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Ecofeminism and a New Agrarianism: The Female Farmer in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), and Thomas Jefferson, in "Notes on Virginia" (1788), identify the self-reliant yeoman farmer as the representative American, articulating an agricultural vision for the nation in what has come to be called "the agrarian myth." Despite the enduring archetypal status of the farmer in this myth, in contemporary America the notion of an independent yeoman working a small farm has become increasingly unrealistic to the point of fantastical. The farming population currently constitutes less than two percent of the national total, farm production comprises only about one percent of the seven trillion dollar U.S. economy, and the farmer is anything but self-sufficient. Farming is heavily specialized, industrialized, subsidized. Moreover, evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the domination of corporate agribusiness has come at the expense of the economic, social, and environmental health of America's rural communities. Rural communities in America are growing sparser, older, and poorer, and for the most part, urban Americans have no contact with farmers or agriculture. Clearly, we live in a post-agrarian age.¹

Nevertheless, a core of writers believe that an alternative vision for the farmer is still possible and, in fact, necessary. Wendell Berry, central among these voices, argues that the bankruptcy of Crèvecoeur's and Jefferson's agrarian dream has made us *all* culturally poorer, and in both his fiction and nonfiction he promotes a rehabilitated relationship between people and the land in rural regions. Importantly, Berry aims

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not merely to reinstate the small, sustainable farmer as a viable player in American agriculture but also to reconceptualize the traditional yeoman's relationship with the land. A good farmer cares for the land because it and its surrounding ecosystem give the farmer life and a livelihood. Berry explains in his seminal *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977): "The healthy farm sustains itself the same way that a healthy tree does: by belonging where it is, by maintaining a proper relationship to the ground" (183). For Berry, the question is not *whether* or not humans, generally, and farmers, specifically, will shape and influence their environments, but *how*. Hence, Berry's new agrarianism gives attention to the nuances of particular places and the specific ways in which they might be sustainably used—this responsible land use is the basis of good human and community health.

A number of writers and scholars, however, insist that any reconceptualized agrarian myth must go even further than reinstating the Jeffersonian yeoman and restoring the farmer's relationship with the land—it must also expand to include in its much-celebrated community those who have been traditionally absent. In "Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley" (1996), Jack Temple Kirby argues that in addition to the contemporary dominance of corporate agriculture, "there is another crisis that may be insoluble, one Thomas Jefferson apparently never considered. This is discontent within families, especially among females, within a quintessentially patriarchal institution" (590). Deborah Fink is even more explicit about the inadequacy of the original agrarian myth, arguing in *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (1992) that women "were peripheral in Jefferson's writings and in succeeding elaborations of the agrarian myth," and as a result agrarianism has taken "only secondary and derivative notice of women" (22, 189). She asserts: "Jefferson's sparse references to farm women and his other reflections on women's proper place in society made clear that women's inequality was integral to his ideal society. His agrarian vision hinged on the subordination of women. Women were not farmers, and they did not gain property ownership through their labor" (19). Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991), as well as Don Kurtz's lesser known *South of the Big Four* (1995), both dark critiques of industrialization in rural America, epitomize the extent to which the destruction of rural communities and ecosystems is propelled by the *male* farmer and fueled by the inherent patriarchy of the traditional agrarian pastoral.

I am particularly interested in the way two novels, Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* (1997) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), present provocative alternatives, where female farmers assume





a central role in the portrayal of a new, ecologically based agrarianism. Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, set in the Civil War, depicts two women living on and farming a 300 acre parcel in the Blue Ridge Mountains; and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* narrates the separate stories of three contemporary women living in Kentucky's Appalachian mountains—an older woman who has been a long-time organic fruit grower, a young urbanite learning to farm her recently deceased husband's small farm, and a wildlife biologist whose commitment to environmentalism is based upon her farm upbringing. Both novels present an ecofeminist vision for the farm. In *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995), Patrick Murphy suggests "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). Frazier and Kingsolver apply these intertwining terrains to agrarianism. As a result, both authors respond to Glen Love's request "to redefine pastoral," to which the American agrarian myth belongs, "in terms of the new and more complex understanding of nature" (231), depicting a new agrarianism that revises the traditional myth, rendering it better suited to the values, concerns, and needs of our present era.

The narratives by Frazier and Kingsolver are not the first to deal with female farmers, of course. Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1911) and *O Pioneers!* (1913) and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1937) come to mind as examples of American authors who vividly portray independent, intelligent, and self-reliant women in farming. In fact, Cather's *O Pioneers!*—with its future-thinking and place-minded farmer, Alexandra—is a prototype of the ecofeminist novel. But the two texts I intend to examine differ from these earlier examples in several ways—in addition to having been written in a post-agrarian age, they deal more explicitly with the current challenges encountered by those who wish to find alternative, more sustainable approaches to farming: the relearning of forgotten skills, the reinvigorating of lost traditions, the reconciling of an urban education with an agrarian lifestyle.

The novels by Frazier and Kingsolver suggest that integral to redefining the American pastoral is a rehabilitated understanding of literary nostalgia, a nostalgia that harks back to its original meaning. Nostalgia comes from the Greek "nostros," which means return or a return home, and "algos," which means pain or sorrow—literally, the word means a painful desire for home or "homecoming." The word was first used by Johannes Hofer in 1688 to name what doctors thought at the time was a type of physical disease afflicting some individuals who left their home village or country. (Garber 444; Starobinski 85; Rubenstein 169)





Interestingly, the shift in the original meaning of nostalgia coincided with the gradual demise of the small village and the growth of the large city, along with a European tendency for individuals to move more frequently during a lifetime. As people have become less rooted to a particular place, the sense of nostalgia as a “homesickness” has fallen out of use. Jean Starobinski, in “The Idea of Nostalgia” (1966), explains: “The village environment, highly structured, constituted an important influence. The desire to return had a literal meaning; it was oriented toward a given geographical area; it concentrated on a given localized reality. It is evident that the decline of the theory of nostalgia [in its medical sense] coincided with the decline of particularism in the provinces [...]. Looking back toward home is no longer a torment; returning no longer has any beneficial effect” (169). Nostalgia has since come to be more closely associated with the loss of a certain *time*, particularly the loss of childhood or youth, rather than a *place*. (Starobinski 94; Rubenstein 4-5). In this sense, nostalgia has attained a more existential meaning of loss, indicating an experience that is always in the past, always a part of memory, and therefore permanently out of one’s reach. In “Pastoral Spaces” (1988), Frederick Garber suggests: “Given the nature of nostalgia, which is essentially a looking back, a longing for what one no longer has, it is clear how pastoral, described as basically nostalgic, has come to be seen as escapist” (443).

However, Roberta Rubenstein, in *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction* (2001), examines the way literary narratives can use nostalgia to “fix” the past, which she explains as “a process that may be understood in two complementary figurative senses. To ‘fix’ something is to secure it more firmly in the imagination and also to *correct*—as in *revise* or *repair*—it” (6). Although she does not deal at length with the relationship between people and place, she does allude to the possibility that literary nostalgia can be “reparative” in its confrontation with the desire for a lost homeland. The texts by Frazier and Kingsolver present this very confrontation. Both novels are marked by nostalgia in its more literal meanings—a longing for home, a home in a particular natural place. The importance of place figures prominently into the texts by Frazier and Kingsolver, both of which portray women whose environmental sensitivity and concern emerge from their commitment to “staying put”² in their rural home, their return to their childhood homes, or their efforts to make a home for themselves in a particular place. Hence, home is presented as “fixed” in a specific place, and furthermore, by allowing female farmers a central role in an ecologically based agrarian and egalitarian culture, Frazier and Kingsolver are *correcting* or *revising* the traditional





Jeffersonian myth and so “fixing” our conception of what an American pastoral can and should be.

Kingsolver’s three main female characters each demonstrate their commitment to home and place in three different forms. Nannie Rawley, an older woman who is the “first organic grower to be certified in Zebulon County,” has spent her life in the Appalachian mountain community, and her opposition to pesticide use and her participation in local marketing arises from a long-time residency in the area. Deanna Wolfe has recently returned to Zebulon County, after a twenty-five-year absence, to work as a wildlife biologist. From her mountain workplace, she can see the farming community where she grew up, and the regularity of this view provides a continual reminder to her of what her father, a farmer, taught her about her home place and how the natural world works. She says of her father: “[M]y dad wasn’t a scientist. He could have been [...]. If you spent a hundred years in Zebulon County just watching every plant and animal that lived in the woods and the fields, you still wouldn’t know as much as he did when he died” (170). Deanna’s extensive knowledge of the mountain where she lives results not simply from her upbringing and education, although certainly these have enhanced it, but also the months she has spent roaming through the woods, learning to recognize its plants and animals from every angle, from all perspectives. Lusa Maluf Landowski is an urban transplant, who soon after arriving to Zebulon County feels “like a frontier mail-order bride [...] wondering how she could have left her city and beloved career for the narrow place a rural county holds for a farmer’s wife” (46), but nevertheless eventually finds a place for herself not as a farmer’s wife but as a farmer.

Lusa’s story, even more than the stories of Nannie and Deanna, is one of coming to know a place, of *making* oneself at home. After the untimely death of her husband, Lusa struggles to find a connection to Zebulon county that extends beyond her marriage to one of its residents. Much of her struggle rests in the conflicts between her urban upbringing and advanced education and the values of the rural community. In large part, it is her growing knowledge of and affection for the natural region that strengthens her resolve to make the place her permanent home. In Lusa’s opening scene, she and Cole are arguing over what Lusa sees as excessive chemical use on plants such as honeysuckles, a disagreement that reflects their different perceptions about land use. For Lusa, a city girl, honeysuckles are aesthetically pleasing and seemingly harmless, while for her husband they are an invader to the region that threaten to overtake his crops and outbuildings. In exasperation, Cole insists: “People get sentimental in a place where nature’s already been dead for fifty years, so they can all get to mourning it like some





relative they never knew” (44). In this comment he articulates the urban tendency, a marker of the earliest pastoral, to romanticize what is no longer known. Certainly, the herbicide use is a problem. But for the farmer, the honeysuckle is also a problem that must be addressed. In the closing scene of the novel, Lusa no longer romanticizes the honeysuckle, and she finds herself ripping long strands of honeysuckle off her barn. This concession illustrates Lusa’s reconciliation with her place, her new home. While she hasn’t changed her views about herbicide or resorted to killing the honeysuckles with chemicals, Lusa does understand that they must be controlled lest they jeopardize the native plants and the structure of the barn, a building which is now her responsibility to maintain. In her gradually changing perceptions, Lusa comes to realize there was a certain arrogance in her belief that she could give advice about a place without knowing it well. Coming to *know* Zebulon County teaches Lusa a humility in the presence of the natural world that she could not have known in the city.

After Cole dies in a automobile accident, Lusa surprises her neighbors and herself when she decides to stay on the farm rather than return to Lexington. She does so on her own terms, however, choosing to raise goats (to market in New York during Jewish and Islamic holidays) rather than continue raising the tobacco her husband had raised for many years. This new venture—this risk—results from her intelligence, cultural background, and urban sensibilities. In Lusa readers see possibilities for reconciling our urban-dominated culture with agrarianism. Significantly, farming forces Lusa to engage herself with the land. This engagement is furthered when she begins to explore the outer regions of the farm with Jewel’s daughter, Crystal. Equally important, it is Lusa’s engagement with the land that enables her to gradually become a part of the human community as well. Farming forces her to reach out to other people. She establishes a relationship with Garnett Walker, for instance, when she needs his advice about raising goats, and she recruits the assistance of Cole’s nephew, Little Ricky. Her discovery that Crystal and Lowell, whom she babysits more frequently as Jewel grows sicker with cancer, are Garnett’s grandchildren brings explicit attention to the way relationships with both people and the land are far more complex and interconnected than we might imagine.

Hence, the ecological and ecofeminist “web of life,” the idea that the natural world is intricately and delicately intertwined, a theme that Kingsolver emphasizes repeatedly throughout the novel, has a social corollary as well. Farming is the means by which Lusa becomes intertwined in both the natural and communal world of Zebulon county—it is the means by which she comes to know the land and the people. Little Ricky articulates the place Lusa has discovered for her-





self when he says, "You like the country, then. You like farming. You were meant for it." Lusa admits that even though she "was born into such a different life, with these scholarly parents" (411) who "had no more acquaintance with actual farm work than could be gleaned on a Saturday drive through the racehorse pastures east of Fayette County" (42), the place and the farm have taken hold of her—and perhaps her long-time interest in insects (she has a graduate degree in entomology) foreshadowed the rural home she would eventually find.

Lusa fully commits herself to Zebulon County when she decides to adopt Crystal and Lowell, whose mother is dying. In this decision, Lusa establishes an alternative family unit, and her decision to reunite the children with their estranged grandfather, Garnett, indicates that the family will be even further extended. Because Garnett lives next door to Nannie, the reader suspects Lusa will eventually meet both Nannie and Deanna, intelligent and progressive women like herself, which promises an additional strengthening of community ties and further reiterates the ecofeminist notion of the interconnections between people. Lusa symbolically solidifies her connection to the place and people, as well, when she decides to take her husband's name "Widener" several months *after* his death. She does so because the farm she has inherited is known as the "Widener place"—in assuming its name, she reinforces her connection to it. She explains to Jewel: "As long as I live on this place, I'm going to be Miz Widener, so why fight it? [...] I'm married to a piece of land named Widener'" (383). While she resisted taking her husband's name earlier, presumably because of what she perceived as a loss of identity in doing so, Lusa finds that once she has begun farming herself and made Zebulon County her home, she is able to accept the label. It no longer seems an oppressive patronymic because Lusa has *chosen* it and because it signifies that she has been "blessed with a piece of the world's trust" (413) and has gained guardianship of two of its children.

Lusa's growing familiarity and commitment with Appalachia seem to be symbolized in her recurring dream of the male Luna moth whose presence, both "comforting" and sexual, speaks to her through a scent that "burst onto her brain like a rain of lights" and "wrap[s] her in his softness, touch[ing] her face with the movement of trees and the odor of wild water over stones, dissolving her need in the confidence of his embrace" (345). Remarkable in its similarity to Alexandra's repeated dream of the strong man who is "yellow like sunlight [...] and [smells] of ripe cornfields" (120) in Cather's *O Pioneers!*, the moth motif appears to be about the encounter with and growing connection between Lusa and the particular place in which she finds herself. Every time the moth appears, he says, "I know you." When Lusa replies, "You know





me well enough to find me here," he replies, "I've always known you that well." Like the honeysuckle branch Cole picked for Lusa as a peace offering after their fight about using herbicide, the moth sends her a "wordless message by scent" (48), and the message appears to be that Lusa belongs where she is.

In fact, the importance of place in Kingsolver's novel cannot be considered separately from the large presence of the nonhuman world in the story. Much attention is given to the extent to which the lives of animals and people intersect, interconnect, collide. Aside from the fact that all of the main characters are actively engaged in some form of conservation—Deanna is tracking and monitoring the predator population on the mountain, Nannie is practicing organic farming, Garnett is attempting to reintroduce the extinct chestnut through plant breeding, and Lusa is trying to find a sustainable way to farm—the natural world appears as an additional character. Furthermore, nature appears to challenge the notion that humans affairs are most important. For example, in the opening lines of the novel's first chapter, Kingsolver describes Deanna walking through the forest: "Her body moved with the frankness that comes from solitary habits. But solitude 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). The point of view of the novel's last chapter is that of a female coyote.

Throughout the novel, nature has a presence so insistent that it often cannot be ignored, such as the way Lusa notices "the mountains breathed [...] the steep hollow behind the farmhouse took up one long, slow inhalation every morning and let it back down through their open windows and across the fields throughout the evening—just one full, deep breath each day" (31). The mountain's breath enters Lusa consciousness, inviting her into a genuine encounter with place; she discovers that the "inhalations of Zebulon Mountain touched her face all morning. [...] She learned to tell time with her skin, as morning turned to afternoon and the mountain's breath began to bear gently on the back of her neck. By early evening it was insistent as a lover's sigh" (31). The mountain, much like the moth, appears to embrace Lusa, to draw her into a deeper sense of dwelling in a particular time and place. Kingsolver's language and symbolism evokes the interconnection between human sexuality and the earth, the relationships emphasizing mutual interdependence and procreation. The symmetrical structure of the novel, wherein the closing images of each protagonist's last chapter repeats or parallels that of the first, reinforces the cyclical rhythm of the natural world.





Although initial book reviewers criticized Kingsolver for making her ecological theme overly “didactic”³—for example, *Time* magazine reviewer Paul Gray accuses Kingsolver of making the message too contrived, arguing “right thinking may seldom triumph in the real world, but it’s her novel and she’ll run it the way she sees fit” (90)—I argue that Kingsolver is writing fiction that is intentionally utopian. In other words, she is deliberately trying to show an alternative vision for the way humans think about their *place* in the world’s ecological systems and, in this way, she encourages us to reform the way we live and the way we think about home.⁴ By presenting two female farmers—one a young, inexperienced, urban-raised woman who nevertheless chooses to farm—Kingsolver suggests the possibility of returning to an agrarian life, one that is ecologically healthy and socially equitable, despite the odds in contemporary America, and in doing so, she promotes a new pastoral.

In Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain*, place figures as prominently into the story, characterization, and theme as it does in Kingsolver’s text. In fact, the two parallel story lines of Frazier’s novel—one about Ada Monroe learning (under her friend Ruby’s tutelage) to know a place and take care of herself by farming that place, the other about Inman longing for and finally returning home—concern, on the one hand, the making one’s home in a particular place and, on the other, nostalgia in its original sense. Like Lusa, Ada is an urban woman. She finds herself, after the death of her father and the departure of her farm hand, alone on a farm about which she knows practically nothing. As with Lusa, it is through farming that Ada undergoes a profound encounter with the particular place in which she finds herself. Unlike Lusa, however, Ada has the benefit of a mentor, the illiterate but intelligent and extremely self-reliant Ruby, who appears at her door one day, offering to help her run the farm. Ada’s growing knowledge of the natural environment around her must be seen as a reflection of Ruby’s intimacy with nature. Ruby “listed as achievements the fact that by the age of ten, she knew all the features of the mountains for twenty-five miles in any direction as intimately as a gardener would know his bean rows” (110), and Ada soon learns that

Ruby always seemed to know the compass points and to find them significant, not just when giving directions but even in telling a story and indicating where an event happened. West bank of the Little East Fork, east bank of the West fork, that sort of thing. What was required to speak that language was a picture held in the mind of the land one occupied. Ada knew the ridges and coves and drainages were the frame of it, the skeleton. You learned them and where they stood in relation to each other, and then you filled in the details working from those





known marks. General to particular. Everything had a name. To live fully in a place all your life, you kept aiming smaller and smaller in attention and detail. (388)

Ada comes to recognize in Ruby's careful attention to the natural world a "stewardship, a means of taking care, a discipline" (134).

Ruby's values regarding land use contrast significantly with those initially held by Ada and her father upon their arrival to the Blue Ridge Mountains. For Ada and her father, who is referred to simply by his last name, Monroe, land value was found primarily in its aesthetic value. Monroe bought the Black Cove farm because he "liked the picturesque setting, the lay of the land [...]. He liked the arc of the wooded hillsides as they swept up, broken by ridge and hollow, to Cold Mountain" (60). He had no intention of farming himself, of course, as he assumed cash would "[continue] to flow from his Charleston investments in rice and indigo and cotton," and he let "parts of [the farm] lapse," preferring instead to operate it "as an idea," having "never developed much interest in the many tiresome areas of agriculture" (31). That he was committed exclusively to the "picturesque" is illustrated in his request for the farm manager to purchase sheep and place them in the field "[f]or the atmosphere" (31). Monroe was much influenced by Emerson, devoted to him in fact, as evidenced in everything from his sermons to his horse, named Ralph, and his cow, named Waldo, and certainly this devotion, along with his fondness for Wordsworth, influences his understanding of nature. For Monroe, all of nature is an "elaborate analogy. Every bright image in the visible world only a shadow of a divine thing, so that earth and heaven, low and high, strangely agreed in form and meaning because they were in fact congruent" (377). Until she was left alone and helpless on the farm, Ada's view of the land was similarly aesthetic and transcendental. She admired the land surrounding her, often sketching what she saw, and found metaphorical meaning in it, but she neither knew its parts by name nor physically engaged with it. Not surprisingly, Ada and her father become objects of amusement and private ridicule in the Cold Mountain area because they "stayed too long green in the country they had taken up" (77).

All this changes after Monroe dies and once Ruby arrives. As the women work together, Ruby regularly quizzes Ada on facts about the plants and animals, forcing her to become more familiar with her surroundings. Ruby's objective is to teach Ada "the running of this land" (288). When at one point Ruby asks Ada to identify a noise they could hear outside the barn, Ada replies, "'Trees,'" an answer to which Ruby, who "seemed to delight in demonstrating how disoriented Ada was in the world" (137), responds "contemptuously, as if she had expected just such a foolish answer" (289). "'Just general trees is all?'" she asks.





"You've got a long way to go" (289). Ada decides that "what [Ruby] meant was that this is a particular world. Until Ada could listen and at the bare minimum tell the sound of poplar from oak at this time of year when it is easiest to do, she had not even started to know the place." Ruby's knowledge of the world does not discriminate, and Ada notices that "Ruby's lore included [...] [t]he names of useless beings—both animal and vegetable—and the custom of their lives apparently occupied much of Ruby's thinking, for she was constantly pointing out the little creatures that occupy the nooks of the world" (137). Ruby sees herself as but one part of a larger ecosystem, and her attention to various natural events as signs of when she should do certain tasks, such as when to plant corn or kill a hog (134), reinforces the extent to which she understands how humans are dependent on nature.

Immersed for the first time in the physical world by way of bodily labor, Ada finds that as she grows to know her farm, Black Cove, and its surrounding area, she grows "increasingly covetous of Ruby's learning in the ways living things inhabited this particular place" (134). Ada does not pay attention simply because Ruby insists she must, but because she wants to see herself in "the picture held in the mind of the land one occupied" (388), the mental picture where everything has a name. Although she often recognizes with some irony the disparity between her former life among the privileged wealthy and her present life of, for instance, making scarecrows to keep the crows off her corn, a "life now where [she must] keep account of the doings of particular birds" (239), Ada believes the changes she has undergone are for the better. Several months into her life as a female yeoman, Ada identifies herself as content, perhaps for the first time in her life (327). In "Closing the Distance to Cold Mountain" (2000), David Heddendorf suggests that Ada "finds her figurative place in the world by acknowledging the literal place where she lives, with its weeds to hoe (and name), its cider to press, its kindling and herbs to gather" (192).

One day a few months into her life as a farmer, Ada concludes that "[w]ere she to decide fully to live in Black Cove unto death," she would mark "the south and north points of the sun's annual swing" in the tree line surrounding her property." She feels that in doing so, "the years [would] seem not such an awful linear progress but instead a looping and a return. Keeping track of such a thing would place a person, would be a way of saying, You are here, in this one station, now. It would be an answer to the question, Where am I?" (330). In this decision, one that acknowledges the overriding cycle of the earth, a cycle of which humans are just a part, Ada demonstrates her growing attachment to the rhythms and forces of *her* place on earth. Readers know Ada has made good on her promise when in the epilogue we learn that several





years later she lost the tip of her right forefinger one winter day while cutting the treetops in order to mark where the sun had been on the winter solstice. Ada has become native to her place.⁵

The story of the primary male protagonist, Inman, deserves attention, too, because his longing for home is so clearly an example of nostalgia in its original sense, literally a “homesickness,” and like Odysseus, this sickness propels him toward his place on earth. Heddendorf points out that both Inman and Ada journey “toward a place,” and “Cold Mountain becomes the halfway house toward which, over different terrains and with different companions, the recovering lovers converge—he from the savagery and violence, she from the opposite pole of artifice and refinement” (192-93). After nearly losing his life to a gun wound in the neck, Inman deserts the Confederate army, sickened by the violence in which he has participated. When pressed on the issue, Inman explains that he originally joined the war effort to keep the industrialized, urban north from invading his homeland (275). But by the time the reader meets Inman at the beginning of the novel, he has decided that he wants only to be left to live in his home community near Cold Mountain (85). During his gradual recovery in the hospital, he did little other than look “out the window and [picture] the old green places he recollected from home” (4), and these remembered places pull him into his long foot-journey to Cold Mountain.

Inman’s attachment to *Bartram’s Travels* is particularly important because William Bartram, a naturalist who for four years immersed himself in the flora and fauna of the southern states, recording his findings and compiling a survey of the region, contrasts markedly with Emerson in his approach to nature. Bartram understands the natural world of the Blue Mountain region, as well as its surrounding regions, not as an allegory of the human spiritual journey, but, rather, as a literal place, a particular place, worth knowing and naming in detail. The distinction between Bartram and Emerson creates a crucial dialogue in the novel about the nature of humans’ relationship with the earth. For Inman, *Bartram’s Travels* acts as his inspiration and comfort during darkness, both figurative and literal. He uses it to fight insomnia, as its “images made Inman happy” and “never failed to ease his thoughts” (15), and reading it gives him the resolve to continue on his hard course home, as it prompts Inman to remember all about the place on earth that is precious to him: “Cold Mountain, all its ridges and coves and watercourses. Pigeon River, Little East Fork, Sorrell Cove, Deep Gap, Fire Scald Ridge.” Like Ruby, he knows the details of his home topography: “He knew their names and said them to himself like the words of spell and incantations to ward off the things one fears most” (16).





When Inman finally gets back to his home region and sees Cold Mountain for the first time in several years, “there was growing joy in [his] heart. He was nearing home [...]. He had achieved a vista of what for him was homeland. [...] He looked out at this highland and knew the names of places and things. He said them aloud [...]. Not a bird or bush anonymous. His place” (355). Once he finally reaches his home, reunites with Ada, and makes plans to marry her and stay home, “the years happy and peaceful” as he and Ada “run their lives by the roll of the seasons” (433), Inman is killed. As he dies, the last images running through his mind are of his home in every season of its agrarian splendor:

He drifted in and out and dreamed a bright dream of home[...], [where] the year seemed to be happening all at one time, all the seasons blending together. Apple trees hanging heavy with fruit but yet unaccountably blossoming, ice rimming the spring, okra plants blooming yellow and maroon, maple leaves red as October, corn tops tasseling, a stuffed chair pulled up to the glowing parlor hearth, pumpkins shining in the fields, laurels blooming on the hillsides, ditch banks full of orange jewelweed, white blossoms on dogwood, purple on redbud. Everything coming around at once. (445)

Inman finds comfort in the face of death in the earth’s cycles, its tenacity and ability to bring forth life and beauty over and over. That Inman dies in his home is a victory, despite the tragedy that it comes so unexpectedly and after such an arduous journey, for Frazier suggests that when we find our way home our lives have meaning and purpose that they lack outside of it. The fact that Ada remains on the farm and bears Inman’s child, a child who grows up on the farm in the region that was so loved by her father, reinforces the hope of Inman’s “bright dream of home.” Frazier’s text implies that returning to the land is an act of reclaiming hope and meaning, even in view of our relentless capacity for violence against all life, human and nonhuman. When we reconcile ourselves to our place on earth, life is “not such an awful linear progress but instead a looping and a return” (330). Significantly, homesickness leads to reclamation of and reconciliation to the earth, making Frazier’s novel both nostalgic *and* an example of a new pastoral myth.

In “Terrain, Character and Text: Is *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier a Post-Pastoral Novel?” (2001/2002), Terry Gifford argues that Frazier’s novel is a “post-pastoral” text because it addresses seriously the nature of a “morally acceptable relationships between people and the land” (91). He explains that the novel shows characters learning how to live with the land and its people—how to treat both well, and in this sense “Frazier has produced a text that asks us to confront some character-





testing lessons located in a landscape that demands ‘doing things right’ in all its subtle sense, where readings of landscape render ecology and ethics inseparable” (96). Of course, these features are what make it so clearly an example of ecological, feminist literature. Gifford suggests that ecological and social ethics are “learned from reading the land as traveller or farmer so that the exploitation of people in the war becomes a metaphor for an unsustainable way of living on the land. The narrative technique of alternating between travelling and farming endorses Frazier’s interest in people and in land and their capacity to live together” (95).

I argue that this point is reinforced by the fact that Inman is also a farmer. The reader learns this when Inman easily uses a scythe against the first group of men who attack him during his trip home. Although he is forced to use the tool as an unlikely weapon, “he found that all the elements of scything—the way you hold it, the wide-footed way you stand, the heel-down angle of the blade to the plane of the ground—fell into the old pattern and struck him as being a thing he could do to some actual effect” (75). In other words, the comfort of using the scythe come not from using it as a weapon but, rather, because he knows how to move it correctly. I would also take Gifford’s point one step further and suggest that Inman’s lessons in “‘doing things right’” come not only from his war experiences and his journey home but also from his former relationship with the land as a farmer.⁶ Inman undergoes great danger and hardship in order to return home *and* to fulfill what he perceives as his true calling: to till rather than kill. That he rejects a masculinity marked by violence and instead chooses one that is domestic includes him in the ecofeministic ideology of Frazier’s novel.⁷ That he is a farmer makes his experience particularly relevant to an exploration of a new, ecological, place-based agrarian myth.

Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* provides also a provocative exploration of gender roles and the relationship between freedom and the female body in a revised agrarian myth. When she arrives on Ada’s farm, Ruby makes it clear that her primary condition for staying is that she be treated as an equal in the household community. Shortly after her arrival, she informs Ada: “[I]f I’m to help you here, it’s with both us knowing that everybody empties their own night jar” (68). From then on, the women farm together as work partners, initially, and friends, eventually. Of significance is the fact that Ruby does not simply refuse to be a servant; she also expects Ada to do the same tasks she does. In other words, their chores do not differ in any marked way: both participate in the house work—the cooking, churning, cleaning—as well as field work—the hoeing, haying, and chopping of wood. Ruby, whose “recommendations extended in all directions, and [...] never seemed to





stop" (93), supervises and plans most of the work because she knows so much more than Ada, but the reader sees that as Ada learns, she takes on greater responsibilities, gradually contributing more fully to the partnership. Their relationship, in other words, illustrates the ecofeminist web of shared interdependency. Although Ruby and Ada do the work of men and sometimes even dress or behave as men would, Frazier does not attempt to masculinize them. They are allowed to maintain their gender difference, as evidenced in the example of how they manage to cut trees for firewood. When Ada wonders if they have the strength for the task, Ruby "argue[s] in detail that it [does] not necessarily require pure power. Just pacing, patience, and rhythm" (324). In other words, they do not have to defy or deny their sex in order to farm, but neither do they forego any of the tasks, even the heaviest labor traditionally relegated to men exclusively. The difference lies not in whether they do a task or not, but in *how* they accomplish the task.

The implications of learning to farm are for Ada profound. A well-educated and intelligent woman, Ada can speak several languages, play the piano, do needlework and draw, as well as discuss art, books, and politics. Interestingly, these skills reflect her father's progressive attitude regarding women and education. Ada was raised to believe she was an intellectual equal with men, and in an urban setting her skills served her well in demonstrating and allowing her to enjoy her educational and intellectual parity. Nevertheless, she is fully unprepared for surviving on the farm, and "[n]one of [her abilities] seemed exactly to the point when faced with the hard fact that she now found herself in possession of close to three hundred acres of seep and bottom, a house, a barn, outbuildings, but no idea what to do with them" (30). During the first few months after her father's death, Ada "was perpetually hungry" because she does not know how to do any more than milk the cow and gather eggs. Although she longs for a proper meal such as "a bowl of chicken and dumplings and a peach pie," she has "not a clue how one might arrive at them" (29). When she sees how the farm is deteriorating before her eyes and considers how little she is able to scrounge up to eat, "she wondered how a human being could be raised more impractically for the demands of an exposed life" (30). Ruby arrives on the scene, however, rescuing Ada from her helplessness, considering her "first victory" to be "when Ada succeeded in churning cream to butter" and her second "when she noted that Ada no longer always put a book in her pocket when she went to hoe in the fields" (105). The transition into a life of physical labor is difficult for Ada, to whom "Ruby's monologues seemed composed mainly of verbs, all of them tiring. Plow, plant, hoe, cut, can, feed, kill" (104). At the conclusion of their first day of haying, for example, "Ada felt near





collapse" (177). When contemplating all the work Ruby intends for them to do, she wistfully notes how "[m]oney made things so much easier" (95). More than any other text, Frazier's illuminates the know-how, careful planning, and diligence required of sustaining a human life, details altogether ignored or forgotten in our era of cash-purchased convenience food.⁸

Nevertheless, Ada comes to embrace the physical work as she finds that farming brings with it social and physical liberation. To some extent, Ada's liberation is simply a freedom from what Bill McCarron and Paul Knoke in "Images of War and Peace: Parallelism and Antithesis in the Beginning and Ending of *Cold Mountain*" (1999) call "the meaningless superficialities of Charleston society" (277). With Ruby—a woman who has never been "proper"—as an example, Ada is able to defy many of the conventions of her former life. For instance, she and Ruby dangle their legs through the door of the hay barn, "[swinging] their legs like boys" (288). The trousers she and Ruby wear the cold December day they go out to look for Stobrod are both warmer and more practical than their dresses would have been. And when hunting turkeys, Ada finds her "britches" especially useful, as "trying to be stealthy in long skirts and their underlying petticoats would be impossible, like walking through the woods flapping a bed quilt around" (401). Inman "watche[s] with great interest" the new liberty the trousers allow Ada: "She cooked cross-legged for a time, leaning forward to tend the food. Then she turned sideways and stretched one leg out straight before her and kept the other bent [...]. He had not yet gotten used to her in britches, and he found the poses they allowed her to take stirring in their freedom" (414).

Certainly, the pants are a contrast from what she had worn the last time he saw her four years previously, when she "had on about all the clothes women of her station then wore, and so her body was all cased up underneath many lapped and pleated yards of dead fabric. His hand at her waist touched the whalebones of corset stays, and when she took a step back and looked at him, the bones creaked against each other as she moved and breathed. She guessed she felt to him like a terrapin shut up inside its hull, giving little evidence that a distinct living thing, warm and in its skin, lay inside" (258). Ada's change in clothing reflects both a literal and metaphorical liberation. Literally, she is able to move more easily, a fact that enables her to better complete certain necessary tasks. And figuratively, she is willing to do more, to break convention, with the boldest being her willingness to initiate, first, her physical intimacy with Inman, by reaching out to touch his stomach, something that "had taken all the nerve she could draw up" (417), and, second, their sexual intimacy, by disrobing before him. Indeed, as In-





man recognizes, Ada has “made her way to a place where an entirely other order prevailed from what she had always known” (417-18).

A more profound and significant freedom than her sexual liberation, however, is Ada’s growing ability physically to take care of her own basic needs: food, shelter, and clothing. She describes in a letter to her cousin all the “rough work” of her life on the farm as well as the strength and endurance she has gained, writing: “[The work] has changed me. [...] I am brown as a penny from being outdoors all day, and I am growing somewhat ropy through the wrists and forearms. In the glass I see a somewhat firmer face than previously, hollower under the cheekbones. And a new expression, I think, has sometimes come to occupy it. [...] You would not know it on me for I suspect it is somehow akin to contentment” (326). Physical labor has brought to Ada, if not joy, at least contentment. Frazier implies that this contentment is a result of her increasing ability to take care of herself. Although Ada greatly loved and admired her father, she comes to fault him for “[trying] to keep her a child” and for limiting her understanding of nature by encouraging her to perceive it through an Emersonian lens. She faults herself, too, for allowing him to do so. Ada’s former ignorance and physical helplessness had infantilized her and made her a talking ornament. In *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy argue that in ecofeminist texts female bodies are “sites where [...] transformations can continuously occur” and, therefore, “[r]eclaiming the body is important work for ecofeminism” (9). The parallel between reclaiming the land and reclaiming the body is evident in *Cold Mountain*. In learning to maintain a farm, Ada reclaims her body, as well as the land, and in this reclamation she not only gains the skills to keep herself alive but also becomes a different person, one she believes she likes better (422). Ada discovers a freedom she has not known before: the freedom of a landholder who relies on herself, her land, and her neighbors for sustenance and survival, the sort of freedom Jefferson and Crèvecoeur envisioned for the American yeoman.⁹

In a book review of *Prodigal Summer*, Dean Bakupoulos argues that although we have clearly lost our agrarian past, Kingsolver’s novel “aims to be a blueprint for finding it again” (43). This also brings to mind a comment Ada makes to Inman when he returns to her but confesses the war has broken him beyond repair. In response, she immediately thinks of nature’s power to heal, “[i]ts every nook and cranny apparently lay filled with physic and restorative to bind up rents from the outside” (419). She sees a parallel between this and the human psyche, replying to Inman: “I know people can be mended. Not all, and some more immediately than others. But some can be. I don’t see why not





you” (420). Given the substance of the plot and what ecofeminists would name a radical transformation in Ada, it is reasonable to see in this statement a parallel hope for agrarianism, a “blueprint for finding it again.” That Frazier’s novel was a huge commercial success among largely urban readers and made into a major motion picture suggests that the story resonates with contemporary Americans, awakening a yearning for a new way of living, one that might mend the American land and feed the spirit of its people.¹⁰ For this reason, Ruby’s plans for the farm are especially significant: “I’ve got a vision in my mind of how that cove needs to be. And I know what needs doing to get there. [...] It will take a long time. But I know how to get there” (409). In this comment, both ecofeminist and utopian in its focus on personal agency and collective future change, Ruby articulates the substance of a new agrarian myth: one that is deliberately chosen and, therefore, both freeing and hopeful. The new pastoral frees individuals, men and women, to choose a different way. It frees them to embrace both mind and body in their engagement with particular places on earth, in their commitments to those communities, their homes.

NOTES

1. See Aftandilian, Davidson 35, Dyer, Krebs 16, Rhodes, Schauman 182, Struthers and Bokemeier 35, Zier et. al.

2. I borrow this term from Scott Russell Sanders’s *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*.

3. See Owen and Cowley, Bush, Gray.

4. Kimberly K. Smith provides a similar defense for Wendell Berry’s fiction, see Smith 629.

5. I borrow this phrase from Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place*.

6. Inman’s understanding of living well and right on the land should also be contrasted with an additional episode from his journey, his encounter with Junior and his family. The utter depravity of Junior’s family and the disrepair of his farm suggests a life and agrarianism at its most perverse. The family members appear driven almost exclusively by their animal instincts—to eat, mate, fight. And, in fact, they seem to live worse than animals: no one has bothered to set right the house knocked off one corner of its foundation; the family members are uncombed and barely clothed; the children, “raised with no more guidance than a pair of feral hogs,” are hardly able to speak (210); and, perhaps most disturbingly, the “rank meat” served, a greasy joint “too big for hog but too pale for cow,” suggests possible cannibalism (219). The state of the household is similarly reflected in the state of the briefly mentioned “weedy gardens of corn and picked-over beans in the middle distance” and the kitchen garden surrounded by staked crow carcasses “in various stages of rot” (215). Inman sees in this household “one’s expectations of the world’s





plumb line [...] thrown off" entirely; hence, it stands in marked contrast to his integrity as a man and farmer.

7. One other character who clearly fits into an ecofeminist reading of the novel is the goat woman Inman meets on his journey. She is the epitome of ecological self-sufficiency. She sustains herself, and has for twenty-six years, on goats she raises (on the meat, milk, and cheese they provide) and the wild greens she gathers in the woods. She gathers medicinal herbs and sells them, along with cheese, for the few staples she cannot raise or hunt herself (272-73). Notably, the woman is in good health—despite her age, "her cheek skin glowed pink and fine as a girl's" (263). Moreover, she lives in a way that is respectful of nonhuman life. When she must kill a goat for meat, for example, she does so gently, so gently that the goat does not even realize what is happening (268). And she keeps a journal, a sort of environmental record, of everything she sees around her: "The goats. Plants. Weather. I keep track of what everything's up to," she explains (279). Gifford argues that "in the goat woman [Inman] meets a profoundly symbolic figure of landscape-based healing qualities" (93).

8. I would argue, too, that Frazier's novel challenges the practicality of vegetarianism in any agrarian culture. Ada and Ruby, while gentle with their animals, depend upon meat for sustenance. In this respect, Frazier resists the notion, widely-held in ecofeminist circles, that sensitivity to nature will necessarily result in vegetarianism. This suggests there might be an importance difference between agrarian ecological feminism and urban ecological feminism. Maybe agrarian ecological feminism would be more accurately labeled "agrofeminism."

9. One other female farmer in Frazier's text deserves mention. Sara, whose pig Inman rescues from the Federals, also exhibits tenacious self-reliance in the face of great obstacles. Sara lives alone with her infant child in the house she built "working like a man" alongside her now dead husband. Unlike Ada, Sara has no companion to help her. Both Ada and Sara suggest the reality that in the Civil War South, many women probably assumed the leadership of their husband's, father's, or brothers' farms, a phenomenon which, however involuntary, reinstated the paradigm of the small farmer, a paradigm that resisted the South's feudal order and, in this sense, gave both the poorer whites and women a new political presence.

10. *Cold Mountain* spent 45 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

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