where and when they manifest themselves in Ginny’s life are symbolic of the patriarchal abuses she is dealing with internally. These domesticated nonhuman animals offer a gateway into the connections between humans and nonhuman animals, namely to highlight the mistreatment of both, and to expose the destructive ideologies that allow for such mistreatment.

Ty and Ginny are responsible for the hog operations on the farm, which becomes an overly ambitious operation for Ty once Larry signs the farm over to his daughters (see chapters 22 and 33). Ginny spends a day working with Ty in the farrowing house with the newborn pigs – clipping out their eye teeth (because they are sharp), docking their tails (so they wouldn’t be chewed on and infected), and castrating twenty boars (presumably so that they are more manageable and

cannot impregnate the sows). Ginny's only mention of the sows is that the "sows didn't love this, our handling the baby pigs" (161). Ginny's conscious connection to the pigs seems minimal at best.

After dinner, Ginny inspects her naked body under the sheets, imagines having sex with her neighbor, Jess, and then rolls onto her stomach to fall asleep and "escape what [she] couldn't stop thinking about" (161). When Ty runs his hand from her shoulder down her back, she has a vision of herself as having a long, humped sow's back with "a smooth arc from [her] rooting, low-slung head... [and] a little stumpy tail" (161). She awakens, remembering the baby pigs and feeling Ty's erection against her leg, which primes her fantasies and results in her initiating sex – "the best ever with Ty" (164). During this encounter, she says that the "part of [her] that was still a sow longed to wallow, to press [her] skin against his and be engulfed" (162). She describes the encounter as an "unaccustomed dream of [her] body" (162). Within the unconscious dream realm, Ginny identifies with the sows.

Some ecofeminists, like Carr and Slicer, believe that in this passage, "the 'sow' [Ginny] objectifies and sexually 'consumes' the man [Ty]" (Slicer 67). Additionally, food historian Magelonne Toussaint-Samat's observation that the pig is often associated with "egotism" and "lust" (423) implies that Ginny's sow dream could be a turning of the tables in which Ginny finds power in sexual expression and initiating/controlling sex with Ty. However, Rozga argues that despite the level of sexual freedom Ginny experiences as the sow, she is ultimately being

“engulfed” within the dominant patriarchal structure that has robbed her of “the memory of [her] body” (Smiley 280). Larry “thinks of women in terms of livestock” argues Rozga, and therefore, “it is a sure sign of trouble...that on the night she [Ginny] is most sexually aroused with her husband, she cannot help but think of herself as ‘a sow’” (25).

According to Glynis Carr in her essay “Persephone’s Daughters: Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* and Classical Myth,” Smiley portrays Ginny as an abused Persephone, and this “imagery of pigs is yet another link to the Persephone-Demeter tale” in which a herd of pigs “tumb[les] underground with Persephone” (121, 131-132). In volume seven of the work, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Sir James George Frazer reveals that the ancient Greeks viewed pigs as “the uterine animal of the earth,” and they were “an embodiment of the corn goddess...either Demeter or...Persephone” (42). Incorporating Frazer’s ideas, Carr expands: “Sacrifices of gravid (pregnant) sows were made to ‘Demeter’ (unripe corn) in spring ‘to promote the abundance of the crops’ (131). During this ceremony, it was believed that “whoever got a piece of the decayed flesh [of the sow sacrifice]...and sowed it with the seed-corn of his field was...to be sure of a good crop” (Frazer 543-44). Contrasted with their revered place in ancient Greece, Ty’s pigs are mass-produced in a factory farm setting, which “reduces them to little more than money-machines for Ty and his banker” (Carr 132).

In *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, Jean-Joseph Goux demonstrates that money is simply the last construction within a series of abstractions that determine value and exchange. When the debt on the farm gets too big and Ty is desperately trying to make loan payments, he decides to sell one hundred piglets as "feeder pigs" (310). Then, at the last minute, he decides to take some of the sows too, which triggers Ginny's anger. She declares that the sows are worth far more than what Ty will be getting for them, and he "can't just cart them off to market on impulse!" (310). Ty declares, "that's exactly what I can do" (310). His focus is on his debt, making payments to the loan, and the fact that "selling off [the] sows will tide [them] over till after harvest" (310). For Ginny, this is an issue of value and priorities, and not the financial type as much as the nonhuman animal and human type. If the sows are ultimately commodities, which are disposable and undervalued, then Ginny is as well. It is in this gesture (and others) that Ty proves his loyalties lie with the farm as a financial investment and not with the pigs or even Ginny. Much like the sows sacrificed "to promote the abundance of crops," Ty sacrifices Ginny for the farm.

Ginny and the women of Zebulon County are used by their husbands and fathers for specific purposes and then generally discarded and forgotten once their usefulness has ended. In this way, they are similar to terminal animals and/or work animals that are eventually worked to death. Within the capitalist farming economy, pigs are one of the many "terminal animals" that exist for meat or

laboratory experimentation. According to Carol J. Adams in *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals*, terminal animals are domesticated nonhuman animals that are “maintained in intensive farming situations until slaughtered and consumed,” or they are used as laboratory animals (n. pag.). In “Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory,” Deborah Slicer equates the distribution of Mrs. Cook’s belongings to strangers after her death with an image of “physical dismemberment, appropriation, [and] consumption, mirroring the eventual fate of Ty’s hogs” (66).

In his book, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, Cary Wolfe argues that a human-imposed hierarchy of importance within the nonhuman animal world expands beyond the sub-group of terminal animals to differences between how humans view domesticated pets, wild animals, and terminal animals.¹³ Domesticated pets, especially cats and dogs, have been given an increasingly special status as compared to other ‘expendable’ non-human animals:

Many animals flourish not in spite of the fact that they are ‘animals’ but because they are ‘animals’—or even more precisely, perhaps, because they are felt to be members of our families and our communities, regardless of their species. And yet, at the very same moment, billions of animals in factory farms, many of whom are very near to or indeed exceed cats and dogs and other companion animals in the capacities we take to be relevant to standing (the ability to experience pain and suffering, anticipatory dread, emotional bonds and complex social interactions, and so on), have

¹³ See also Barney Nelson’s *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature*. Reno: U of Nevada P, 2000.

as horrible a life as one could imagine, also because they are 'animals.' (54)

Wolfe concludes by saying that "[c]learly, then, the question here is not simply of the 'animal' as the abject other of the 'human'" (54).

Prior to consumption, terminal animals "suffer literal constraints upon their freedom: most are unable to walk, to breathe clean air,...to root in the dirt,...to suckle their young, [and] to avoid having their sexuality abused" (Adams n. pag.). In short, "the institutions created to hold [terminal animals] deny them the opportunity to make the expressive gestures that characterize and give meaning to their individual lives. Pigs cannot root; chickens cannot peck; calves cannot nurse. These activities do not fit into the profit requirements" (Adams 28). Like the sow, Ginny has been robbed of "expressive gestures" (such as childbearing), but as the sow, Ginny has also realized "her body's capacity" and "agency," and she longs to take "back some of that which had been stolen during [Larry's] nighttime visits" (Carr 132).

After Rose reveals Ginny's long-repressed sexual trauma, Ginny recognizes how she's been broken like a horse. During a storm that seems both literal and symbolic of what is happening within Ginny, Rose divulges their father's incestual rape of his two oldest daughters. The next morning Ginny feels another nonhuman animal within herself, "a horse haltered in a tight stall, throwing its head and beating its feet against the floor, but the beams and the

bars and the halter rope hold firm, and the horse wears itself out, and accepts the restraints that moments before had been an unendurable goad” (198).¹⁴

In his book *Respect For Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Paul Taylor describes the concepts of human and nonhuman animal freedom and considers a nonhuman animal "free if it has the ability and opportunity to promote or protect its good according to the laws of its nature" and "unfree to the extent that there are [external or internal (5)] constraints that make it difficult or impossible for the organism to realize its good" (109). Neither Ginny nor the nonhuman animals on the Cook family farm are able to realize their good or potential, and even more detrimentally, they are actively kept caged and broken. Although Henry Cabot Lodge's article is over one hundred years old and not necessarily true of all horse breakers, Lodge offers insightful commentary about the violence used in breaking horses (which is less prevalent today, but still in existence). In many ways, Lodge's descriptions parallel Larry's "breaking" of his wife and daughters in *A Thousand Acres*:

Horse-breakers, as a rule, are neither highly educated nor very thoughtful persons, and they resort naturally to force when the animal under their hands makes them impatient....Be it much or little...violence is almost invariably used in breaking horses, and... [the horse-breaker believes that the horse is a] creature which must be subdued by fear....[Horse-breakers break an animal] by adding to its fear, and control it by making it more afraid of [them] than anything else....It is a waste of words, however, to try to reform

¹⁴ In the Epilogue, as Ginny reflects on her father, she says that she can "imagine what he probably chose never to remember – the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him" (370-371). In this way, she relates to what her father must have felt, as she felt something similar, but for other reasons.

horse-breaking. The present system has been in vogue for an indefinite time. The world gets in a rough way what it wants, and the mass of men engaged in the business have neither the time nor the wish to change, even if they had the power of reflection sufficient to enable them to see the need and the value of improved methods. (695-696)

Larry, like the horse-breakers Lodge describes, rules his house with an iron fist of fear and does not seem to possess the “power of reflection” nor the desire to change. Ginny was always told by her parents that she was “getting out of hand,” (278), and she and her sisters “were told, when [they] has been ‘naughty’ – disobedient, careless, destructive, disorderly, hurtful to others, defiant – that [they] had to learn [to be submissive]” (278). Like a horse that has been forcefully “tamed,” Ginny has been physically beaten and raped by her father (183, 188-191), emotionally and verbally abused (181), and mentally and psychologically scarred through fear, manipulation, guilt, and shame. Larry thoroughly broke Ginny as a child – so much so, that at 36 years old she still lacks a will of her own and is behaviorally brainwashed to think, act, and speak in accordance with her father’s will – “a complete melding of identities” (Leslie 36).

In “Nature Nurturing Fathers in a World Beyond Our Control,” Patrick D. Murphy explores his own experience of fatherhood, and critiques the traditional roles of men in the lives of the women and children around them. He notes that when it comes to parenthood, “[m]en are credited with creating but are not expected to nurture what they create, while women are expected to nurture what men create without being credited for participating in that creation” (196).

Because men are taught within our rationalistic culture that feelings are reserved for the weak and vulnerable (women and children), men are often disconnected from their emotions and experience a fractured existence “rooted fundamentally in the dualisms of mind versus body, reason versus emotions, masculine versus feminine, and culture versus nature” (197).

According to Murphy, introducing a child into a rationalistic being’s world generally results in chaos and strong emotions (anger, rage, etc.) because a child does not follow the rules of logic but operates from a more primitive and instinctual base of emotions and reacts in ways that often negate a father’s “intellectual domination of the moment” (198). The lack of control that a father experiences in these situations can result in violence, which is often a last ditch effort to regain a false sense of control. This became Larry’s basic mode of operation in dealing with his daughters – the desire to break and control beings that he felt needed to be wholly subject to his wants and needs.

Speaking from his own experiences with his pre-teen daughter, Murphy observes the ways in which his own daughter challenged him and his realization that in human relationships “[i]nfluence may be possible; control never” (206). He confesses that he had “to struggle to relinquish the illusions, the ego gratification, the fear-driven desires, of exercising power over” and instead shifted to “sharing power with her in order for her to realize her own interdependent existence” (206). Larry Cook, however, is part of an ongoing dynasty of male hubris, refusing to share his power with others, and opting

instead to be the greatest source of strife and fear in the lives of his household members.

Similar to children, nature operates by its own primal rules and not by the laws of men. As a result, people often view nature as hostile and in opposition to the human goals of progress, culture, and commerce and “see the solution as lying in exercising greater human control” (200). However, Murphy compares the human propensity to dominate with addictions addressed in any twelve-step program and argues that humans in general need to define themselves as “living in a world beyond [their] control” (199) and “admit that [they] are powerless over the power of domination and that it has made [their] lives unmanageable” (200). Instead, they need to consider examples of ecological nurturing and assume responsibility for themselves and their world through “heterarchy – mutually constitutive, non-hierarchical relationships” (199), which focus on symbiotic interconnectedness.

As oppressed individuals, the women of Zebulon County, much like broken horses, have “collapse[d] under the strain” of male domination and have “reach[ed] the end of their rope” (187). These farmers’s wives have been forcefully stopped, contained, and halted from further progress by ropes that their husbands’ control. They have been silenced and forgotten by “national myths of identity...that erase women and authorize their abuse” (Strehle 215). Ellen Bass appropriately connected this ideology with sexual abuse, which Ginny and Rose experienced at the hand of Larry: “The sexual abuse of children is part of a

culture in which violence to life is condoned. Our forests, our rivers, our oceans, our air, our earth [including our animals], this entire biosphere, all are invaded with poison – raped, just as our children are raped” (118). These destructive results are well attested to in *A Thousand Acres*.

The damaging control exerted upon a horse in order to break it is the same “damaging control exerted by patriarchal ideals on the lives of girls and women” (Strehle 218). Accordingly, Ginny believes she has no voice in the decisions that affect her body, her property, or her well-being. She has been sufficiently “beat...into submission” (141) so that she’ll be a “good girl” (106), or as Larry requested when he raped her, she will be “quiet,” and “won’t need to fight [him]” (280). She finds herself “mute, null, and void, then trapped in circular logic that muteness *is* nonexistence and therefore reinforces nonexistence” (Strehle 219). In ways, she has become nothing – the living dead, or as she put it a “dead young self” at age thirty-six (370). In her “research into the lives of women who had been sexually abused by their father[s],” Jane Smiley concluded that “the path into the future is a very tortured and dark one. In some ways, the woman has to find a way for her life not to end, to not be destroyed by what her father has done to her” (qtd. in Berne n. pag.). By slowly and honestly addressing her painful realities, Ginny is finally able to move from survival to living.

Over time, Ginny seems to be gaining *some* self-identity by morphing from a sow and horse into a dog, which some view as Smiley reappropriating the male

discourse of *King Lear* for her own purposes (“Body and Nature” n. pag.). After sex with her husband, Ty, and prior to falling asleep, Ginny hears a number of things, including “the barking of a dog” (162). The barking dog recurs again, less than a week later, as Ginny questions what she should feel about her lover, Jess, after they have sex. Beneath all of her dizzying thoughts, she finds that there is another animal, “a dog living in me, shaking itself, jumping, barking, attacking, gobbling at things the way a dog gulps food” (172). This dog within clearly explains Ginny’s remark that the “hardest thing for [her] is not grabbing things” (62).

Ginny observes that Rose’s daughter, Pammy, guards her sunglasses like a precious object that she is not willing to share – that they are “emblematic of some sort of deprivation that she could feel but not define, or maybe, admit to” (95). Ginny recognizes aspects of herself in Pammy’s behavior; Ginny has been deprived of love, safety, and even her own body, and she compensates by grabbing and trying desperately to hold on to what she can call her own. In her conversation with Pete, Rose’s husband, this ownership is what Ginny says that Rose wants as well: “A stake in something of her own. A life she can call her own” (250). Rose, keenly aware of the history that triggers her reactions, is trying actively to get back what she has lost by taking over the farm (302-303). In contrast, Ginny grabs and guards with an “instinctive female reaction of caution” (322) without remembering (or admitting to) the reason for her urges and behavior. This is why Rose affects Ginny in “that barking dog way, never resting

for all the alarms there were to sound” (244), but Ginny likens the dog in herself to “one of those other, less alert but still excitable animals who couldn’t help joining in and barking with equal frenzy” (244). Rose has been vocal, actively asserting her presence and position, whereas Ginny has thrashed and fought inwardly over her intense feelings, which rarely rise to the surface in words or actions.¹⁵

Repressing and suppressing the “sow,” “horse,” and “dog” within has become the norm for Ginny and often results in passive-aggressive behavior. In a telling illustration combining hog and dog, Ty describes that when a group of hogs gang up on another hog and start fighting, “the underdog never fights back, he just looks for a smaller one [to attack]... ‘Shit rolls downhill’” (251). Rose describes this legacy of bullied-to-bully as the norm for abused and worn-out women in the farming community: “First [the] wives collapse under the strain [of their husbands's domination], then they take it out on their children for as long as they can, then they just reach the end of their rope [and die early deaths]” (187). When Ginny seeks to poison Rose with water hemlock for Rose’s affair with Jess, Ginny is drawing from, and passing down, the poison that she inherited from her father – the physically destructive poisons like “atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia” lodged in her “every cell” (369), and the soul-killing

¹⁵ Another dog-like instance in which Ginny’s irritations got the better of her is described on page 278. In first grade, Ginny’s clothes were “a constant torment,” which she was acutely aware of (278). During the last recess of school, when a boy wouldn’t give up his swing, she “bit him on the arm and drew blood” (278). Her reason for the incident was that “[t]he dress had made [her] mad with irritation” (278). This sudden instinctual biting is not unlike a domesticated dog that might suddenly nip or bite out of irritation, pain, or fear.

“beating and fucking” (343) and “stripes of pain [that her] father’s belt laid across [her] skin” (369). Like a sinister water-poison cycle, these sisters have literally and metaphorically become part of “the loop of poison...the water running down through the soil, into the drainage wells, into the lightless mysterious underground chemical sea...drawn up, cold and appetizing, from the drinking well into Rose’s faucet, [Ginny’s] faucet” (370). These poisons have caused mutations of both body and soul, resulting in physical cancers, premature deaths, and miscarriages, as well as lifeless, silent “terminal” human animals in the form of daughters and wives (7, 53-55, 136, 355-356).

These harmful mutations also result in Ginny’s final allusion to herself as something akin to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – a “freak” that occupies a no-man’s land somewhere between the human and the nonhuman animal world – an undignified creation born of “desire, shame, and fear” (Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* 262). She describes herself as a “freak, like a woman with three legs” who, during high school, was paralyzed by the idea of dating. Larry’s acceptance of Ty enabled “the three-legged woman to walk, carefully, very slowly” (262). When she feels indecisive one night about whether she should approach her father’s house where Jess Clark is staying, she feels like “a three-legged woman...[with] each of her legs strained in a different direction” (262). This three-legged woman conjures up images of a mutant outcast, an “unclean”¹⁶ and

¹⁶ According to Phyllis Trible, a prominent feminist biblical scholar, women were “considered far more unclean than the male (Lev. 15)” and a woman’s “monetary value was less (Lev. 27:1-7)” (116).

ill-formed thing, or an evolutionary mistake that provokes fear and disgust in the eyes of those who behold it and guilty self-consciousness and shame within the creature herself.

Although, as Deborah Slicer argues, “the [patriarchal] gaze is not omnipotent” (66), Larry’s omnipresent gaze of “predatory detachment” (Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* 214) has stunted, dwarfed, and even disfigured Ginny to the point that she is unable to function as she should. As prey before a predator, Ginny is “paralyzed” (262) by the fear of a man who calls her a “barren whore,” “slut,” and a “dried-up whore bitch,” (181) and who questions her womanhood, and perhaps even her humanity by accusing her of “creeping here and there all [her] life” (181). According to Carr, Larry is delivering “a powerful threat [in this speech], letting [Ginny] know that he can do anything to her that is done to other ‘useless’ or defective animals” (131). Like King Lear, Larry “never changes his attitude toward his older daughters, but continues to believe that they are unnatural, vicious, and brutal” (Smiley qtd. in Berne n. pag.) and treats them as such.

1.2 The View and Treatment of Human and Nonhuman Animals: Larry, Harold, Ty, Pete, and the Zebulon County Farming Community

As farmers, Larry, Harold, Ty, and Pete view nature as their enemy. Native plant species and nonhuman animals and habitats are bulldozed and eradicated in order to make way for farming crops (14-16). The land is seen as something to fight and subdue until one has erased all traces of what it once was – the

pelicans, the swamplands, the ponds, snakes, cattails, and even the water. Larry always “spoke of the land his grandparents found with distaste – those gigantic gallinippers, snakes everywhere, cattails, leeches, mud puppies”...“shooting stars and wild carrots, and of course, bindweed and Johnsongrass and shatter cane and all other noxious vegetation that farmers have to kill, kill, kill” (46, 124). In “The Gender of Nostalgia: Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*,” Sinead McDermott aptly notes how these prairie plants are “now categorized as weeds” (398) so that there are grounds for exterminating them – emphasizing the employment of language/rhetoric as another way to dominate and justify one’s actions. Ginny summarizes her father’s view in this way: “Daddy’s not much for untamed nature” (123). The harvest drama was always one of men “against nature” (317), and the “untamed nature” of both the land and Larry’s household unnerves and even enrages him, so he attempts to violently subdue both.

Ty believes that Larry is afraid of his own daughters (103), and perhaps Larry’s fear-based ideologies distance him from humans and nature alike and allow for his heartless destruction of anything he fears. Jess, Rose, and Ginny all remember times when their fathers cruelly took the lives of animals simply because they were in the way and/or a nuisance for them. Jess recalled a time when he was a boy and “Harold was driving the cornpicker...and there was a fawn lying in the corn, and Harold drove right over it rather than leave the row standing, or turn, or even just stop and chase it away...after he drove over it, he

didn't stop to kill it, either. He just let it die" (234). Smiley's use of a fawn plays strongly on the readers' sympathies, as most would view it as an innocent creature, much like a baby or child.¹⁷ This innocent, simple creature taking a nap in the corn juxtaposes sharply with Harold's callousness and senseless cruelty in running it over and leaving it for dead. Ginny also recalls that her father "killed animals in the fields every year...rabbits and birds" (235), and although Larry claimed, "That's life...that's farming" (235), there is a much more sinister, self-entitled attitude undergirding these killings.

The same attitude that allows Larry and Harold to destroy the lives of nonhuman animals also allows them to destroy the lives of other people, namely women and children. When Rose describes what mode of thinking could possibly allow a father to rape his daughters, she explains it in a series of appropriate, yet disturbing connections: "You [Ginny] were as much his [Larry's] as I was. There was no reason for him to assert his possession of me more than his possession of you. We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (191). The treatment of women, nonhuman animals, nature, and belongings all fall into the same category because from a patriarchal misogynistic mindset, they are all categorically viewed as possessions. Rose demonstrates that in Larry's mind, the pond,

¹⁷ In "Ambivalence Toward Animals and the Moral Community," Kelly Oliver points out that certain nonhuman animals are "imagined as dangerous and threatening," whereas other nonhuman animals are "imagined as innocent and victimized" (494). In *A Thousand Acres*, Larry, Harold and men in general fall into the former category. After listening to Jess's story of the fawn, Rose says referring to the male farmers, "they're all like that" (302). The fawn, as well as Ginny and Rose (especially as children), fall into the latter category of innocent victimized beings.

houses, hogs, and crops are all alike in value and position, and by drawing this parallel within the context of rape, Rose indicts Larry's abuses of all of these things as acts of rape (Malmgren 439).

Perhaps what is most disturbing of all is that members of Zebulon County greatly respect Larry and his way of life, and he is "implicitly condoned by his community" (McDermott 395). It is this collective mindset that a man can do what he wants with his wife, children, animals, land, and goods that is most invidious of all – and unforgivable for Rose. She cannot stand the injustice of a father that "beat" and "fucked" his children and yet was given respect and power, looked up to, liked and who "fit right in" with the community (302). "However many of them [other farmers] have fucked their daughters or their stepdaughters or their nieces or not, the fact is that they all accept beating as a way of life" (302). Larry himself positively portrayed abuse when he told Ginny the story of a boy on a nearby farm who contracted polio when he was twelve and became crippled:

But [the crippled boy] didn't stay in the house, nosiree. The old man got him out there and made him plow his furrows as straight as the other boys, and he whipped him, too, to show him there wasn't any way out of it...[One of the farmer's daughters left home] calling her father all kinds of a bully and slave driver, but the thing is, that boy did his share, and he respected himself for it. It was the old man's job to see to that. (175)

Larry attempts to enforce the reasonability and acceptability of his own abusive behavior by giving examples of other farmers who did similar things and are "respected" in his mind because of it. However, Ginny questions her father's

rosy interpretation: “How do you know he [the crippled boy] respected himself for it, that that was what he needed?” (175). Larry is infuriated by this remark because Ginny aligns herself with the farmer’s daughter in Larry’s story who saw her father as a bully and a slavedriver and not a respectable man who did well by his son. In short, Ginny undermines the patriarchal values that her father espouses by questioning their validity, and consequently his own self-identity.

Larry’s anger also stems from the belief that these “values” he has received from his father, whom he never disrespected, judged, or criticized (175), are in danger of becoming extinct when others question or rebel against them. Harold expresses the same sentiments when he criticizes women, saying, “The thing about girls is, they always got minds of their own” (202). Having a mind of one’s own poses a danger to the single authoritative mind or will of the father, who believes no one else has the right to a point of view. Apparently, for the first 36 years of Ginny’s life, Larry had done a good job of convincing her that this was the case. As Ginny recalls “It was silly to talk about ‘my point of view.’ When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it” (176). For most of her life, Ginny has lacked a self-identity altogether; her job has always been “to give [Larry] what he asked of [her], and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him” (115). Her life is dictated by her father well into adulthood, not rightfully, but because she is constantly “making allowances” (34) for her abuser and believing the lie that this is somehow what she deserves. This poisonous way of thinking has crept into

almost every Zebulon County household, and its powerful hold is not an easy one for any individual to break.

1.3 The View and Treatment of Human and Nonhuman Animals: The Ericsons and Jess Clark

The Ericsons and Jess Clark serve to a certain extent as foils for Larry, Harold, Ty, and the Zebulon County farming community. The Ericsons are introduced as a family that love nonhuman animals and love one another. They have “a petting zoo” – hogs, dairy cows, beef cattle, sheep, ponies, dogs, chickens, geese, turkeys, goats, gerbils, guinea pigs, cats (“who were allowed in the house”), two parakeets, and a parrot (43). “Animals were Mr. Ericson’s talent and love” (44); he taught his dogs to do tricks, kept cows “because he liked them” (44), and let his chickens and geese run free. All of Mr. Ericson’s practices were scoffed at and ridiculed by Larry, who “certainly disapproved of Cal Ericson’s aspirations, which seemed to be merely to get along, pay his mortgage, and enjoy himself as much as possible” (44).

Almila Ozdek points out that as “much as the Ericson family is liked, they are never respected because they refuse to treat their land as a business, and instead choose to see it as part of a nurturing nature with which they identify themselves” (65). Larry’s farming catechism was that farmers should “feed the world,” “grow more food,” “buy more land,” keep “clean fields, neatly painted buildings, [have] breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water,” and should “not ask...for any favors” (45). As Mary Paniccia Carden notes, “Larry’s narratives of

family/national history license him to outlaw the pleasure of whimsy [embodied in the Ericsons] and to rule his wife and daughters through the discipline necessitated by the historic demands of ownership, the 'goal' that structures their lives" (193). Cal Ericson, unconcerned with ownership as a primary goal, breaks all of Larry's farming rules.

However, despite the Ericsons' lack of "new methods" (44-45) or monetary prosperity, the Ericsons are the only positive example of a farming family in the novel and seem to be collectively characterized as nonhuman animal lovers: "All of the Ericsons shared a fondness for [their] animals" (43). In addition, their love of nonhuman animals carries over to their love of other people, which is exemplified in the way that their home, like a safe haven, draws in the women of Zebulon County. Mrs. Cook and her daughters found peace and rest in the Ericson household, and Mrs. Cook "liked to go over there" and went at least "for coffee every morning," admiring how Mrs. Ericson knew "how to relax in her own house...as if [she] had remarkable powers" (46). This ability to relax suggests an inner and outer peace and connection that the Ericsons have with one another and with their nonhuman animals – a stark contrast to Larry's "overwhelm[ing]" (190), "looming" (170) presence, of which Ginny says, "I could not drive with [him], or even be in the same room with him" (170). And whereas Larry's identity is wrapped up in the concepts of control, ownership, property, and progress, the Ericsons value interconnection and enjoying life, and do not lose

their sense of identity when farming doesn't work out (135-136), and they have to move back to Chicago.

Jess Clark plays the "role of what standpoint theorists call an outsider within" and is able to have a "critical distance on what he rediscovers at home" (Slicer 67, 68). The residents of Zebulon County "don't really feel comfortable with [Jess]" because "he's just not familiar any more" (157). After dodging the draft, traveling, and experiencing many aspects of life that those of Zebulon County have not, Jess is full of new ideas about everything from farming to philosophies of living. Even more significantly, "Jess helps Ginny and Rose achieve some critical perspective on their marginalized status, a perspective grounded largely on the materializations of their bodies and on their bodies as signs that could stand for other bodies, for the land, for animals, and for other farm women's bodies" (Slicer 68).

Although Jess ultimately ends up assuming "a relation of surrogacy with [Larry]" (Malmgren 440), and is therefore not the best spokesperson for "depatriarchalizing"¹⁸ culture, his experiences and self-reflective abilities allow Ginny and Rose to glimpse other realities for the human and nonhuman animal world. In addition to being a walking botanical encyclopedia, Jess also loves nonhuman animals that are not generally appreciated by humans, such as snakes. After detailing his knowledge of an eastern hognose snake that he finds

¹⁸ "Depatriarchalizing" is a term that feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible uses in "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," as she attempts to imagine the Hebrew Bible stripped of patriarchy (30-48).

in the dump, Jess remarks that these snakes are “one of [his] favorites” (123). And when Ginny expresses that she’s “never thought of having favorite snakes,” (123) Jess goes on to explain that there are lots of “nice” and “beautiful” snakes in Zebulon County: milk snakes, racers, and rat snakes to name a few (123).

Ginny’s connection to snakes reflects that of her father’s; when Jess mentions rat snakes, Ginny interjects with, “Daddy’s killed those” (123). Since *A Thousand Acres* is a retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, it is worth noting that Lear (Larry’s equivalent) says, “sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child” (1.4.287), referring to his eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan (Ginny and Rose in Smiley’s novel). In addition, Lear refers to Goneril and Regan as “kites” (1.4.296), “wolves” (1.4.317), “vulture[s]” (2.4.136), and boars (“boarish fangs” referenced in 3.7.59) – presumably, these are nonhuman animals that Lear disdains or sees as threatening. Larry’s adversarial relation to snakes and nonhuman animals in general inevitably results in death and has also tainted Ginny’s view of these creatures, as well as her view of herself.

Jess recounts a time in his youth when he raised a steer named “Bob the Beef” for 4-H and FFA. Being a vegetarian as an adult, Jess is somewhat disturbed by this memory, but even more offended by a beef industry that does not name their animals or care for them as Jess did with Bob. Although Jess “liked” Bob, he also “liked the money that [he] made when [Bob] was slaughtered” (127). He tries to come to terms with two opposing realities

simultaneously present within him: that his care for Bob was “absolutely real,” but that “from the moment Harold told [Jess] that [Bob] was [Jess’s], Bob was dead meat” (127). This conflation of ownership and death characterizes Larry and Harold’s view of nonhuman animals as commodities; they are terminal animals raised for profit and consumption. As Stephanie Jenkins remarks in “Returning the Ethical and Political to Animal Studies,” humans’ “everyday practices, including what (or who) we eat and wear, mark nonhuman animals as killable... [and] until we recognize the lives of all animate beings as worth protecting, the hierarchical dualisms of human/animal, mind/body, and nature/culture will remain intact” (505). Jess feels responsibility in the death of “Bob” and recognizes that in his youth, he raised “Bob” for slaughter for his own economic gain and because he viewed nonhuman animals as killable.

Although there is not space here to examine feminist theories on the connection between meat consumption and exploitative ideologies, it is worth noting that when it comes to food, Larry is characterized by the amount of meat he consumes (101, 174, 218, etc.). Jess is “the exact opposite of Ginny’s...father who gobbles down meat, overuses insecticides, and drains wetlands” (Olson 26). In this way Jess becomes a foil for Larry, as Jess seems to be the only man in town who is aware and personally concerned with the abuse that nonhuman animals are subjected to within the “animal industrial complex” (Noske 22). Jess remarks, “You know that the new hybrid breeds of chickens fatten so fast that they can’t support themselves on their own legs?...It disgusts me. I don’t want to

eat it, I don't want to do it" (127). Like Derrida, Jess believes he should "sacrifice [the] sacrifice" of nonhuman animal consumption (Derrida 399).¹⁹

Jess, unlike the average American, both recognizes and incriminates himself in the abuse and death of the nonhuman animals that he has consumed. Jenkins links varying levels of responsibility and self-incrimination with the amount of awareness and sympathy an individual possesses:

[T]he ability to be responsive to others, a prerequisite for responsibility, is found in conditioned, bodily responses. Individuals who are not moved by nonhuman animals, who do not perceive their lives as grievable, will not perceive or recognize the atrocities committed against them as violence. (508)

Jess recognizes human and nonhuman animal life as grievable, whereas with Larry, "nothing about the death of [his wife] stopped time for [him], [or] prevented him from reckoning his assets and liabilities and spreading himself more widely over the landscape" (136). Larry does not grieve for his own wife; she is a consumed possession that ends up in Larry's liability column because she left him with three girls to raise in addition to the farming business.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that although Rose's vegetarianism seems connected to her love of Jess and not to her beliefs about the nature of nonhuman animals, it is still her shift to vegetarianism that ultimately saves her from being killed by Ginny's poisoned sausages and "saves Ginny from becoming a murderer" (Olson 30).

Chapter Two: *Prodigal Summer*

In the “*Prodigal Summer*, Politics, and Eco-Politics” section of Linda Wagner-Martin’s biography on Barbara Kingsolver, Wagner-Martin opens by noting that “[w]hen Barbara Kingsolver...confessed to a number of *-isms* – humanism, feminism, environmentalism – as well as being ‘a social advocate,’ she may not have given enough emphasis to one of the most significant: her belief that people could save the planet” (115).²⁰ In Susan Mackenzie’s article “Among the Wild Things,” she quotes Kingsolver as saying that she holds “[t]he belief that by re-imagining the world you can change it” (n. pag.). And this is exactly what Kingsolver seeks to do with *Prodigal Summer* – to change how humans view the world that they are part of so that they can bring about positive changes for a healthy and sustainable future.

Describing *Prodigal Summer* in a radio interview with Noah Adams, Kingsolver said that the novel concerns “‘the biological exigencies of life on Earth[,]...about the human food chain, the connections between humans and our habitat’” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 116). Kingsolver states outrightly on her website: “This novel is not exclusively – or even mainly – about humans. There is no main character. My agenda is to lure you into thinking about whole systems, not just individual parts. The story asks for a broader grasp of connections and interdependencies than is usual in our culture” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 119). As Ceri Gorton aptly notes in her dissertation “‘The Things That Attach People’: A

²⁰ See editor Elisabeth L. Beattie’s “Barbara Kingsolver Interview,” page 163.

Critical Literary Analysis of the Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver,” these interdependencies are even integral to the very structure of the three narratives in the novel. “The very structure of *Prodigal Summer*, with overlapping and interpolated stories, reflects the interrelatedness inherent in ecosystems and in relations between people and their environments” (219).

In “Darwin and Ecology in Novels by Jack London and Barbara Kingsolver,” Bert Bender argues that Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* is a “novel that celebrates and explores Darwin’s great theme of the reproductive force in evolutionary biology, [and] it is also a meditation on his inseparable, fundamental ecological insight – that ‘all organic beings’ ‘are bound together by a web of complex relations’” (125).²¹ For this reason, Kingsolver often asks readers to view the world from an animal’s point of view – whether that animal be a snake, beetle, or coyote – and to observe how a change in vantage point challenges the generally anthropocentric perspective of humans. It is also for this reason that in *Prodigal Summer*, the “events in each of the three primary characters’ lives stem from the earth, the trees, the animals” and “[t]hey themselves are strangely volitionless human beings” (117).

Often espousing common principles of ecology and theories of sexual selection, Kingsolver’s female protagonists lead the way in establishing healthier interconnections between humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment. As

²¹ The quoted phrases “all organic beings” and “are bound together by a web of complex relations” comes from Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, pages 59 and 62.

Richard Magee notes in his article “The Aridity of Grace: Community and Ecofeminism in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer*, the women in *Prodigal Summer* represent the “ideals of ecologically sensitive living who seek to educate their communities about threats to the environment and the defenses against those threats” (15-16). Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie resemble a loosely connected matriarchal family of “coyote women” (200), whose three narratives turn out to be interconnected in ways that they were unaware of. Battling the ideologies of their mates and male community members, these women seek to restore balance to their local ecosystems by facilitating the return of the coyote (Deanna), farming food instead of tobacco (Lusa), and farming organically in a way that is healthy for the environment (Nannie). According to Suzanne Jones in “The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*,” “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” (88). Despite conflicts amongst those with differing viewpoints in *Prodigal Summer*, Paul Gray’s “On Familiar Ground” argues that the subject of the novel “is not the clash of ideologies but the rhythms of nature and man’s misguided attempts to interfere with them” (n. pag).

Bender further notes that “[e]ach of the three narratives accepts the terrible fact that ‘living takes life’ (323),” and Kingsolver offers “three examples of how people might live sustainably,” suggesting that “human beings can adapt to the new conditions of an overpopulated earth” (130). Kingsolver emphasizes that as humans, we need to understand our role within the greater web of life – that we are all inseparably part of nature, as Lusa explains to Cole: “You’re nature. I’m nature. We shit, we piss, we have babies, we make messes” (45). And yet, according to Kingsolver, humans are also powerful and have a unique role to play, as they are able to “reflect, regret mistakes, and change behavior” (Wenz 115) in ways that affect everything around them. An oft-repeated quote from *Prodigal Summer* perhaps best summarizes this idea of impact and the human power of choice: “[S]olitude is only a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed” (1).²²

2.1 Deanna Wolfe, the Predator Lover, and Her Quest for the Elusive Coyote

In the first chapter of *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver introduces the reader to Deanna Wolfe – a 47-year-old divorced woman who has lived alone in the Zebulon National Forest for two years while working a hybrid job for the Forest Service and the National Park Service. After teaching science to seventh graders for ten years and hating it, Deanna went on to graduate school where

²² Kingsolver repeats this quote, like a thematic inclusio, at the end of her novel as well: “Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end. Every choice is a world made new for the chosen” (444).

she wrote her thesis “on the coyote range extension in the twentieth century” (59), the importance of coyotes to ecosystems, and the paradoxical Volterra principle regarding their population numbers.²³ Deanna’s primary emphasis centers around the importance of predators in an ecosystem; hence, her chapters throughout the novel are entitled “Predators,” which Wagner-Martin calls “the strongest narrative of the three” (*Barbara Kingsolver* 117). The final untitled chapter of *Prodigal Summer* echoes the opening of the novel, bringing the three narratives full circle,²⁴ but also revealing that an interconnected web of life has come full circle as well – Deanna Wolfe and the coyote are one. Neither has lost its distinct nature as an individual from a specific species group, and yet the two are inextricably connected as if one inhabits the life of the other and vice versa.

If someone in the forest had been watching her – a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees – he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path and how direly she scowled at the ground ahead of her feet. He would have judged her an angry woman on the trail of something hateful. (1)

²³ See page 258 where Deanna notes that “[o]ne of the things that [her thesis] shows is how people hunting [coyotes] actually increases their numbers” (258). Nannie Rawley explains the same concepts of the “Volterra principle” in regard to insecticides and insect populations on page 216 as well.

²⁴ In *Barbara Kingsolver*, Linda Wagner-Martin argues that “Chapter 31 is a part of none of the three novellas: it is instead a new start, a ‘sweet, damp night at the beginning of the world’” (119). While I agree with Wagner-Martin, I would also argue that Chapter 31 begins its own narrative by wrapping up the three novellas and acting as the launching point for a future sequel.

Compare the opening passage of *Prodigal Summer* (above) about Deanna tracking a coyote to the final chapter of the novel that is written about a coyote, from a coyote's point of view, using the same description:

If someone in the forest had been watching her – a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees – he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path, attending the ground ahead of her feet, so preoccupied with her solitary search that she appeared unaware of his presence. (443-444)

This kinship is something Deanna values, and for reasons of ecological conscience as well as the importance and interdependence of the greater biotic pyramid, Deanna's own personal well-being is wrapped up in the return of the coyote to the Zebulon National Forest.

In "Leopold's Novel: The Land Ethic in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*," Peter S. Wenz states that Aldo Leopold calls for a holistic "land ethic [that] changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (106). Like Leopold, Deanna esteems the biotic pyramid – the concept that energy transfers from the sun to the base of the food pyramid (the soil) and moves up through the food chain to the predators at the top of the pyramid.²⁵ For this reason, both Leopold and Deanna disapprove of

²⁵ In *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River*, Leopold states that the sun's energy "flows through a circuit called the biota, which may be represented by a pyramid consisting of layers. The bottom layer is the soil. A plant layer rests on the soil, an insect layer on the plants, a bird and rodent layer on the insects, and so on up through various animal groups to the apex layer, which consists of the larger carnivores....Proceeding upward, each successive layer decreases in numerical abundance. Thus, for every carnivore there are hundreds of his prey, thousands of their prey, millions of insects, uncountable plants. The pyramidal form of the system reflects this numerical progression from apex to base" (252).

programs that “eliminate keystone predators because their elimination impoverishes ecosystems” (107).

When Deanna finds evidence of a coyote family on Zebulon Mountain, she muses about the significance of the animal’s return:

What she had here on this mountain was a chance that would never come again, for anybody: the return of a significant canid predator and the reordering of species it might bring about. Especially significant if the coyote turned out to be what R.T. Paine called a keystone predator. (62)

As Jones notes, “Deanna Wolfe does not judge coyotes, which are migrating to southern Appalachia, as ‘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” (85).

Deanna’s love for coyotes, and her desire to protect them from local hunters and farmers stems from her desire to see a rebalance in the ecosystem of the Zebulon Mountain area. She explains to her hunter-lover Eddie Bondo that she is primarily interested in coyotes and other predators because “[t]hey’re the top of the food chain...[and] [i]f they’re good, then their prey is good, and *its* food is good. If not, then something’s missing from the chain” (10-11). Deanna informs Bondo that observing the population and health of predators “tells you what you need to know about herbivores, like deer, and the vegetation, the detritivores, the insect populations, small predators like shrews and voles. All of it” (11). The complex biosystems of earth are intricately connected and become

acutely unstable and unhealthy when the biotic pyramid is out of balance.

Deanna explains that killing a coyote does not just affect the individual coyote's life. By eliminating one coyote, "you've let loose an extra thousand rodents on the world that he would have eaten" (320).

Kingsolver defects from some heterarchical ecocentric approaches because she argues that evolutionarily, there is a natural hierarchy involved in order to maintain a balanced pyramid.²⁶ This is not to say that Kingsolver necessarily views one species as more important than another in terms of the overall structure of the environment, but rather that especially when it comes to food choices and environmental impact, humans must prioritize the lives of predators and their importance within the overall structure of the system itself. When Bondo questions Deanna about killing nonhuman animals, Deanna replies that she would "never kill just for fun. Maybe to eat, if I was hungry, but never a predator" (178). Bondo then continues by asking if some nonhuman animal lives matter more than others, "So a deer but not a fox? Plant eaters matter less than carnivores?" (178). Deanna answers that plant eaters "don't *matter* less. But herbivores tend to have shorter lives, and they reproduce faster; they're just geared toward expendability. They can overpopulate at the drop of a hat if nobody's eating them" (178). Conversely, predators are fewer in number, take

²⁶ For an informative background on heterarchy and hierarchy, see Von Goldammer, Paul and Newbury's article "Heterarchy – Hierarchy: Two Complementary Categories of Description." According to this article, Kingsolver advocates an ecological organizational form that incorporates both hierarchy (predator-prey structures) and heterarchy (a complementary symbiotic web of life).

longer to reproduce, and help keep the rest of the biotic pyramid in balance, therefore in Deanna's mind, "[t]o kill a natural predator is a sin" (179).

Kingsolver uses Deanna to argue that humans are biologically omnivores, but maintains that our food choices should always take larger predator-prey dynamics into consideration. For example, while cooking a wild turkey that Bondo killed for Deanna, she explains to Bondo why turkeys (as a prey species) are, and should be, consumed at a much higher rate than other animals higher in the pyramid.

A turkey lays fourteen eggs without half thinking about it. If something gets one of her babies she might not quite notice. If a fox gets the whole nest, she'll go bat her eyes at a tom here and plunk out fourteen more eggs....But still, turkeys are scarce compared to their prey. Grubs and things, there's *millions* of them. It's like a pyramid scheme. (319)

Deanna goes on to argue that "[p]redation's a sacrament...it culls out the sick and the old, keeps populations from going through their own roofs. Predation is *honorable*" (317). She reiterates that her land ethic is holistic and that she doesn't "love animals as individuals" but "as whole species" (177), therefore it's all about "[n]umbers" and "[s]imple math" (319). Wenz, extending Leopold's theories, echoes Deanna's viewpoint: "The ecosystem, a holistic entity, has value over and above, and in most cases more than, the value of its individual components. This...is summed up in Leopold's maxim: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise'" (qtd. in Wenz 107). The

bottom line for Deanna is that “[r]emoving a predator has bigger consequences for a system” (319); therefore the fear of possibly losing a farm animal to a coyote does not outweigh the benefit of a predator living in the forests near the Zebulon Valley.²⁷

This concern for predators and Deanna’s desire to allow nature to run its course without detrimental human impact is the same reason why she doesn’t want to kill spiders – without them, her cabin would be filled with flies. Similarly, when Deanna painstakingly catches and releases a moth from her cabin only to have it immediately snatched out of the air by a phoebe, she realizes that the bird was taking it “to feed her nestlings” (184) as part of a greater natural cycle of life. And as much as Deanna internally rages when the black snake on her roof eats the baby birds out of a nest, she begrudgingly admits that the snake was just “a predator doing its job. Living takes life” (329).

Referencing R.T. Paine’s experiments from the 1960s,²⁸ Deanna describes how the removal of starfish from tidepools caused a significant decrease in the number of species, because the mussel population exploded. “Without starfish, the mussels boomed and either ate nearly everything else or

²⁷ In one of the final “Moth Love” chapters, Lusa explains to Little Rickie why she won’t kill a coyote she saw walking along the fence line near her goats: “[M]aybe, at the worst, it could get one kid, and that wouldn’t break me. I can’t see killing a thing that beautiful just on suspicion....I’m not such a perfect farmer that I can kill a coyote for the one kid it might take from me. There are ten other ways I could lose a goat through my own stupidity. And I’m not about to kill *myself*” (413).

²⁸ See R.T. Paine’s article “Food Webs: Linkage, Interaction Strength, and Community Infrastructure.”

crowded it out. No one had known, before that, how crucial a single carnivore could be to things so far removed from carnivory” (62). Deanna goes on to explain how similar experiments were then replicated with other populations and always with the same result – a severely unbalanced ecological system.

Removing mountain lions from the Grand Canyon resulted in “a monoculture of prolific, starving deer that outbred all other herbivores and gnawed the landscape down to granite” (62-63). In the Zebulon area, killing the minks, river otters, and red wolves, which “had kept muskrats in check” resulted in muskrats overpopulating “to pestilence along the riverbanks over the past fifty years” (63). As the main predator of endangered shellfish, the muskrats had eaten the population into near extinction. Referring to human-based causes for river creature extinctions, Deanna notes that there “were hundreds of reasons for each death – pesticide runoff, silt from tilling, cattle in the creek” (63).

Deanna argues that “[p]lenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system” (63), and it was time that humans started taking responsibility for the power that they wield. She tells Bondo that humans are not following nature’s law when they fail to realize the importance of predators. Again, it comes down to “simple math” (179) in the biological world. “One mosquito can make a bat happy for, what, fifteen seconds before it starts looking for another one? But one bat might eat two hundred mosquitoes in a night...where’s the gold standard here? Who has a bigger influence on the lives of others?” (179). The obvious and only answer to

Deanna's question is: the predator. And by also "affirming human uniqueness" (Wenz 115) throughout the novel, Kingsolver argues that human predators hold a highly influential place within the pyramid and are therefore obligated to develop an ecological conscience for the sake of humans, non-human animals, and the environment.

In regard to predators, Deanna says that the biggest reason they are hunted down is fear, which is also generally linked to a farmer's financial well-being and the losses a farmer *might* sustain if a predator were allowed to live near her/his flocks and herds. Deanna claims that the stereotype of predators as "bad guys" has been "the subject of childhood brainwash" for centuries. "Every fairy story, every Disney movie, every plot with animals in it, the bad guy is always the top carnivore. Wolf, grizzly, anaconda, *Tyrannosaurus rex*... Jaws" (317). Deanna doesn't understand how humans can see themselves as separate from other predator species. "We're the top of our food chain, so you'd think we'd relate to those guys [predators listed above] the *best*. Seems like we'd be trying to talk them into trade agreements" (317).

Deanna describes hiking through "an old-growth forest whose steepness had spared it from ever being logged" (2), and although steep terrain is often enough of a hardship that farmers and loggers have let the forests stand, as Leopold describes in his work, other forests are logged indiscriminately to make

room for pasture land. Although logging is one of Deanna's concerns,²⁹ her primary efforts are focused on removing out-of-season hunters/poachers who come to the forest to eradicate predators. Like Larry Cook, who is admired by his community and yet abuses his own family, nonhuman animals, and the land itself, the predator hunters in *Prodigal Summer* are often viewed as local heroes for their eradication efforts.

Irresponsible hunting/fishing, foresting, and agricultural practices that ignore the needs of the greater biotic pyramid are harmful to the entire biotic community, and yet individuals engaging in such activities are often respected members of their towns, as Larry Cook was in his own. Like Kingsolver and Smiley, Leopold is angered and baffled by this situation as well: "The farmer who clears the woods off of a 75 percent slope, turns his cows into the clearing, and dumps its rainfall, rocks, and soil into the community creek, is still (if otherwise decent) a respected member of society" (245). Leopold laments that "[t]here is yet no social stigma in the possession of a gullied farm, a wrecked forest, or a polluted stream" (202).

²⁹ Deanna mentions that the Magnolia warblers have "not been nesting on this ridge since the thirties, when these mountains got all logged out. Now the big woods are growing back and they're starting to breed up here again" (13). She also educates Bondo on the American chestnut blight that killed most of the chestnut trees, but emphasizes that in their panic and greed to use the wood before it went bad, locals made a run for the hills and logged all of the American chestnuts, including the few that were still healthy and would have survived the blight and perpetuated the species. As a result, the species is basically extinct within the Zebulon area with the exception of a handful that Garnett Walker is trying to crossbreed in an effort to bring the chestnut back again. Additionally, Deanna hears about Cole Widener dying and fears that Lusa will choose to log the forest that lies on her property, as many people have suggested she do (122-123, 250).

Kingsolver and Leopold both understand the unique role of humanity and the importance of technology in our modern world. Even though Leopold claims that “men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution...[and] hardly the sole object of its quest,” he also believes that “man... is now captain of the adventuring ship” (117), and must therefore consider how she/he uses his/her power. Wenz claims that Leopold and Kingsolver advocate that “[e]nvironmental education is key to preserving nature” (121). When people are intimately connected with someone or something, they have a vested interest in the well-being of the Other because the Other has value and/or has become a part of them. As Leopold puts it, “We grieve only for what we know” (52), and therefore humans need to get to know all of nature more intimately once again.

Leopold and Kingsolver both see education and the purposeful development of an ecological conscience as essential for improved stewardship of the entire biotic pyramid. Leopold writes: “It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense” (252). The three female protagonists in *Prodigal Summer* exhibit a keen awareness of ecological issues and lead the way in educating their communities on how to value all aspects of nature. Deanna plays a leading role in developing the principles of a positive land ethic through the importance of predators, and this same didactic mantle is then taken up by Lusa Maluf Landowski and Nannie

Land Rawley with their own nuanced emphases on various creatures and aspects of the ecosystem.

2.2 Lusa Maluf Landowski, the Moth Lover, and Her Instinctual Search for a Place Within the Community

Dr. Lusa Maluf Landowski is a “bug scientist” (346) – an entomologist professor from the University of Kentucky who specializes in the sexual selection habits of moths. She is first introduced as “alone, curled in an armchair and reading furtively” lost in “a description of a virgin *Saturnia carpini* whose scent males flocked to” (30) when her own reading is interrupted by the scent of honeysuckle. This appropriate opening scene captures the recurring sensation of scent within Lusa’s narrative and its powerful biological and evolutionary role within both the human and nonhuman animal world. Her chapters in the novel are titled “Moth Love” and focus on her intuitive search for a place to call home after the untimely death of her husband, Cole.

Lusa’s narrative emphasizes the difference between native and nonnative species in the biotic pyramid and how to maintain a balanced system while accounting for the presence of both. She also provides a positive example of how someone willing to think outside of the traditional box can creatively come up with alternative ways of making a living that promote the health of humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment. In addition, Lusa embodies the instinctual and intuitive senses that many humans have forgotten or ignored and shows the beauty of navigating the journey of life in much the same way that a

moth does – by detecting “currents of scent in the air and, by small increments, discover[ing] how to move upstream” (68).

A city transplant onto the Widener farm, Lusa finds it nearly impossible to fit into the Widener family, and becomes quickly disillusioned after marrying Cole, likening herself to a “mail-order bride, hardly past her wedding and already wondering how she could have left her city and beloved career for the narrow place a rural county holds open for a farmer’s wife” (46). Lusa’s national heritage (half Palestinian and half Polish Jew) and her progressive manner (kept her maiden name after marrying Cole and spends too much time reading) have made her fodder for malicious family gossip, as most Zebulon locals are suspicious of outsiders. Lusa opens her narrative with a jaded description of how she views the Widener family and her position as an unwelcome outsider:

Cole was the youngest of six children, with five sisters who’d traveled no farther than the bottom of the hollow, where Dad Widener had deeded each daughter an acre on which to build a house when she married, meanwhile saving back the remainder of the sixty-acre farm for his only son, Cole. The family cemetery was up behind the orchard. The Widener’s destiny was to occupy this same plot of land for their lives and eternity, evidently. To them the word town meant Egg Creek, a nearby hamlet of a few thousand souls, nine churches, and a Kroger’s. Whereas Lusa was a dire outsider from the other side of the mountains, from Lexington – a place in the preposterous distance. And now she was marooned behind five sisters-in-law who flanked her gravel right-of-way to the mailbox. (33)

Viewing Zebulon County through nonnative eyes, Lusa sees a stagnant family and community, frozen in time and old habits, and skeptically opposed to change and outsiders. As she summarizes it, “Life in Zebulon: the minute you’re born

you're trapped like a bug, somebody's son or wife, a place too small to fit into" (104).

Although Lusa feels like a foreigner who is unable to deflect her community's wary disapproval, this position proves to be a great boon when Lusa is forced to creatively generate enough money to save the farm. Wenz claims that "like kudzu and the Japanese beetle, Lusa is an exotic with a competitive edge over the natives" (117). This statement is somewhat problematic, given that both Kingsolver and Leopold's view regarding exotic species seems to be that "respecting the integrity of ecosystems requires restraining the introduction of exotics" (Wenz 108), as exotics can "derange the channels of [energy] flow or deplete storage" (Leopold 254) within the biotic pyramid. However, the bottomline is about balance and restraining the *overgrowth* of invasive nonnative species such that they find a harmonious place within the greater ecological system.

In the first "Moth Love" chapter, Lusa adamantly defends the nonnative honeysuckle because she has a "fondness for this weedy vine that farmers hated to see in their fencerows" (32). Cole believes that nature must be persuaded "two steps back every day or it will move in and take you over" (45). "Why tolerate a weed," Cole questions, "when you can nip it in the bud?" (45). Although Kingsolver leads readers to sympathize with the majority of Lusa's perspectives on nature, in the end of the novel, Kingsolver has Lusa recant from her initial opinion of the invasive honeysuckle. When Lusa finds that the

honeysuckle has overgrown the garage, she rips the vine “down from the walls in long strands, letting them fall in coils like rope on the ground” (440). Lusa concludes, “It was only honeysuckle, an invasive exotic, nothing sacred. She saw it now for what it was, an introduced garden vine coiling itself tightly around all the green places where humans and wilder creatures conceded to share their lives” (440).

Invasive species often take over and degrade the ecosystem by depleting the energy sources of other creatures in the biotic pyramid. However, if kept in check, even an exotic species has the potential to live harmoniously within a nonnative ecosystem. Wenz argues that Lusa “shows the kind of restraint that Leopold recommends” (118) by refusing to cut down the trees on her property, and by raising goats organically and thereby killing “fifty animals, not [the] fifty thousand” (299) living creatures that would be killed from conventional farming practices. Additionally, Lusa positively invests energy into her community and ecosystem by instilling the youth (namely Little Rickie and Crys) with a love and appreciation for all of nature. Lusa also introduces a new way of thinking to her community through her alternative farming project; she proves that humans can live in harmony with their environment while still making a living.

After Cole dies, the “delegation of husbands” (103) shows up at Lusa’s door to inform her about when they are going to plant tobacco on Cole’s property. Lusa shocks and baffles them when she suggests that she may not want to plant

tobacco (a “drug” in Lusa’s opinion)³⁰ on her farm and is considering other options. This is a two-fold blow to her brothers-in-law because Lusa (as a woman and a widow) is acting as the owner and decision-maker of her farm. Additionally, none of the other farmers have ever successfully grown a crop other than tobacco in that area and cannot imagine growing anything else. Lusa admits that she needs and appreciates the help that the Widener men can provide, but observes that Big Rickie and Herb talk about what they intend to do with her farm as if they “agreed to the fact of Cole’s presence here – and [her] absence” (103). After the men leave, Lusa tells Jewel that “[i]t would be nice to be asked [about what to farm], instead of bossed around like a child” (118).

As Lusa brainstorms about what she could possibly grow or do to save the farm, Jewel, her sister-in-law, suggests that she could log the property for timber, but Lusa argues, “I couldn’t log this hollow” (122). She continues emphatically, “I will not cut those trees down. I don’t care if there’s a hundred thousand dollars’

³⁰ When Lusa gives her reasoning for why she doesn’t want to grow tobacco on her farm, she tells Jewel, “[H]alf the world’s starving, Jewel, we’re sitting on some of the richest dirt on this planet, and I’m going to grow *drugs* instead of food?” (122). Although Lusa is being mindful of global ethical concerns for basic needs (food), Scott Hicks, in “Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991) and Archival Reimaginings of Eco-Cosmopolitanism,” states that the problem with this thinking is that “[p]reserving farmland because it manifests nature fails when, at its base, nature itself is feared and subjugated” (8). Hicks argues that “[d]espite the rhetoric of feeding a starving world and saving precious soil, these objections elide the role of the technologies, practices, and property consolidations in producing these very problems to begin with” (7). However, Lusa demonstrates that she is seeking to remedy or even reverse the negative impacts that a farm can have on its natural environment by refusing to cut down the trees, by allowing predators, such as the coyote, to roam her property unmolested, and by letting the land lie fallow and untouched by chemicals and pesticides. Others, like Leopold, would likely argue that letting a large herd of goats eat much of the vegetation off of the land has its own set of negative environmental results. Nonetheless, given her starting point as an outsider within a traditional farming community, this decision is a step in the right direction that has many positive effects on Lusa’s immediate biotic community.

worth of lumber on the back of this farm, I'm not selling it. It's what I love best about this place...[t]he trees, the moths. The foxes, all the wild things that live up there" (123). Lusa's concern for the overall environment – including the trees, bugs, and nonhuman animal life – is exactly the kind of land ethic that both Kingsolver and Leopold are promoting. Lusa goes on to educate Jewel's daughter, Crys, about why the forests are important to the health of the entire food chain, describing how everything is interconnected. When Crys asks, "Who needs trees?" Lusa replies, "About nineteen million bugs, for starters." (353). Crys continues this child-like line of reasoning, continuing through the levels of the biotic pyramid:

'Who needs nineteen million bugs?'
'Nineteen thousand birds that eat them.'
'So? Who needs birds?'
'I do. You do.' She so often wondered whether Crys was really heartless or only trying to be. 'Not to mention, the rain would run straight down the mountain and take all the topsoil off my fields. The creek would be pure mud. This place would be a dead place.'
Crys shrugged. 'Trees grow back.'
'That's what you think? This forest took hundreds of years to get like this.'
'Like what?'
'Just how it is, a whole complicated thing with parts that all need each other, like having a living body. It's not just trees; it's different kinds of trees, all different sizes, in the right proportions. Every animal needs its own special plant to live on. And certain plants will only grow next to certain other kinds...' (353-354)

Lusa understands the web of life and how each part is interdependent on the others. Although they have never met, Lusa is connected with Deanna within

this greater web: they both share a portion of the same forest,³¹ protect the predators that live there, and care about and promote the same ecological values within their social circles.³² Both women also reflect the cycles of life – their bodies are in sync with nature (menstrual cycling with the moon phases), both of them acknowledge the under-appreciated power of biology within humans (namely pheromones and how much humans unconsciously operate by scent), and both of them see humans as animals whose experiences are much more akin to those of nonhuman animals than are often affirmed within our modern world.

Lusa explains that moths “tell their love across the fields by scent...[in] a language that could carry nothing but love and simple truth” (47). And this is Lusa’s lived experience and challenge to her fellow humans – to feel one’s way, instinctually and intuitively through life until the heart empties “of words” and fills

³¹ Jerry, the Forest Service jeep driver, says that Cole Widener owns the property at the bottom of the mountain, and the Forest Service had to get a “right-of-way through him [Cole] when we rehabbed this cabin [Deanna’s cabin]” (250). Deanna expresses concern about the Widener’s property and the forests on it: “They’ve got some kind of timber, let me tell you. There’s some virgin stuff in there, I swear, right back up against our border. Every year I’m scared to death they’ll discover what they’ve got and log it. It’d cut the heart out of some wonderful habitat, all the way up this side of the mountain” (250). Kingsolver directly connects Deanna and Lusa through conversations like these, demonstrating that the concerns and values of one, are also the concerns and values of the other.

³² Lusa and Deanna’s narratives also intersect by the end of the novel because Lusa becomes the step-mother to Crys and Lowell, who are the grandchildren of Garnett Walker III. In the final chapters, Lusa initiates a visit to Garnett’s farm, thereby facilitating a reunion (and encouraging an ongoing relationship) between the children and their estranged grandfather. At the same time, Deanna, who finds herself pregnant with Bondo’s child, asks permission to live with her own step-mother, Nannie, Garnett’s next door neighbor. Kingsolver heavily implies that in the near future (beyond the close of the novel), that Lusa and Deanna will meet at Garnett and Nannie’s houses someday, and that their children will even grow up knowing one another. Nannie ends the final “Old Chestnuts” chapter by saying to Garnett, “I’m finally going to have a grandbaby in my house, an you’re going to have *two*” (427).

“with a new species of feeling” (46). When community members ask her about her plans, she always answers, “I’ve made up my mind to finish what I started” (437). But what she really wanted to do was to “quote Darwin to them, explaining that there was room in this world even for certain beings who could not eat or speak, whose only purpose was to find and call out the other side of their kind. She had been called here. There was no plan to speak of” (437). By incorporating Darwinian studies on moths, her own deep-rooted instincts, and even the “ghosts” of her family and Cole’s family that appear to her, Lusa is able to do things that her community considers unprecedented and impossible. She saves the Widener farm with her ingenuity, adopts her sister-in-laws two “difficult” children when their mom (Jewel) dies of cancer, and decides to make the Widener family farm her home.

2.3 Nannie Land Rawley, the Mother Earth, and Her Respect for the Intersectionality of All Living Things

The narrative of “Old Chestnuts” juxtaposes Nannie Land Rawley with her long-time neighbor, Garnett Walker III. Both elderly and alone, Nannie and Garnett argue and disagree about almost everything with the familiarity of an old married couple. Their love-hate relationship eventually forms a kind of equilibrium of assumed polarities (yin-yang, feminine-masculine, evolutionist-

creationist, etc.).³³ The final union of these seemingly disparate characters is consummated in the penultimate act of the “Old Chestnut”’s narrative. Garnett goes to Nannie’s property to protect her from what turns out to be only a scarecrow, and this act of concern and love is met by a spontaneous hug from Nannie – the first they had ever shared. After lingering in this affectionate moment for a few minutes – a positive culmination of so many years of contrary interactions – Garnett finally realizes that this embrace was “the main thing he’d been needing to do” (427) all along. And though their acceptance of one another is likely somewhat conditional, their actions toward one another attest to the fact that they value the role and place the other plays within an interconnected existence. Nannie and Garnett’s relationship is one of Kingsolver’s many mini-parables within *Prodigal Summer* that focuses on the importance of every organism within the grand scheme of life.

Garnett Walker III’s primary life project focuses on bringing the American chestnut back from the brink of extinction by cross-pollinating the last few remaining local healthy chestnut trees with a hardy exotic Chinese chestnut species. This time-consuming labor of love, if successful, would rebalance the local forest ecosystem, and preserve a beneficial species that was nearly lost to

³³ Kingsolver seems to use Nannie and Garnett’s disagreements as a kind of polemic for the purpose of illustrating a point-counterpoint argument. Kingsolver most likely carries out both sides of age-old debates for the final purpose of educating, and also possibly for the purpose of demonstrating how to agree to disagree in a relationally-positive and interconnected way. My only critique of this narrative is that it almost over-exaggerates the neighbors’s superficially antagonistic relationship by rehashing many stereotypical debates to the point that the argument itself becomes somewhat farcical in places.

blight and the aftermath of frenzied logging by community members. Similar to Garnett's experiments, Nannie and Garnett spend the bulk of the narrative cross-fertilizing one another's ways of thinking. Although both seem stubborn and unreceptive in many ways, they each consider, and even at times internalize, the heart of what the other is saying. The union of these neighbors is like a marriage of heaven and hell. And appropriately, in Blake's work of the same name, he argues that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy,/ Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (149). Regardless of how antagonistic it may appear at times, Nannie and Garnett's differences are combine to create a more balanced perspective and ethic.

At seventy-five years old, Nannie Rawley is "the first organic grower to be certified in Zebulon County" (86). In many ways, Nannie represents the Mother Earth, caring for each of her creatures (with the exception of snapping turtles and goats). Deanna, her step-daughter, recollects the tender care that Nannie gave to her orchards and the life lessons Nannie taught Deanna based on the trees.

Deanna describes Nannie's trees as if they were Nannie's children:

But Nannie's field saplings were outlaws from seeds never meant to be sown, the progeny of different apple varieties cross-pollinated by bees. Up here stood the illegitimate children of a Transparent crossed with a Stayman's winesap, or a Gravenstein crossed with who knew what, a neighbor's wild apple or maybe a pear. Nannie had stopped mowing this field and let these offspring raise up their heads until they were a silent throng. 'Like Luther Burbank's laboratory,' was how she's explained it to an adolescent girl who wanted to understand, but Deanna could think of them only as Nannie's children. (391)

As a Mother Earth figure, Nannie herself is wild, acknowledges no man-made boundaries, and insists on the miracle of sex (crossing) and the beauty and variety it has evolutionarily created over time. She embraces and honors the products of sex in whatever form they take, including her own illegitimate daughter, Rachel, who was born with Down's syndrome and a hole in her heart and died in childhood. Nannie explained to twelve-year-old Deanna that "[w]hen the genes of one parent combine with the genes of the other, there's more chances for something to go wrong. Sometimes a whole piece can drop out by mistake, or get doubled up. That's what happened with Rachel" (389). But Nannie immediately follows this statement by affirming these biological processes: "But just think what this world would be if we didn't have the crossing type of reproduction" (389).

While others, like Garnett, believe that anything that suggests sex is shameful (Nannie's illegitimate child, how Nannie wears shorts as an old lady, the way young men gather around her, etc.), Nannie celebrates it. When Deanna asks to come live with Nannie because Deanna is pregnant, Nannie does not ask who the father is, nor does she care; she is simply elated with the idea of a baby. Deanna claims that she is going to tell the townsfolk that "the father of her child was a coyote" (432), and when Garnett asks Nannie who the father is, Nannie replies, "I don't care if the daddy's a mountain lion, I'm going to have a grand baby!" (425).

Perhaps most significantly, Nannie affirms the importance of the entire family of the biotic pyramid and the intersectionality of all living things. Nannie is known for buying all of the salamanders that are sold as bait at Grandy's bait store and setting them free because they are becoming extinct within Zebulon County. Garnett writes her a letter questioning, amongst other things, the philosophy behind her actions as a salamander savior. He lists three main questions: Are humans merely one species among many with no special authority? Are humans keepers of the earth, as described in Genesis 1, and therefore given the environment and all nonhuman species to "use for [their] own purposes, even if this occasionally causes this one or that one to go extinct after a while"? (186-187). And "[i]f one species or another of those muddly [*sic*] little salamanders went extinct, who would care anyway?" (187).

Nannie's reply to Garnett's letters illustrates Nannie's posthumanist perspective, as she elaborates on the interconnected web of life, decentralizes human beings, and considers the world from an animal's point of view (as Leopold does).³⁴

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

³⁴ Aldo Leopold demonstrates this same concept through an active story of a mouse and a hawk. "The mouse is a sober citizen who knows that grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks, and that snow falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack: supply, demand, and transport all neatly organized. To the mouse, snow means freedom from want and fear. The rough-leg hawk has no opinion why the grass grows, but he is well aware that snow melts in order that hawks may again catch mice....[T]o him a thaw means freedom from want and fear" (4-5).

me... To [the salamander], a man's a shadowy nuisance (if anything) compared to the sacred business of finding food and a mate and making progeny to rule the mud for all times. To themselves and one another, those muddy little salamander lives mean everything. (215)

Regarding Garnett's interpretation of Genesis 1, Nannie replies that she reads it differently – that humans were given “the mystery of a world that can re-create itself again and again” (217). She goes on to argue that Genesis 1 affirms the sanctity of all life within the biotic pyramid, be it pond algae, salamander, or human. Nannie notes that the Bible also counsels “that gluttony is a sin” and commands, “Thou shalt not kill,”³⁵ which Nannie believes also pertains to humans killing plants and nonhuman animals in order to satisfy their whims and competitive wills (216).

As for Garnett's question about why it matters if one species goes extinct, Nannie cites Garnett's cross-pollinating experiments and reminds Garnett that the chestnut blight devastated his family.³⁶ “The extinction of one kind of tree wreaked pure havoc on the folks all through these mountains – your own family more than any other” (215). Nannie reiterates that just as the chestnut tree holds “a purpose in our world that nothing else can replace,” so “the loss of one kind of salamander would be a tragedy on the same order to some other creature that

³⁵ See *New English Translation Bible*, Ex. 20.13 and Deut. 5.17.

³⁶ Citing Linda Wagner-Martin's arguments in “Keeping an Eye on Paradise’: The Exuberance of *Prodigal Summer*,” Brendan Hawkins notes that Garnett's motives are not necessarily sympathetic to the environment. In fact, his main purpose is to restore the glory of his family name. As Walker states, “Restoring the chestnuts is a symbolic way of keeping the Walker name tied to the Zebulon Mountain with the chance that the name will even spread as the ‘Walker Chestnut’ will spread throughout the Appalachian region to reclaim its former habitats” (47).

was depending on it” (215). Nannie’s main theme, echoes *Prodigal Summer’s* own: “Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don’t see can help you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bite you, and that’s the moral of the story” (216). And this too is Kingsolver’s own moral of the story – the intersectionality of all living things, the value of each, and learning to live in balance with the rest of the biotic pyramid for the good of all.

Conclusion

According to Smiley, “feminists insist that women have intrinsic value, just as environmentalists believe that nature has its own worth, independent of its use to man” (qtd. in Duffy 92). By the end of *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny realizes this truth, and as a result, her life grows “intolerable in retrospect, and every possibility of returning to [it] equally intolerable” (322). Where Larry, Ty, and the men of Zebulon County see a “grand history,” she sees only “blows” (342). Thus, Ginny becomes dangerous to an exploitative patriarchal system because she has the ability to critique and undermine it. She knows that “others” (namely women, nonhuman animals, and the land) paid the price for this grand history that was then covered up and forgotten (342).

This grand history centers on an “anthropologically inspired conquest of nature” ideology (Wenz 113), which nearly always results in tragedy for all of the players involved. As Nannie reminds Garnett, the biotic web of life is a wild,

beautiful, living entity that one should not try to control; to do so is self-defeating and harmful to the entire community. Leopold reiterates this same principle:

In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.” (240)

Larry Clark is a prime example of this self-defeating process, as he is “very much the product of a community, a history, an ideology” (Brauner 664). He, and all of those like him, continue bequeathing an inheritance of pain, poison, and abuse because, as Rose puts it, “they [Larry and the community] all accept beating as a way of life” (302). Rose goes on to tell Ginny, “We have two choices when we think about that. Either they [the community] don’t know the real him and we do, or they do know the real him and the fact that he beat us and fucked us doesn’t matter” (302). According to Rose, either a lack of education and awareness or a blatant disregard for the welfare of others has allowed abusive unbalanced relationships to continue unchecked throughout the community. Similar to the scene in Shirley Jackson’s story, “The Lottery,” in which the whole community stones one member to death each year simply because it is “the ritual,” (n.pag.), exploitative systems continue because they have been handed down and few have questioned them, or even more importantly, taken action against their harmful androcentric and anthropocentric biases and against the communities that perpetuate them.

Ginny's alternative education (through Jess and the Ericson family) and her newfound self-awareness allow her to re-write her own history and set her free (at least in some regards) from the destructive ideologies that most of her community subscribes to. As Marina Leslie notes, Smiley reveals "the intimate connection between memory and revision in the perpetuation of inherited myths, be they familial or social" (35), and because Ginny is able/allows herself to remember and recognize her history, she is able to revise it. She no longer bends to the authority and will of a man; she is free to cultivate her own desires for the first time in her life – even if those desires start with simply moving to the YWCA in St. Paul, waitressing at Perkins, and taking college classes in psychology (330, 333, 358).

In *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Diamond and Orenstein state that "ecofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life. These new stories honor, rather than fear, women's biological particularity while simultaneously affirming women as subjects and makers of history" (xi). At the end of *A Thousand Acres*, the significant fact for Ginny is that she has recognized and dismantled some of the oppressive falsehoods that have plagued her own history, and she has refused to participate in a community that oppresses women, nonhuman animals, and the land. She has begun the "tortured and dark" path into the future that Smiley referred to, and although there is no

moment of exultation at the end of *A Thousand Acres*, there is the hope that Ginny has finally begun to live.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, *Prodigal Summer* picks up the cause of the entire biotic pyramid where the tragedy of *A Thousand Acres* leaves off. *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates what further education and action, especially on the part of liberated women, can achieve in the world. It emphasizes that humans are capable of living in harmony with the environment, and using the positive examples of Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie, Kingsolver challenges readers to be educated about the whole system and to consider economically viable and sustainable ways to live in harmony with the rest of the pyramid. Kingsolver exudes her own hope for the future of humanity and the entire ecosystem through the story of *Prodigal Summer* – the belief that people can save the planet (“Barbara Kingsolver Interview” 163).

According to Barbara Bennett in “Through EcoFeminist Eyes: Le Guin’s ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,’” “[e]cofeminists believe that until we change our perspective of community and see it as a system of cooperation for the betterment of all rather than competition for the success of a few, our world will experience an intensification of these serious problems” (64). Bennett and other ecofeminists admit that “[a] societal structure in which women, men, and nature are equally valued cannot be accomplished overnight” (64), but like posthumanists, they are committed to finding and implementing long-term

solutions and educating society about our interconnectedness and responsibility as humans.

As both of these novels (and “The Lottery” story) argue, humans are culpable for what happens to other human beings, nonhuman animals, the land, and the world. We can either live recklessly like Larry – who believes that “history starts fresh every day,” (216) and deny, ignore, or abusively take advantage of the power we have to affect everything around us – or as Mahatma Gandhi said, we can have a “power based on love [which] is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.” And while *A Thousand Acres* reads like a bleak Shakespearean tragedy, emphasizing the destructive and dire consequences of abuse, exploitation, and domination, *Prodigal Summer* reads like an optimistic sequel to *A Thousand Acres*, emphasizing how humans can positively dismantle exploitative systems by taking action within the microcosms of their own lives. By either individually or communally educating themselves and others about empathy for all beings and the importance of a responsible ecological conscience, humans can lead the way in creating a balanced biosphere that is centered on sustainability and the betterment of all.

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