Humdrum Tasks: Agriculture, Education, and Environment in England and America, 1874-1999

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Introduction: Turning the Rows

In most of our daily interactions with the outdoors, we need to leave our surroundings alone. In the city, we use the streets and the sidewalks but we do not alter them; in the suburbs, we romp on lawns but carefully keep them looking the same, day after day and year after year, by selecting grass species that can sustain foot traffic. In national parks, signs and good sense warn us to keep our feet on the narrow trails, avoid disturbing the plants and animals around us, and generally maintain a state of separation from the surrounding scene: leave no trace; take only pictures, leave only footprints. Whether people watching or bird watching, and despite the fact that our individual impact on the environment is greater than ever, a majority of humans engage with the outdoors primarily through observation.

This demographic fact has only been true for a short time. The global population of people living in urban areas exceeded 50 percent in 2007, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; in 2014, 54 percent of the human population lived in urban areas, and in 2017, the World Health Organization projects that a majority of people now live in urban areas even in less developed countries ("World Urbanization Prospects;" World Health Organization). Britain and the United States transitioned to majority urban populations much earlier—England and Wales by 1891, and the United States by 1920 (Watson 3; United States Census Bureau). The six novels discussed in this project are all published or set within a generation of these dates in their respective countries. Though they do not all share a nationality, ethnicity, gender, or century of birth, Thomas Hardy, Willa Cather, and Leslie

Marmon Silko are united in their decision to write novels about rural people living at precisely the historical moment when such people and their way of living were becoming a minority in their national communities.

Living in a rural way means transcending observation as a primary means of engaging with the land, climate, and ecosystem. A rural dweller must consume enough calories to live and to reproduce, and this means either working on the land by hunting and foraging, working the land itself using agricultural methods, producing something from the land that is tradable or sellable, or combining any of these three methods. If she manages a farm to sustain herself and others, a person must imaginatively play with her landscape. By playing, she also works it. Unlike the designer of an urban street, a lawn, or a trail, she does not list aesthetics near the top of her priorities—though she, like many of us, might enjoy the look of a well-managed farm. When she looks at her fields and pastures, she sees not just the plants and animals that are growing at that particular moment (knee-high wheat, 200 head of sheep with their 50 lambs) but what *was* there (the boulder-filled field she cleared with just two helpers to plant that wheat) and what *will* be there (the harvest, the sheep run she is hoping to build when life slows down again after the frost). On her acreage, there is not a single square foot of land upon which she has not focused her brainpower to consider its best possible use to her, and she directs the bulk of her physical energy to shaping the land to fulfill that use by digging, hoeing, planting, building, demolishing.

In a letter of advice to young farmers, the Virginia farmer and author Joel Salatin urges farmers to relish this hands-on relationship with the land:

> …the human's large brain and mechanical prowess (opposable thumbs) exist to interact with nature....Indeed the difference between a farm and any other piece of

> property is what a farmer—the person—brings to the landscape. Absent the farmer, the land could be anything from a condominium to a national park.
>
> Don't be afraid to carve in a road, build a pond, excavate a swale, install a root cellar, or construct a building. I call this participatory environmentalism—bringing healing and redemptive capacity to the landscape. The human is the most efficacious destroyer and the most efficacious healer; it all depends on how we implement our intellectual and mechanical gifts. (Salatin 72)

A literary term for describing this working, "participatory" engagement with the land is "georgic," whereas the observational relationship to which most of us are confined in the modern world is better defined as "pastoral;" in Greg Garrard's words, "pastoral and wilderness tropes typically imply a perspective of the aesthetic tourist" (Garrard 108). In this dissertation, I argue that Hardy, Cather, and Silko are all undertaking projects of "participatory environmentalism"—georgic projects of dwelling, not tourism—when they write novels about farmers, farmhands, and gardeners trying to eke out a reliable, fulfilling existence by working with the natural resources of the region in which they are born or to which they are transplanted. I argue further that reading their texts as georgics—which very few scholars (in the case of Hardy and Cather) or no scholars (in the case of Silko) have done—permits a fuller appreciation of their distinct, varied, and often overlooked contributions to environmental thought. By writing the stories of farmers trying to learn and practice their 10,000-year-old trade while deciding whether and how to incorporate new industrial, technological, and scientific methods into their traditional agricultural practice, how to accommodate the rural brain drain caused by increasing urbanization, and how to reorganize the human ecology of rural life in response to systemic oppression and attempts to resist it, these three writers build on the themes and stylistic movements of the georgic tradition

to develop a distinctive mode of storytelling, a modern georgic, in which the farm becomes a microcosm of modernity itself.

To interrogate the perspective of the novelists analyzed in this project, I rely on Bruno Latour's 1991 definition of "modernity" as the conviction among "modern" people that "nature" and "culture" are, and must remain, distinct from each other. This orientation, combined with the sense of modernity as "an acceleration, a rupture" from the past, describes quite well the way certain modern-coded characters (like the science teacher in Silko's *Ceremony*) and certain implements (like the newfangled thresher in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*) engage with the rural, ancient-coded spaces into which they are thrust in the novels under study (Latour 10). Latour defines the non-modern or pre-modern orientation as the conviction that nature and society, the human and nonhuman, are *not* in fact separate, and that new hybrids of the two are constantly under construction. This definition, too, coincides with the ancient-coded characters and spaces represented by the novelists—consider, for example, Cather's hermit Ivar in *O, Pioneers!*, who is called "crazy" because he treats animals the same way he treats people, or Silko's Aunt Bronwyn in *Gardens in the Dunes*, who joins a society for the preservation of old stones. Were I bold enough to venture my own definition of modernity in the twentieth and twenty-first century, I might suggest that modernity is actually the act of mixing or hybridizing of "modern" knowledge—in other words, the insights and innovations that come from observing "nature" from an outsider perspective, often through the scientific method—and ancient, already-hybridized knowledge. In other words, I think Hardy, Cather, and Silko demonstrate how modernism can be conceived as a movement of selection and combination, not a movement of purity and exclusion.

I. Georgic Didacticism, or Literature As Manual

In the passage quoted above, Joel Salatin opens his thoughts by stating what he understands as environmental facts based on his experience ("the human's large brain…national park"), then urges the farmer to action in an imperative-driven sentence of very specific tasks ("Don't be afraid…building"), and finally returns to broader proclamations about the way the world works ("I call this…mechanical gifts"). This pedagogical movement from instructional statement to imperative command is a prime example of the stylistic construction that I will examine throughout this project, and here it comes in a perfectly expected context: a nonfiction advice book written mostly by farmers, about farmers and (supposedly) for farmers. Of course, tens of thousands of books fall into this category; many of them fall under the category of "manuals," or books designed to be kept close at hand, and that instruct readers on the best ways to perform manual labor, or work done by hand ("manual, n. and adj."). These books tend to live in the "Agriculture" sections of libraries and to teach specialized skills like how to build a pest-proof chicken coop or grow wheat in an arid climate. Salatin's letter does not quite fit into this category, for it does not teach the farmer precisely how to build that pond or carve that road—the farmer would have to check out a different stack of books to achieve this end. Instead, it falls into the category of georgic literature, which I am defining here as a text that teaches readers how to farm and that emphasizes the importance of labor, but that has aesthetic and ethical goals that matter just as much to the author as the urge to instruct. In his "Essay on Virgil's *Georgics*" (1697), Joseph Addison provides a more extended definition of the mode that is useful in the context of this project for its emphasis on agricultural "science," a way of thinking about agricultural knowledge that the farming characters studied here often contrast with intuition or tradition: "The Georgic deals with rules of practice.... It raises in our minds a pleasing variety of

scenes and landscapes, while it teaches us, and it makes the dryest of its precepts look like a description. A Georgic therefore is some part of the science of husbandry, put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the beauties and embellishments of poetry" (Addison 159). Addison does not mention the tendency of a georgic to draw broad moral or ethical conclusions from particular "rules of practice" and "precepts," yet Vergil does this, and so do all of the novelists studied here.

The Latin word "georgicus" means "having to do with farming," and the adjective can be applied to the farmer herself as well as to the land that is farmed (Ronda 2). A modern georgic takes agriculture or at least human engagement with other organisms as a primary subject. It might argue for the best ways to raise grain, trees, cattle, and bees, as Vergil does in each of his four books of *Georgics* (29 BCE), or it might dwell on other aspects of cultivation of plants of the raising or hunting of animals for food and fiber and transportation that are more relevant to the author's time and place. A georgic work narrates the work, the *labor*, involved in maintaining a successful farm, particularly when that work is difficult, exhausting, and prone to being thwarted by natural phenomena. It outlines the process necessary to perform farm tasks well, with enough specificity that a reader could theoretically use the text as a manual to try the process on his or her own. And it speaks to the farmer's satisfaction at seeing that meticulously performed work come, literally, to fruition, and of sustaining herself on those fruits. A georgic aims to teach its reader how to live a good and ethical life by explaining in great detail how to accomplish what Vergil calls *tenuis curas*, literally "slender cares," or in David Ferry's translation (2005) "trivial things," or in Wilkinson's translation (1982) "humdrum tasks" (Virgil and Ferry 15, Virgil and Wilkinson 62).

Vergil's *Georgics* is often thought of as a poem of the middle ground, of moderation: each book is longer than one of Vergil's ten *Eclogues* (circa 38 BCE), but the *Georgics* contains only four books, so it is only a third as long as the epic *Aeneid* (19 BCE). It is the second major work that Vergil published and contains much of the environmental language of the early *Eclogues*, but also looks toward the historical and military concerns of the *Aeneid*; in this way, it is Vergil's middle work both chronologically and thematically. When Classicists debate Vergil's intentions in the *Georgics*, they often spar over whether the poem is essentially a positive and optimistic poem, or a negative and pessimistic one. Books Two and Four, on viticulture and beekeeping, suggest that the poem is primarily optimistic: Vergil praises farmers and describes the beauty of the Italian countryside, and he imagines a future of constantly regenerated agrarian beauty and glory for the Roman Empire; his images serve, according to L.P. Wilkinson, as "a demonstration that farming was a good life" (Wilkinson 23). But Books One and Three, on soil management, grains, and livestock, present a darker picture. Here we have the destructive storm that the most diligent farmer could not have predicted. It sweeps away a full season of hard work. Here we have the famous passage in which the words *optima dies…prima fugit miseris mortalibus* appear: the best days flee first for miserable mortals—then we quickly get old and decrepit and die (Virgil and Thomas 5). In the words of Richard Thomas, Vergil dwells "pessimistically and pathetically on the brevity and difficulty of existence" (Virgil and Thomas, 51).

In my reading of the poem, informed by the philological scholarship of Classicists but filtered through literary critical methods, it is not necessary, and might in fact be counterproductive, to conclude that Virgil intended to produce a poem that chooses optimism over pessimism, or vice versa. Instead, I think that Vergil includes ecstatic praise and profound

misery in the *Georgics* in order to arrive at a form of moderation through the combination of extremes. He is too smart to claim that farming—or life, for that matter—is exclusively wonderful or horrible. He knows that agriculture can always be both things, and in fact that the only way to be a good farmer (or a functioning human) is to allow space for both extremes in one's psyche. If a person cannot enjoy the look of a beautifully managed countryside, or if she cannot fully appreciate the *dapes inemptae*, the "unbought meals" composed of ingredients collected on her own land, then she should not be a farmer (Virgil and Ferry 150). Similarly, if a person cannot stomach disaster, pestilence, disappointment, and death, then she should definitely not be a farmer.

In their modern georgic novels, Hardy, Cather, and Silko also create moderation through the presentation of various extremes, though the stakes are quite different. Rather than toggle between optimism and pessimism, they use georgic tactics to dramatize the tensions between traditional knowledge and agricultural practices and the new practices associated with industrial farming, technological education, urbanization, and assorted social movements. Their work suggests that it is impossible, and even undesirable, to choose one epistemology to the complete exclusion of the other. Wisdom means knowing how to select and combine teachings that come from various sources and that offer contradictory advice.

The tradition of georgic literature dates back even farther than Vergil's *Georgics*, from which the georgic mode takes its name, and which serves as the primary model of the georgic mode in this project. In *Works and Days* (circa 700 BCE), the Greek poet Hesiod instructs his reader, purportedly his brother, on the best techniques for farming his land and living a morally upright life. In *On the Nature of Things* (50 BCE), Lucretius does not focus on farming but develops poetic didacticism with his teachings on Epicurean philosophy and convictions about

the way the world works. Both of these poets served as crucial influences to Vergil as he conceived the *Georgics*. Though John Dryden famously called the *Georgics* "the best poem by the best poet," literary critics have historically avoided engaging with the Vergil's poem itself and the tradition of literary agricultural didacticism that came after it (Wilkinson 19). The revival of the mode in eighteenth-century England, which was spurred by Dryden's 1697 translation of the *Georgics* and produced such poems as James Grainger's Vergilian imitation *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), proved to be more of a historical anomaly than a trend (Johnson 94). To acknowledge and understand the georgic mode, it is necessary to look outside the pastoral, which occupies a more prominent place—a monopoly, even—in contemporary literary and critical conversation about literature of the countryside, rural life, and wilderness. In an email, a colleague once referred to the georgic as a "strain of the pastoral." In his landmark monograph *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell takes the liberty of "blur[ring] certain distinctions that some scholars would wish to press," including "between pastoral and georgic" (Buell 439). While acknowledging that the boundaries between modes and genres are never absolute, in fact are defined only so that others may blur them, I will press the distinction between georgic and pastoral in this this project, particularly in Chapter One. I argue that the georgic ought not to be thought of as a "strain" of any other type of literature, but rather as its own mode with characteristics distinct from and often opposed to pastoral conceits.

In this respect, my work draws on a small body of arguments that critics have been articulating for centuries, always aware of their minority position. Addison, for example, complains that:

> There has been an abundance—of criticism spent on Virgil's Pastorals and Aeneid, but the Georgics are a subject which none of the critics have sufficiently

> taken into their consideration, most of them passing over it in silence, or casting it under the same head with pastoral,—a division by no means proper…No rules…that relate to pastoral, can any way affect the Georgics, since they fall under that class of poetry which consists in giving plain and direct instructions to the reader. (Addison 158)

This declaration translates remarkably well into the twentieth century: in 1979 A.J. Boyle introduced a volume of *Ramus: Critical Studies in Greek and Roman Literature* devoted to Vergil's *Georgics* by calling the "critical neglect" of the *Georgics* "less omission, more outrage," particularly in contrast to the attention paid to the epic *Aeneid* and pastoral *Eclogues* (Boyle 1). In the twenty-first century, there is still a much greater volume of pastoral rather than georgic scholarship; there is still an unfortunate tendency to stamp every work of literature that involves the countryside, rural life, or wilderness with the label pastoral. This absence of georgic studies has been particularly noticeable—and particularly disturbing—in the burgeoning fields of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, where one might most expect critics to take up the subject of literature about working with the land. For example, the critics represented in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) never mention the georgic (Glotfelty and Fromm). Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) contains full chapters on the "Pastoral" and "Wilderness," but only a few pages on the georgic embedded in a chapter on "Dwelling" (Garrard). It is significant that Buell classifies the georgic as a corollary of the pastoral, whereas Garrard includes the mode in a category that also contains traditional Native American literature, outside the bounds of the chapter on the pastoral: the critical disagreement on categorization suggests the need for further attention to the georgic mode. Garrard transitions out of his section on georgic with the sad declaration that "[t]he

Georgic model of dwelling is of diminishing relevance for most North Americans and Europeans" (ibid 120).

If the last two decades of literature and scholarship give any indication, the georgic is in fact of increasing relevance to contemporary critical thought—especially in the field of literature and the environment—and indeed to our current moment of renewed investment in agriculture as a potential means toward living more ethically, equitably, and sustainably. The topic is beginning to appear more frequently in literary and environmentalist contexts. The book *Letters to a Young Farmer*, from which the Salatin quotation is excerpted, falls into the georgic category, as do the growing number of farming memoirs, including Sue Hubbell's *A Country Life* (1999), Kristin Kimball's *The Dirty Life* (2010), and Attina Diffley's *Turn Here, Sweet Corn* (2012). Bernadette Mayer published the agriculturally focused poetry collection *Works and Days* (2016), titled with obvious reference to Hesiod; Ross Gay's poems in the National Book Critics Circle Award winning *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* (2015) connect garden work to a thriving spiritual life, and his forthcoming book (still untitled) will mention Vergil's *Georgics* explicitly.[1] Much of Wendell Berry's prose falls in the georgic category, and his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (1973) is the most plainly georgic text published in the last half century. In criticism, Timothy Sweet's *American Georgics* (2002) and Margaret Ronda's *Disenchanted Georgics* examine georgic threads in American literature, Kevis Goodman dissects the eighteenth-century British georgic in *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (2004), and Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy's *Green Modernism* (2015) includes a chapter on the fictional British georgic. Edwin C. Hagenstein, Sara M. Gregg, and

[1] In a reading of his poetry in June 2017, Gay included a new prose poem that mentioned the *Georgics* by name

Brian Donahue's interdisciplinary anthology *American Georgics* (2012) indicates that the georgic turn, native to literary studies, is gaining traction across the academy.[2]

II. The Georgic Novel

Seeking the georgic mode in novels, as I do in this project, presents a challenge because narrators in novels (unlike the speakers of poems or the first-person narrators of nonfiction) seldom use the imperative mood. It is easier to identify the georgic in imperative poetry, like Berry's "Mad Farmer," which opens with the imperative "Love the quick profit," or in back-to-the-land memoirs like Scott and Helen Nearing's *Living the Good Life*, which contains advice like "Good food should be grown on whole soil, be eaten whole, unprocessed, and garden fresh" (Berry 505, Nearing 121-2). The writers of novels tend not to address their readers directly in the twentieth century; instead, they have their characters do the teaching, instructing, learning, and working inherent in the georgic.

It is crucial to examine novels for this georgic impulse, which, since it is tied so intimately to agriculture, so intimately to the human relationship to the land and its organisms, is also an environmental impulse. Ecocritics and scholars of environmental literature have successfully mined medieval, Renaissance, Romantic, and contemporary poetry for environmental themes; we have covered nonfiction in the form of "nature writing" from Transcendentalism up to Rebecca Solnit's journalism. Yet we have been less eager to read for environmental meaning in fiction, which, with its unruly plots, foregrounding of human characters, and emphasis on storytelling over transmitting precepts, adheres less completely to the classic environmentalist message that the human-land relationship is as important as the

[2] The fact that Sweet's 2002 book and the 2012 anthology share a title is a coincidence, according to Sweet in a private conversation.

human-human relationship. The anthology *American Earth: Environmental Writing since Thoreau* (2008) includes works of nonfiction by 83 writers, poems from nine poets, and fiction excerpts from just two novelists—so that fiction receives the same amount of recognition in "environmental *writing*" as cartooning and songwriting, each of which also has two entries (McKibben). The numbers look even stranger when you realize that four of the nonfiction entries—by Theodore Dreiser, Alice Walker, Barbara Kingsolver, and Linda Hogan—come from writers known primarily as novelists. It is as though Bill McKibben, the editor of the anthology and a nonfiction writer himself, cannot accept writers as "environmental thinkers" until they state their ideas in the form of a thesis, a directive, an imperative, in a way that all of novelists do in their essays but not in their fiction. Professors of environmental literature have also been slow to recognize fiction, though: *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture* is edited by three academics and contains 60 nonfiction texts, 32 poems, and 13 short stories (Anderson).

Yet many works of fiction contain nuanced if subtly represented ideas about the human relationship with the planet and other organisms, and these novels and stories deserve a more prominent place in the environmental canon. I am speaking not just of overtly thematic works like the new speculative "cli-fi" genre that imagines the effects of a future world devastated by climate change. Realist fiction, too, has offered crucial perspectives on the ways in which humans do and should interact with the land, ocean, plants, and animals. Reading "georgically"—by seeking and unpacking moments of didacticism in which agrarian instruction gets bound up with universal precept, and which often posit an attuned but not idealized relationship to the land—can help us see the contributions of fiction to environmental thought more clearly. This project illuminates ways in which these environmental theses are in fact

embedded in novels, particularly those that treat agriculture. In nonfiction and poetry, critics most often identify environmental or environmentalist messages in descriptions of animals, plants, landscape, and human-caused degradation like pollution. In novels, the georgic turn, and by extension the environmental turn, occurs in plot and character development: if the pastoral idealizes a landscape, the georgic idealizes character.

III. But were they farmers?

The short answer is "no." In 2012 I was walking down the hallway of Sapienza University in Rome with a group of young Classicists when the *Georgics* came up in conversation. "Vergil was a farmer like Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin," one University of Chicago student exclaimed immediately. With this comment, he seemed to dismiss the possibility that the *Georgics* might have any value, for who would waste time reading a farming manual not written by a farmer?

In truth we know very little of Vergil's biography. Tradition holds that he was born in a rural area near the northern Italian city of Mantua, possibly to a humble family but more likely to the landowning equestrian class, prosperous enough to give him an education. It is likely that Vergil spent his childhood living on or near a farm; as a teenager or young adult, though, he went to Naples and Rome to complete his education. As an adult, he quickly established a reputation as a poet and entered the inner circle of Maecenas, a patron of the arts and close consort of the eventual emperor Augustus (Wilkinson 19). He never earned a living as a farmer.

Neither did Hardy, Cather, or Silko. Like Vergil, all three of these writers were born or raised in the rural areas that would serve as inspiration for their most celebrated novels. Also like Vergil, they literally or figuratively abandoned the rural sphere in early adulthood: Hardy moved

to London to train as an architect, and though he would eventually build a country home in his native Dorchester, he always maintained close ties to London; Cather moved to Lincoln for her education, then to Pittsburgh and New York for her career; Silko left the Laguna Pueblo reservation to attend the University of New Mexico, and, while she has spent a good deal of her adult life in the American southwest, she travels extensively and no longer lives on the reservation (she wrote her first novel, *Ceremony*, from Ketchikan, Alaska). Intensely devoted to their regions though they are, all three writers were published by national presses and were—and continue to be—read by national and international audiences of non-farmers. Of Hardy's relationship to the land and people he writes about, Raymond Williams writes:

> He is neither owner nor tenant, dealer nor labourer, but an observer and chronicler, often again with uncertainty about his actual relation. Moreover he was not writing for them, but about them, to a mainly metropolitan and unconnected literary public. The effect of these two points is to return attention to where it properly belongs, which is Hardy's attempt to describe and value a way of life with which he was closely yet uncertainly connected, and the literary methods which follow from the nature of this attempt. (Williams 200)

This "closely yet uncertainly connected" relationship with rural life and society, this awareness that the people similar to the characters in the texts would not be the primary readers of the texts, applies to all three modern writers and to Vergil. Rather than critique the writers for choosing to write about a society to which they did not completely belong—indeed could not belong, for those who have time to write poems and novels do not have enough time to support themselves through agriculture, and vice versa—I choose, with Williams, to analyze the perspective granted to a writer who partially belongs to a society.

One interesting effect, observable in all three writers, is their insistence that it is acceptable, even ideal, for the brightest and most hardworking characters to stay on the land, to remain embedded in rural life just as the writers have *not* done. Hardy's Tess, Cather's Àntonia, and Silko's Indigo face pressure to leave the land and carve out a new identity in town, all on the promise that more money and less agricultural work will make them happier. The characters resist this pressure and stay on the land, and the novelists celebrate the decision. They acknowledge that not everyone can, or should, live the way they do. This is not to say that the writers wish to preserve the image of the country bumpkin for their aesthetic or nostalgic pleasure—quite the opposite. Having grown up with farmers, they recognize the genius required to make a farm run well, and they want rural areas to remain populated with people smart and conscientious enough to work for the land with care.

Chapter 1: Georgic Realism in Thomas Hardy's Agrarian Novels

In his poetry and prose Thomas Hardy focuses as much on the landscapes, livestock, and plant life of southwest England as on its human inhabitants; he especially emphasizes the working relationships that connect these various organisms to each other and their environment. Many of the scholars who have attended to Hardy's consistent interest in the environment casually label Hardy's works, or at least certain tropes in them, pastoral.[3] The assumption is that any text about shepherds, agricultural laborers, and geographical features must be in the pastoral tradition. Pressing on the term, however, shows that the form uniting Theocritus's *Idylls* and Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* bears little fundamental resemblance to the novels of Thomas Hardy. Treating them as prose pastorals undermines rich interpretations of the work that expose not nostalgic reflections on a static countryside but a record of the way rural societies were modernizing their working relationship with the land, for better and for worse. On Hardy's writing about change, Raymond Williams argues:

> The profound disturbances that Hardy records cannot…be seen in the sentimental terms of neo-pastoral: the contrast between country and town. The exposed and separated individuals, whom Hardy puts at the centre of his fiction, are only the most developed cases of a general exposure and separation. Yet they are never merely illustrations of this change in a way of life. Each has a dominant personal history, which in psychological terms bears a direct relation to the social character

[3] See, for example, Ivan Kreilkamp's on a poetics of caring in "Pitying the Sheep in *Far from the Madding Crowd*," Richard Kerridge on ways of regarding landscape in "Ecological Hardy," and Zena Meadowsong on the interpellation of agricultural technology in "Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*" (Kreilkamp, Kerridge, Meadowsong).

of the change. (Williams 210)

The rural Hardy novel is not simply about mourning a lost past, but about narrating the decisions made by "individuals," characters, who are learning how to accommodate "profound disturbances" in the social and economic character of the countryside. Nor, as Williams says, are these rural characters passive bystanders who receive whatever change the city dares to heap upon them. Instead, they are actively learning, thinking, and deciding how to incorporate aspects of "the change" of industrialization, technological advance, and standardized education, into their social and agrarian practices. Hardy narrates the process of modern rural learning by following characters who manage or work on farms that are changing rapidly. Writes Williams: "the most significant thing about Hardy, in and through these difficulties, is that more than any other major novelist since this difficult mobility began he succeeded, against every pressure, in centering his major novels in the ordinary processes of life and work" (Williams 211). "Ordinary processes" sounds remarkably similar to *tenuis curas*. Though Williams mentions Vergil's *Georgics* elsewhere in *The Country and the City*, he does not explicitly link Hardy to the tradition. I will. In this chapter I argue that Hardy should to be read as a georgic novelist who shows rural characters learning the best ways to live and work by narrating the ordinary processes, the humdrum tasks, of their days, even as they tweak antique agricultural ecosystems to incorporate modernity.

Bracketing the pastoral label is surprisingly fraught. The Anglo-American discourse on environmental literature leans heavily on the term, for which there are as many definitions as there are scholars who write about it. A few qualities transcend individual critics. First, the pastoral and its relatives, the bucolic and idyll, pit an image of rural life at the margins of civilization against urban life at its center. Second, the pastoral often depicts countryside as a

distinct realm to be either idealized in a nostalgic way, despised as stupidly provincial, or summoned primarily to symbolize human emotion, as when, in the "Januarye" Eclogue of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*, the mournful Colin "homeward drove his sonned sheepe / Whose hanging heads did seeme his carefull case to weep" (Spenser, 77-78). The pastoral landscape exists more as a figure for human desires or problems than as material place upon which humans rely for food and clothing. If English literature has broadened the pastoral category from the ancient tradition, in which shepherds and goatherds sang stylized songs about their would-be lovers, to a modern tradition large enough to contain all poems and prose about the differences between country and city life, then contemporary literary criticism tends to engorge the pastoral label with almost any text that deals with nature or rural life or class comparison. The pastoral now includes not just "some versions" of an idea, to use Empson's title, but infinite versions of a vague trope, so that almost any work could fit into it (Empson 1935).

For some critics, expanding the definition of pastoral serves an important purpose. By defining the pastoral as anything that is *not* "the machine," Leo Marx observes a crucial trend in American literature, namely that American writers like to idealize wilderness by juxtaposing it with the comparatively ugly and noisy mechanical objects, like trains and cars, that were emerging at the time of the work's publication (Marx 1964). More recently, in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) Lawrence Buell uses pastoral terminology to describe moments in which writers depict landscape, often idealized, "in the service of local, regional, and national particularism"; this turn allows him to show how environment and individual identity become intricately intertwined in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature (Buell 32). These writers required a flexible definition of pastoral. But referring to Empson, Buell notes that very

flexibility permitted one of the genre's "shrewdest interpreters to define, for example, gentry-class mimesis of urban working-class life as a version of pastoral" (ibid).

Buell is unwilling to follow Empson's suggestion that literature can participate in the pastoral tradition if it abandons the countryside and substitutes a member of the proletariat for the antique shepherd. I am similarly unwilling to admit a swath of texts that remain in the countryside and even happen to include—even to admire!—a shepherd. It is a disservice to the vast body of rural literature to assume that all of it can be wrested into a single genre or category, particularly one which, though expanded in the present day almost to the point of inanity, still evokes strong enough expectations in a reader to limit her chances of encountering a text keenly and imaginatively. If a reader is told that a work is "pastoral," in other words, she is likely to look for an idealized landscape and simplified rustic characters; her interpretation will develop in relation to this preconception. Better, in many cases, to reconsider the term and the preconception.

To position the pastoral appropriately, scholars need to cultivate new categories to inform our discussions of literature about rural life and land. Otherwise we risk occupying the same position as the prototypical pastoralist, who gazes upon the landscape and sees only what relates to his immediate desires: we might see in rural literature only what relates to the pastoral. Reincorporating the term "georgic" into the possible categorizations for rural literature is just one start. Georgic works recognize rural complexity; they understand that people living outside the metropolis can live full intellectual lives just as worthy of representation as those living in cosmopolitan centers. They show that rural life, specifically agricultural life, contains plenty of sorrow and plenty of joy, requires a lot of hard work, thought, and challenging decisions, and permits moments of leisure too. If the pastoral puts the "complex into the simple," according to

Empson's formulation, then the georgic shows how complex the seemingly "simple," the seemingly humdrum, really is (Empson 30). A pastoral might project human emotion onto a "simple" shepherd to show how attractive that emotion looks when not cluttered by modern thoughts and ideas; a georgic would show that shepherding is not simple, that shepherding requires a store of knowledge and expertise complex enough to challenge the intellect of any city dweller. The georgic demonstrates this complexity by enumerating every minute step required to complete a rural task correctly.

Hardy revels in this form of representation. In *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), he describes the proper procedure for puncturing sheep rumens in greater detail that anyone outside the shepherding business needs to know. That novel and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) are the case studies of this chapter, though nearly all of Hardy's "Novels of Character and Environment" demonstrate georgic tendencies. My goal in analyzing both works is to show that reading them through a pastoral lens leads to flat interpretations of Hardy idealizing a lost past, whereas recognizing their georgic characteristics highlights the way Hardy shows his farmer characters negotiating a balance between tradition and modernity.

Madding Crowd is in particular need of a georgic intervention because its focus on shepherds has burdened it with many interpretations that assume it is a pastoral, though tellingly the critics who read the novel this way struggle to fit it neatly into a pastoral framework. With *Tess*, the task is less contentious and more complicated: the novel is too tragic for many critics to claim that it is pastoral in a fundamental way, but I argue that mistaken pastoralizing lies at the heart of the tragedy. Tess's admirers imagine her to be an old-fashioned rustic, plucked from the pages of a Greek or Elizabethan pastoral and needing only the polish of wealth to perfect her, but

Tess sees herself primarily as a rural worker who wants to be valued for her usefulness and intelligence rather than her looks.

I. Hardy and Vergil's *Georgics*

Hardy uses the ancient mode as a backdrop and moral explanation for his plots, but he does not write in dactyls, nor does he intend his texts as didactic tracts on farming. His reading relationship with the *Georgics* is obscure. Dennis Taylor, one of a few scholars who connect Hardy to the georgic tradition, notes that Hardy's first copy of Vergil's works shows no underlinings or annotations on the *Georgics* pages. But, Taylor writes, the pages of this Dryden verse translation, given to him by his mother and now housed at the Dorset County Museum, "look much read" (Taylor 44). When I saw the copy, the pages of the *Georgics* looked no more worn than the rest of the volume. Jeremy Steele, who documented Hardy's relationship with the Classics, claims that Hardy showed "much less interest in the rural *Eclogues* and *Georgics*" than in the *Aeneid* (Steele 55). Hardy annotated the *Aeneid* extensively; he gave the bucolic *Eclogues* a very few markings. If we could extrapolate Hardy's novelistic tendencies only from his early reading material, then we would have to concede that he paid little heed to the georgic *or* pastoral traditions. But another copy of Dryden's *Works of Virgil* that Hardy owned later in life tells a different story. Here Hardy again makes copious notes in the *Aeneid* and none at all in the *Eclogues,* but in this copy he underlines several passages in the *Georgics*. The most important of these will come into play in the context of *Far From the Madding Crowd*. It is also possible to use Hardy's early annotations of the *Aeneid* to demonstrate, with Taylor, that Hardy drew importantly on the georgic tradition in his novels and poetry.

Steele claims that Hardy preferred the *Aeneid* because he always "relished a good story, and Virgil's epic provided one tinged with a distinctive pathos" (Steele 55). The passages that interested the young Hardy in the *Aeneid* certainly bear this out: he marked many more lines in the first half of the epic, the story of Troy's fall and Aeneas's tragic romance with Dido, than in the second half, which is a pseudo-historical account of the Trojans' war with the Italians, driven less by character or plot and more by the need to create and report a collective memory for the Roman people. In his 1915 poem "In Time of the Breaking of Nations," Hardy tells us that he does not just *prefer* plotted literature—he actually thinks that agrarian literature will outlast historical war literature:[4]

I

Only a man harrowing clods

In a slow silent walk

With an old horse that stumbles and nods

Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame

From the heaps of couch-grass;

Yet this will go onward the same

Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight

Come whispering by:

[4] Writing literature that lasted mattered to Hardy: his favorite lines to mark in Vergil, Horace, Lucretius, and Ovid that did not have to do with characters' high emotions, or with the indifference of fate to human suffering, were mostly about the immortality of the poet's verse.

War's annals will cloud into night

Ere their story die.

Hardy makes several comparisons in this poem. One is between "story" and "annals," which are literally texts written up every year that contain accounts of the events that transpired in that year. Hardy claims that the annals will "cloud into night"—essentially dissipate, cease to matter—while the "story" of the maid and her lover will survive for posterity. Why should this be? The first two stanzas of the poem are straightforward: the sleepy man and his laboring horse continue their work even as history spins on, and they will still be working after the next crisis has run its course. Dynasties pass in the world of politics; urban centers are transformed; but agriculture will always be telling a story. This is not to say that Hardy sees agriculture as static; he recognizes that his generation is witnessing great changes in the countryside as machines are introduced to farms and the railroad brings milk to London. In his pamphlet *The Dorset Farm Labourer* (1884), for example, he describes how the rural laboring class is now changing farms more frequently:

> This annual migration from farm to farm is much in excess of what it was formerly.…Dorset labourers now look upon an annual removal as the most natural thing in the world….Change is also a certain sort of education. Many advantages accrue to the labourers from the varied experience it brings….They have become shrewder and sharper men of the world, and have learnt how to hold their own with firmness and judgment. (Hardy, *The Dorset Farm Labourer* 12).

Perhaps the rural story outlasts military records precisely because it can adapt to changing times, because the agrarian classes get "shrewder or sharper" as they must. The novels under consideration in this chapter fall under Hardy's category "Novels of Character and Environment,"

which take place in the fictional southwest England county of Wessex. Critics have discussed the possible meanings of this heading at length. I propose, simply, that Hardy picked these two particular descriptors because they form the foundation of his stories: the characters' travails are shaped by their local ecosystem. Since their environment—whether in pasture, woodland, or moor—is rural, and their occupations are agricultural, we might say that they are placed in a georgic environment where georgic rules apply. Hardy's novels of character and environment are, in other words, georgics with character and plot. Considering Hardy's novels through this lens helps to explain his tragic endings. In Vergil's *Georgics*, hard work and good character are necessary for success, but do not guarantee it. A farmer can do everything right and still fail by selecting incorrectly from the innovations of modernization and the wisdom of tradition. A country maiden can work hard and maintain a pure heart, as Tess Durbeyfield does in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and still be abandoned by her husband and hanged for murder because law and custom mitigate against a woman's right to labor. Tragic outcomes are easy to account for if you assume that Hardy is operating on the georgic principle that hard work and good character are necessary, but not enough.[5] Tragedy happens when you add plot to a georgic world.

Hardy's favorite characters understand that they live in a georgic world and persevere all the same. They understand that "Change is…a certain sort of education" and do not cling to tradition for its own sake, but rather shrewdly adopt modern innovations when they can help stave off disaster. They understand their environment as a tangled collection of weather, land, animals, plants, and humans. They approach their work lives with professionalism and their personal lives with stoicism: they want a lot, but they do not really expect to get what they want. They can imagine an idyllic ecosystem, but their time spent shooting sheep and slaughtering

[5] For further discussion of Hardy and tragedy, see for example Jackie Shead's "*The Return of the Native* and Greek Tragedy," and Dale Kramer's *Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy* (Shead, Kramer).

chickens teaches them that the environment, which includes the agricultural world in which human and non-human species interact, is unavoidably violent and death-filled. In them, Hardy discovers a way to embody the idea of georgic in humans: they are not just characters who live adjacent to an environment, but characters who take their ethics from the hard reality of that environment. It is no coincidence that, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Farmer Oak's hardworking old dog is called George.

II. Reading the signs in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

The georgic foundations of Hardy's first Wessex novel have been overlooked perhaps because the title, taken from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," and several set pieces, such as the sheep and rustic shepherds who play tunes on oaten pipes, have led many scholars to read *Far from the Madding Crowd* primarily for its allegiance to the pastoral tradition of rural literature. This critical tendency to read for the pastoral, combined with the distinctly non-pastoral emphasis in *Far from the Madding Crowd* on rural instruction and physical labor, has led to articles like Michael Squires's "*Far From The Madding Crowd* as Modified Pastoral," an analysis of traditional tropes like the sing-off and a preference for country life, and Charles May's "*Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*: Hardy's Grotesque Pastorals," which claims that Hardy shows rural reality dampening the idealization one would expect in a pastoral novel (Squires, May). Both readings tease out interesting tensions in Hardy's work, but it is possible to read *Far from the Madding Crowd* with more elegance and depth by bracketing the occasional moments of idealized pastoral leisure and focusing instead on the much more central—and georgic—issue of rural education. We should stop modifying pastoral, in other words, and consider the novel afresh without assuming that Hardy was merely

trying to refresh an ancient tradition of writing about shepherds. Focusing on Bathsheba's agricultural education reveals a novel about a woman trying to break down gender barriers to become a knowledgeable, successful farmer in a modernizing world.

Bathsheba learns to run a farm partly by throwing herself, untaught, into agricultural tasks, and partly by relying on her shepherd, the unflaggingly competent and hardworking Gabriel Oak. I examine one scene of Bathsheba's autodidactic abilities and another in which she learns from Oak to demonstrate how Hardy incorporates georgic didacticism into his novel without directly instructing the reader. Shortly after she takes over her farm, Bathsheba gathers her staff and announces she has "'formed a resolution to have no bailiff at all, but to manage everything with [her] own head and hands'"; an "audible breath of amazement" follows this proclamation that a woman will attempt to supervise a collection of ragtag male farmworkers (Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* 79). It is important that Bathsheba singles out her "head" and "hands" as the body parts necessary for management rather than simply saying she will manage the farm "herself." Despite the fact that she doesn't "'yet know my powers or my talents in farming,'" as she admits later in the scene, she already understands that her new position will require both mental and physical expertise, that she will have to learn both the tasks necessary to keep a farm running and the theory that underlies them, and that the distinction between the work of the hands and the head is less important than those who do not engage in the former might imagine.

Indeed the "first public evidence of Bathsheba's decision to be a farmer" involves a combination of physical and mental confidence: upon entering the Casterbridge corn market to sell her grain in a chapter aptly titled "Farmers," she discovers that, as the "single one of her sex that the room contained," it "required a little determination—far more than she had at first

imagined—to take up a position here" (90). The language enacts a shift from idealized pastoral to industrious georgic: Bathsheba has "imagined"—the word suggests dreamy fantasy with no bearing on reality—a smooth transition into farm life in which she becomes a respected member of agrarian society simply because her inheritance has elevated her social status. Her first foray into the farm world, however, requires "determination"—grit, hard work, the georgic opposite of nonchalant *otium*. Bathsheba is a spectacle among the exclusively male farmers, most of whom are strangers and stare unabashedly at her. Bathsheba learns her first lesson and decides to persevere:

> …if she was to be the practical woman she had intended to show herself, business must be carried on…and she ultimately acquired confidence enough to speak and reply boldly to men merely known to her by hearsay. Bathsheba too had her sample-bags and by degrees adopted the professional pour into the hand—holding up the grains in her narrow palm for inspection, in perfect Casterbridge manner. (90-91)

The words "practical," "business," and "professional" all contribute to a market atmosphere more rigorous and complex than most urban readers might expect from a corn exchange in a provincial market town. The scene suggests none of the intuitive, effortless intelligence of the rustic that pastoral often assumes; rather Bathsheba must "acquire" confidence and "adopt" the professional pour. The reader watches her learn to become a Casterbridge businesswoman by "holding up the grains in her narrow palm," and in the process the reader, too, learns the correct way to conduct business at the corn exchange in an English market town. Bathsheba's lesson—and the reader's—combines mental acuity (the ability to observe one's surroundings and decide how to respond to them) and physical dexterity (imitating the "professional pour" "in perfect

Casterbridge manner"). Without using an imperative, Hardy has taught his reader how to work a grain market by showing his character learning the same process. The lesson is at once particular and universal: we learn the proper way to hold grain (particular), but also that the proper way to conduct business is with confidence and a professional comportment, and that in the modern world a woman can achieve the same business competence as a man (universal).

The market scene shows Bathsheba learning to act the part of the farmer when she isn't on her farm; she also has much to learn about how to work her new land productively and with a strong set of ethics. She receives much of her agricultural education from Gabriel Oak, the stolid shepherd who comes to work for her after she rejects his marriage proposal and he later loses his own farm—and the coveted title "farmer"—because of the sudden, accidental death of all his sheep. Unlike Bathsheba, and despite his dramatic misfortunes, Gabriel is no agricultural novice (and no plot point could be more georgic than a good and hardworking farmer losing everything in an unpreventable natural disaster). He was born to the business of sheep farming and has spent his life perfecting his techniques; his practical skills also extend to the farming of grains and hay. His moral character lives up to his abilities, indeed derives from them: Gabriel is not just industrious but also humble and trustworthy and, as Bathsheba comes to understand over the course of their working relationship, uniquely unselfish. Comparing him to Farmer Boldwood, the most respectable and demented of her three admirers, Bathsheba realizes late in the novel that Oak's capacity for seeing himself in the context of other organisms makes him a good farmer:

> What a way Oak had, she thought, of enduring things. Boldwood, who seemed so much deeper and higher and stronger in feeling than Gabriel, had not yet learnt, any more than she herself, the simple lesson which Oak showed a mastery of by every turn and look he gave—that among the multitude of interests by which he

was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes. (266)

The third-person narrator in this novel frequently changes perspectives, sometimes focusing on a single character, sometimes describing the feel of a crowd; here, it zooms in on Bathsheba's consciousness to represent her way of thinking about her life on the farm: Gabriel shows "mastery" and she needs to "learn" a "simple lesson" from him. Throughout the novel she has learned many particular, technical lessons about how to run a farm; now she is synthesizing those lessons into universal ideas about how to be a good person.

The goodness that Bathsheba recognizes in Gabriel has deeply environmental roots: the "multitude of interests" that surround him belong to plants and animals as well as other humans; in order to be a good farmer he has to care for an entire ecosystem, as Ivan Kreilkamp writes in "Pitying the Sheep in Far from the Madding Crowd" (Kreilkamp 474). To conclude this section, I will examine a scene that Bathsheba surely takes as evidence for Gabriel's selflessness and that ties together two of the main threads of this project: how georgic can work in fiction and how georgic fiction can express environmental thought. The scene opens as Bathsheba celebrates her marriage to the villainous Sergeant Troy, who is handsome where Gabriel is plain, and eloquent where Gabriel is often silent. While the farmhands dance and drink too much in the barn, Gabriel observes the weather and, suspecting that rain and thunder are imminent, suggests that his new master Troy allow him to take a few men from the party to cover the grain ricks, which would be destroyed if left to the mercy of a storm. Troy scoffs at the suggestion, claiming that it will not rain; Gabriel slinks off twice dejected, first because Bathsheba has chosen Troy over him and second because he feels sure that disaster is about to befall the farm, which matters to him because he cares about the integrity of the farm even though it does not affect "his personal well-

being." The narrator observes that "In juxtaposition with Troy, Oak had a melancholy tendency to look like a candle beside gas" (238). The metaphor imagines Oak as less bright and modern, less connected to the technologies of the industrial revolution, less industrially processed and perhaps less artificial than his rival.

If he is less modern, though, Oak is more attuned to the timeless signs of the natural world: his good qualities are more solid, more Oak-like, than Troy's shifting moods and identities. Leaving the party for his cottage, Oak questions whether his instincts about the weather are correct, but he soon finds answers in the "multitude of interests" that surround him:

> In approaching the door his toe kicked something which felt and sounded soft, leathery, and distended, like a boxing-glove. It was a large toad humbly traveling across the path. …He knew what this direct message from the Great Mother meant. And soon came another.
>
> When he struck a light indoors there appeared upon the table a thin glistening streak, as if a brush of varnish had been lightly dragged across it. Oak's eyes followed the serpentine sheen to the other side, where it led up to a huge brown garden slug, which had come indoors to-night for reasons of its own. It was Nature's second way of hinting to him that he was to prepare for foul weather… He knew now that he was right, and that Troy was wrong. Every voice in nature was unanimous in bespeaking change. (238-9)

The narrator knows that rain is coming: he calls the toad a "direct message" and tells us that Nature is giving "hints" to Oak. Oak, though, is more cautious in forming and sticking to an opinion about the weather. Like Bathsheba, Oak does not enjoy an effortlessly instinctual relationship with the nonhuman world; rather he must learn to read natural signs—understanding

a traveling toad as a sign from the "Great Mother" requires experience and excellent observational and analytical skills. As Oak puts his natural knowledge to use in predicting the storm, the reader, too, learns how to sense a change from temperate harvest time to wintry weather in southwest England: besides the toads and slugs, Gabriel observes some overactive spiders and anxious sheep facing resolutely away from the approaching clouds. To extrapolate the universal from the particular once again, the reader is learning how to become an intelligent interpreter of nature—how to work with the weather, how to see animals as allies, not just resources.

Vergil's *Georgics* includes a section identical in content if not tone: the speaker urges readers to pay attention to natural signs in order to predict the weather and protect their farms from whatever threatens—heat or drought, rain or cold:

> *Atque haec ut certis possemus discere signis,*
> *Aestusque pluviasque et agentis frigora ventos,*
> *Ipse pater statuit quid menstrua luna moneret,*
> *Quo signo caderent Austri, quid saepe videntes*
> *Agricolae proprius stabulis armenta tenerent…*
> *numquam imprudentibus imber*
> *obfuit: aut illum surgentem vallibus imis*
> *aëriae fugere grues, aut bucula caelum*
> *suspiciens patulis captavit naribus auras,*
> *aut arguta lacus circumvolitavit hirundo*
> *et veterem in limo ranae cecinere querelam.* (Vergil and Ferry 30)

In order for men to know what might be coming,
Drought, or torrential rain, winds bringing the cold,
Jove, the father himself, provided signs:
The warnings of the moon in its monthly round
What it might mean when the wind suddenly dies;
What the farmer sees, and sees again, that tells him
To keep his cattle close to the barn and shelter…
No storm comes on without giving you any warning.
High in the sky you can see the cranes depart
For the deep inland valleys; in the field the heifer
Looks up at the sky and sniffs the change in the air
With open nostrils; the crying swallows fly
Around and around the pools in their excitement;
The old frogs in the mud croak out the song
Of their ancient grievances…(Vergil and Ferry 31)

Just as Hardy emphasizes the "messages," "hints," and "voices" of nature, Vergil focuses on the "signs" (*signis*) and "warnings" (*luna moneret*); as Hardy shows Gabriel relying on experience rather than instinct, Vergil claims that divine will decreed farmers should "learn by observation" (*videntes agricolae*) how to protect their farms. Hardy shows how the behavior of toads, slugs, spiders and sheep can indicate rain; Vergil selects cranes, heifers, swallows and toads in this passage. Both passages also present a compelling environmental ethic. They express no enmity toward the natural world; neither Oak nor Vergil's speaker curses the climate that threatens his crops. Nature challenges humans but also presents an anthropomorphized face with which

humans can negotiate: the "Great Mother" in Hardy's rendering and "the Father himself" (*ipse pater*) in Vergil's. Humans might have a particular reason to despise Jupiter, who, earlier in the *Georgics*, sentences them to an eternity of hard labor by ending the Golden Age, but according to Vergil they should take comfort in the fact that the deity has left behind signs to direct the course of that labor. Hardy and Vergil argue that the natural world and its many plant, animal, and geographical inhabitants are animate beings that behave in intentional, meaningful ways, and humans must work with its fellow beings, not against them. This outlook coincides with certain Indigenous cosmologies and the branches of contemporary environmental thought that study them, which I discuss in Chapter 3 of this project.

Of course the ancient Roman and modern English text are not identical. A major difference is that the Vergil passage needs little prefacing; like the rest of the poem, it is presented as straightforward advice to farmers. One can dip in and out of the poem with ease. The Hardy passage, meanwhile, makes most sense in the context of the plot of *Far from the Madding Crowd*: Gabriel is anxious about the rain because Troy disagrees with him about whether it will come; he is anxious about the compromised ricks because they belong to his beloved Bathsheba and his general love of stewarding the land well. Vergil requires readers to acknowledge their interest in *tenuis curas* before delving too deeply into his subject; Hardy, the novelist, almost tricks his readers into learning agricultural wisdom as they follow a human plot.

To return to the human: after the wedding party, after all the farmhands have fallen asleep in the barn thanks to Troy's insistence that they drink his strong liquor, Oak heads to the grain ricks to cover them by himself for Bathsheba's sake. Soon Bathsheba, respectful of her new husband but not so complacent that she will allow his idiocy to destroy her farm, hears the

approaching thunder and rushes outside in alarm. Upon learning that Troy is lost to drunken stupor, she determines to help Gabriel however she can:

> "He promised that the stacks should be seen to, and now they are all neglected! Can I do anything to help?... Surely I can do something?"
>
> "You can bring up some reed-sheaves to me, one by one, ma'am, if you are not afraid to come up the ladder in the dark," said Gabriel. "Every moment is precious now, and that would save a good deal of time…."
>
> "I'll do anything!" she said resolutely. (245)

In this moment Gabriel's farming expertise collides with Bathsheba's desperate need to learn: she may be his master in name, and he her employee, but in the face of disaster she is smart enough to cast pretense aside and beg him to teach her how to be a more useful worker. Thrice she repeats her willingness to participate in the labor, each time with increasing self-assurance, from the questioning "can I?" to the rhetorical "Surely I can" to the declarative "I'll do anything." Just as in the market scene, her confidence increases as she assesses a task. And Gabriel takes her up on her offer. He is too polite to order his mistress with blunt imperatives, but he undeniably issues her instructions—teaching her how to bring the thatching material up to the rick, explaining that time is short. The scene is fraught with numerous tensions—sexual, marital, climactic, agrarian—all of them bound together in this one instance of the transmission of knowledge as Gabriel imparts his farming knowledge—the ethical embedded in the practical—to the novice female farmer who must continue to learn the profession from an expert in the wake of her husband's negligence.

Success for Oak and Bathsheba means committing to a life of hard agricultural work, with all of its difficulties and satisfactions. Once Boldwood kills Troy, eliminating his rival and

himself as possible suitors to Bathsheba in one shot, a romantic relationship between equals is finally possible for Oak and Bathsheba. Oak may be poor, but he has proven himself to be loyal, hardworking, and steady of mind; she was once vain and impetuous, but grief and commitment to education have hastened her maturity. When the two finally unite in marriage, the narrator insists that these practical, hard-won qualities form the basis of their new compatibility:

> They spoke very little of their mutual feelings; pretty phrases and warm expressions being probably unnecessary between such tried friends. Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. The good-fellowship—camaraderie—usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death—that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam. (357 – 8)

"Pretty phrases and warm expressions," the currency of the pastoral or the courtly romance, are "unnecessary" between Bathsheba and Oak. After dismissing them, the narrator slips into a language that exalts the importance of the ordinary ugliness from which Oak and Bathsheba have built a partnership: their "substantial affection" is built out of the "rougher sides" of their personalities, in the midst of "hard prosaic reality." The last phrase is particularly important:

pastorals traditionally traffic in lofty, highly stylized verse—high language spoken by humble rural figures—while georgics, though also traditionally written in verse, are typically executed in a rougher, more prosy style intended to mimic the dialect of the locale being described. By mentioning "prose" here, Hardy is also commenting on his own decision to narrate an agrarian romance in novel form.

The relationship the narrator describes here is worlds—or forms—away from the "ideal passion" that Boldwood imagines when he first notices Bathsheba. Or if Oak and Bathsheba's partnership is ideal in the agrarian world of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it is ideal insofar that it departs so dramatically from what is typically considered an ideal romance—a pastoral romance in which lovers meet and frolic at leisure amid sheep-dotted meadows. In fact the narrator is clear that Bathsheba and Oak go well together because they have worked together. They owe their bond to the moments they spent ministering to sheep and thatching grain ricks, not from the harvest dinners and country dances they attended together. They have, as the narrator writes, associated "in their labours": they have applied georgic precepts about an agrarian environment to the complexities of human character and human relationships. Hardy imagines their work-oriented marriage, "unfortunately seldom" seen in country life because of the longstanding tradition of separating the labors of men and women on the farm, as a model for modern marriage, made possible only because Bathsheba has insisted on learning all the skills required for good farming and Gabriel has been patient enough to teach her and work beside her. Their marriage is possible only because Bathsheba brazenly breaks down traditional gender barriers so that she may associate with men georgically, "through similarity of pursuits," not in her "pleasures merely."

III. Fancy Farming in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Like Bathsheba, the eponymous Tess of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* wants men to respect for her hard work and agricultural skill; unlike Bathsheba, she cannot convince them to see her as a worker. "Everything look[s] like money" at The Slopes, the country estate that Tess visits early in the novel, hoping to claim kin with its wealthy inhabitants, who have made their fortune in modern industry, and to seek work from them (Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* 44). The enigmatic "look" of money and its lack helps to drive the moral narrative of the novel alongside the more commonly cited rape plot. Tess first travels to the home of her future rapist hoping to earn money by working with her hands, but Alec d'Urberville is more likely to spend money on other parts of her body. Thus the narrator's extended description of The Slopes is at once cloying and troubling: The property, though "bright, thriving, and well-kept," and "fitted with every late appliance," fits into its placid Wessex surroundings as awkwardly as its owners, the Stoke-d'Urbervilles, fit their falsely adopted name (ibid). The house is obviously "of recent construction," a modern imposition on a traditional landscape. Most important, the farm attached to the house produces only pleasure, not sustenance:

> It was not a manorial home in the ordinary sense, with fields and pastures and a grumbling farmer out of whom the owner had to squeeze an income for himself and his family by hook or by crook: it was more, far more; a country-house built for enjoyment pure and simple, with not an acre of troublesome land attached to it beyond what was required for residential purposes and for a little fancy farm kept in hand by the owner, and tended by a bailiff. (43)

This moneyed house requires no income from its land and does not contribute to the local economy; its acres are not "troublesome" because no one need work them to keep the family

from starving. It is paradoxically "far more" than an "ordinary" country house because it contains more expensive appliances and glass houses for extended-season strawberries, yet it is also "pure and simple," serenely removed from the uncertain world of agricultural necessity. Its farm is "little" enough that working it, or at least tending to it on a whim to supplement the bailiff's care, would be a diversion rather than a chore for its owner. And the farm is "fancy," a fantasy, an experiment, a passing desire, maintained more for luxury than practicality. Into this strange universe steps Tess, "half-alarmed" by its gleam but ready to work for the benefit of her family (ibid). She will indeed earn money for her parents here, but her new employer will value her work far less than her looks, which to Alec signify maiden innocence as bluntly as his house signifies new money. Upon approaching the d'Urberville home, Tess unwittingly submits to its appearance-based purpose: "On the extensive lawn stood an ornamental tent, its door being toward her" (ibid). Like everything else at The Slopes, the tent is decorative. Its door faces "toward" Tess, facilitating her entrance. At Alec d'Urbervilles' house, Tess, who was raised to work and wants to work for her living, turns out to be most valuable as another fancied ornament.

Why would Hardy create a character accustomed to agricultural labor who comes to be seen, to her eternal chagrin, primarily as a decoration first to Alec and eventually to Angel? Hardy portrays Alec unsympathetically, Angel ambivalently, and Tess lovingly. He expects readers to sympathize with Tess, his "Pure Woman Faithfully Presented," when she determines to earn a living rather than pose for one, however impractical her conviction.[6] Critics agree that the novel is, in part, an extended lamentation about the extinction of Tess's rural lower-middle class, which lived "side by side with the agricultural labourers, an interesting and better-informed class, ranking distinctly above the former" (372). Agricultural depression and mechanization were, at the time of writing, pushing that class out of the countryside and down

[6] Hardy appended the subtitle "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented" to the 1891 edition.

the social ladder, sometimes into the laborer class. Hardy portrayed the tragic demise of Tess Durbeyfield and her family in part to demonstrate the social and economic obstacles poor rural people faced in their attempt to modernize in late nineteenth-century England.

Yet Hardy could not just condemn Victorian society from somewhere comfortable outside the fray. Born into the Durbeyfield's class of "the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster," by 1891 Hardy had become a well-known and well-off novelist whose way of life coincided more closely with that of the newly rich Alec d'Urberville's than with any other character's in *Tess* (372). The resemblance between the fictional Slopes and the real life Max Gate, the elegant home Hardy designed and had built for himself in Dorchester and in which he lived while writing *Tess*, is striking. Max Gate was designed in 1885; The Slopes is "almost new." Max Gate is made of red brick; The Slopes has a "crimson lodge" and the house is "of the same rich red color" (43). Hardy ordered 2000 evergreen trees to be planted around Max Gate to exclude nosy passers-by; The Slope is "up to its eaves in dense evergreens" and surrounded by "a truly venerable tract of forest" (ibid).[7] Max Gate boasts a greenhouse, flower gardens, a vegetable garden that is attractive but was never productive enough to feed the whole family, and a sole gardener; The Slopes has its "acres of glass houses," fancy farm, and bailiff (44). Insofar as Hardy criticizes the aesthetics of the d'Urberville home, he criticizes himself, too.

But is the novel condemning the look of modern middle-class prosperity along with Alec, its fictional embodiment? Jessica Martell writes that The Slopes "spares no expense in its attempt to improve upon the offerings of the region's systems of life and culture. But the impulse to re-

[7] Information about the look of Max Gate comes from a visit there in 2013. A visitor's guide at Max Gate notes that "Hardy answered Emma's complaint that the site was too open by planting some 2,000 Austrian pines around the perimeter" even before the house was built (National Trust).

create the native environment is one of domination, not care" (Martell 85).[8] She points specifically to the famous scene in which Alec, delighted to discover his pretty faux-cousin on his front lawn, takes Tess on an impromptu tour of the "lawns, and flower-beds, and conservatories; and thence to the fruit-garden and green-houses, where he asked if she liked strawberries" (Hardy 47). He proceeds to show a surprised Tess that the berries are already ripe inside the structure, though the regular season for them has not yet arrived. To Martell, this agricultural innovation is an abomination: "Divorced from natural cycles and rhythms, dominated by an unsympathetic and artificial design, the hothouse plants have been forced to bear fruit early" (Martell, 85). The premature strawberries, she writes, parallel Tess's premature violation and pregnancy.

I find it difficult to read modernity as such an explicit menace in the greenhouse scene. Tess may not have had access to this technology in her cottager childhood, but the concept of growing vegetables under glass is hardly "new" like The Slopes; greenhouses have been in use since Roman times and probably arrived in England in the seventeenth century ("greenhouse, n."). Even the gentlest agriculture involves just as much "domination" of the land as "care," as Hardy knows well. And in this scene, Hardy shows that Tess herself is genetically predisposed to premature physical ripening on her mother's side, through no fault of Alec or the greenhouse: Alec's eyes "rivet themselves upon her" because she has a "luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was" (48). The problem in the greenhouse is not the fact of artificial cultivation, but rather the uncanny way in which Tess's looks mimic the products of "fancy" modern agriculture. Tess, accustomed to toil, feels out of

[8] That second sentence could apply as easily to novel-writing as to season-extension, a consideration I will take up when discussing the way Angel views Tess.

place among the decorative bounty of The Slopes; to Alec, though, she fits into the modern surrounds perfectly.

Thus he hurries to incorporate her into its scheme. Wandering the greenhouse, Alec feeds Tess strawberries and "fill[s] her little basket with them;" next he hands her flower blossoms to fill her bosom. Just as The Slopes turns farming into a hobby, Alec converts the work of picking strawberries, quite arduous when performed for long periods because of the bending and stooping, into his own little leisurely pastoral, a rustic scene removed from the outside world (literally, in this case, by glass walls) in which natural objects represent and reify human mating rituals. Most famously, Alec feeds Tess a single strawberry with his own hand:

> D'Urberville began gathering specimens of the fruit for her, handing them back to her as he stooped: and presently selecting a specially fine product of the "British Queen" variety he stood up and held it by the stem to her mouth.
>
> "No, no!" she said quickly, putting her fingers between his hand and her lips. "I would rather take it in my own hand."
>
> "Nonsense!" he insisted; and in a slight distress she parted her lips and took it in. (47)

It is not surprising that scholars like James Heffernan and Ellen Rooney, among others, read this scene from a sexual angle, as an example of Alec's coercive or seductive power and Tess's curiosity or inability to defy her suitor.[9] Certainly the scene foreshadows Alec's rape of Tess, with its emphasis on her denial of his offering, her "distress," her "mouth" and "parted lips."

[9] See Rooney's "A Little More than Persuading" for a comprehensive discussion of the ambiguity of the question of whether or not Tess was actually raped and for more notes on Tess's inability to escape from the curse of her beauty (Rooney). Heffernan's "'Cruel Persuasion: Seduction, Temptation, and Agency in Hardy's *Tess*" contends that the strawberry scene, emulating Milton's portrayal of Eve and the snake, shows that Alec's violation of Tess may be better described as a forced seduction than as a rape (Heffernan).

But Tess is not only submitting to metaphorical sex in this scene, and her mouth is not the only body part at play. Very often in the novel, Hardy refers to Tess's hands while describing her agricultural tasks in Marlott, at Talbothays, and at Flintcombe Ash. She is by title a hired hand, as in "Mr. Crick was glad to get a new hand" at the dairy, and she distinguishes herself as an individual by the work of her hands: certain cows "loved Tess's hands above those of any other maid" (123, 165). Her hands perform hard work while retaining feminine beauty: "amid the immaculate whiteness of the curds Tess Durbeyfield's hands showed themselves of the pinkness of the rose" (194). In a moment of despair after Angel deserts her, Tess reminds herself to avoid self-pity because "'I have two hands to feed and clothe me'" (298). At The Slopes, Tess objects to Alec's attempt to clothe her by ornamenting her dress with flowers, and to feed her by placing a strawberry in her mouth. He has already transformed the task of harvesting into a leisure activity; now he even presumes to neutralize her ability to take the fruit in her "own hand." To prevent this transgression, she makes a barrier by "putting her fingers between his hand and her lips." This wall, this metonym for her self-reliance as an agricultural worker, must fall first. Only after defeating her hand can Alec persuade Tess to part her lips.

This early scene in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* serves less to descry the aesthetics or technologies of bourgeois country houses than to demonstrate the evil that can occur when members of other classes and livelihoods enter bourgeois space. According to his gardener, Thomas Hardy liked to eat the strawberries grown on his own estate; he even required his gardeners to leave the stems on the berries when harvesting so that he and his guests could pick up and consume the fruits by hand, just like Alec and Tess (Stephens 5). Hardy would become, in his prosperous years, an engine of the social transformation he seemed to despise. He may have worried that he had too much in common with Alec in terms of his slanted view of Tess; in

fact Richard Kerridge argues that Hardy frequently changes the perspective from which readers can approach the characters precisely to emphasize the distance between the laboring rustic characters and his middle class audience—including, I would add, Hardy himself. Kerridge claims that Hardy should be worked into the ecocritical canon because he portrays humans working in and with the land, not just alongside it (Kerridge). I would add that the *Georgics* and the georgic mode already provide an ecological guide for the interaction between land and human, and that both ancient poetry and Victorian novel should be brought into the environmental fold. The tragic ending of *Tess* has prevented most critics from labeling the novel a pastoral, though as Martell notes Hardy draws on the pastoral tradition in his description of Talbothays Dairy. Still, *Tess* has a pastoral problem: Tess's suitors, her readers, and even her creator are all tempted to read her as a character most notable for her beauty and rustic innocence, while Tess herself would prefer to be recognized for her hard work, temperance, and good sense—her georgic qualities.

Tasting Labor

The "phases" that organize *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* trace Tess's professional development as much as her sexual and moral development. Over the course of the novel, Tess works as a homesteading cottager, a poultry manager, a grain harvester and processor, a milkmaid, and a turnip harvester and processor. She performs all her tasks willingly, stoically, and for the most part skillfully. Yet her relationship to agricultural work is neither even nor stable: as the narrative progresses, she simultaneously becomes more confident of her value as a general laborer and also, more subtly, learns to prefer certain forms of rural labor to others. Specifically, Tess learns that she is more comfortable caring for domesticated animals than

working in the fields. She can immediately consume the foods produced by animals and thus quite literally feed herself by the work of her own hands; the grain and swedes she gleans from the fields, on the other hand, must be mediated through machines, masters, and money before they become useful to her. Zena Meadowsong argues that mechanical intrusion "deforms" the narrative realism of *Tess* to emphasize the decimation of rural life; similarly, moments in which agriculture functions without machinery—by hand—often align with hopeful beginnings and narrative cohesion (Meadowsong 225). Just as Tess prefers to be valued for her useful skills rather than her ornamental looks, so she prefers to do work that feels immediately useful to her and her kin rather than the type that more obviously benefits the burgeoning class of businessman-farmers. One tragically ironic effect of the narrative is to move Tess farther away from the type of working life she would like to live even as she begins to understand what that life is.

As in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the death of livestock catalyzes the plot of *Tess* by plunging her family into economic instability. Tess blames herself bitterly for the death of Prince, the family horse, who is killed while she is diligently driving to market in the darkness of early morning because her father is too drunk to run the errand himself. Even this early in the novel, Tess exhibits two georgic qualities: she has learned how to care for animals and understands the importance of best practices, yet she recognizes that all her efforts can come to naught in an unpredictable world. On learning that her father cannot travel to market, Tess says, "'But somebody must go.…It is late for the hives already. Swarming will soon be over for the year; and if we put off taking 'em till next week's market the call for 'em will be past" (35). Tess may still be a teenager, but she has already internalized the seasonal rhythms of freeholder life: she

possesses as much knowledge about how to make a living from the land and its animals as her parents do, in addition to the work ethic that they lack.[10]

Still, even before Prince dies, Tess declares a pessimistic view of the world while journeying to market. When her brother asks whether they live on a "splendid" or "blighted" world, Tess immediately affirms that theirs is the latter. If it were splendid, "father wouldn't have coughed and creeped about as he does, and wouldn't have got too tipsy to go this journey; and mother wouldn't have been always washing, and never getting finished" (37). Tess simultaneously criticizes her father's idleness and bemoans her mother's need to toil. This sentiment aligns neatly with the philosophy of labor laid out in Book 1 of Vergil's *Georgics*, which at once celebrates and laments the necessity of constant hard work: *pater ipse colendi / haud facilem esse viam voluit, primusque per artem / movit agros, curis acuens mortalia corda / nec torpere gravi passus sua regna veterno* (The father [Jove] himself hardly wanted the path to be smooth for tilling, and first caused fields to be cultivated through skill, sharpening mortal hearts with cares, nor did he suffer his kingdom to be burdened with sleepy idleness) (Virgil 40). Agricultural work may challenge humans in this fallen world, but the difficulty keeps us smart and attentive. The alternative—laziness—is worse for both Vergil and Tess: she may complain about working, but she refuses even to answer her brother when he asks Tess whether she might escape work and "be made rich by marrying a gentleman" (Hardy 37). The thought of relying on her beauty to achieve financial security is less appealing to Tess than to her family.

If we accept that the world of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is as "blighted" as Tess believes it to be—not a stretch, given the relentless bleakness of the novel—then that world differs from Vergil's in a key way. In the Georgics, "*pater ipse*" determines the conditions for human life,

[10] It is likely coincidental but still interesting to note that Tess's first agricultural task is beekeeping, the subject of the fourth and last book of the Georgics. Her second major task, milking cows, aligns with the third book, on cattle management, and her last employment, fieldwork, aligns with the subject of the first book.

and the speaker admonishes readers "*in primis venerare deos*" (above all worship the gods) to protect themselves against crop failure and other evils (Virgil 46). In *Tess*, for all the narrator might muse about Tess's tendency toward "Pagan fantasy" and her "beliefs essentially naturalistic," he makes it clear that no god, Christian or Pagan, is interested in Tess's behaviors or responsive to her prayers (120, 182). In this sense Hardy's world is even less predictable, even more chaotic, than the world of the ancients—this is one of the ways in which he verges on the modern. In the 1866 sonnet "Hap," Hardy writes, "If but some vengeful god would call to me / From up the sky, and laugh… / 'Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy…' / Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die" (Hardy, *Complete Poems* 5). But divine anger is not the cause of the speaker's suffering; "Crass Casualty" and "dicing Time" are the perpetrators, and they are indifferent to the speaker's fate and ignorant of his suffering (ibid 11-12).

The narrator of *Tess* reminds us several times that Tess's fate is not hitched to divine power or, by extension, to the look of the natural world. This rejection of the pathetic fallacy (by no means endemic to Hardy's oeuvre) is also a modern, anti-pastoral polemic: if, in pastoral, nature weeps for man's distress, in *Tess* nature does not weep in response to human suffering. Sometimes the disconnection is tragic, as in the final phase of the novel when Angel visits Marlott and finds Tess missing from her old house, but "Even the spring birds sang over their heads as if they thought there was nobody missing in particular" (395). Earlier in the novel, after the rape but before the additional traumas of the death of her child and Angel's desertion, Tess appreciates the fact that her own suffering makes no mark on wider nature, her optimism almost matching Gabriel's selflessness in *Far From The Madding Crowd*:

> After wearing and wasting her palpitating heart with every engine of regret that lonely inexperience could devise, common-sense had illumined her. She felt that

> she would do well to be useful again—to taste a new sweet independence at any price. The past was past; whatever it had been it was no more at hand. Whatever its consequences, time would close over them; they would all in a few years be as if they had never been, and she herself grassed down and forgotten. Meanwhile the trees were just as green as before; the birds sang and the sun shone as clearly now as ever. The familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain. (103)

Again, the "trees," "birds," and "sun" have failed to respond to Tess's emotions. But Tess is glad for this indifference: to represent her pain, these natural features and creatures would have had to become uglier. Instead, they retain their attractions and lift her mood; the thought of being "grassed down" in death is less horrifying because Tess can imagine that the landscape will look exactly as it did with her in it. "Time" is now a healer, not a horror: recognizing indifference in nature leads Tess to feel at least a temporary indifference of her own about her violent past, which is "no more at hand." Being "useful," finding "independence" by working outdoors, finally is at hand. Tess may not appeal to the gods like the pagan she almost is, but in georgic fashion she is motivated to work by the very fact that the natural world would get along fine without her.

Thus Tess is hardly displeased when she arrives at her new job at Talbothays Dairy and discovers that the cry of "'Waow! Waow! Waow!'" she hears is "not the expression of the valley's consciousness that beautiful Tess had arrived, but the ordinary announcement of milking-time" (121). She has traveled to the Valley of Great Dairies to gain "new sweet independence" through her skill and effort as a dairymaid, not to be admired for her beauty. Tess's first interactions with her new employer, the prosperous dairyman Mr. Crick, demonstrate

her hope that work will revivify her. Crick warily notices that Tess looks delicate from working indoors and, unsure that she can stand the hard work of dairying, asks a question that threatens to transport her back to the greenhouse at The Slopes: "'Quite sure you can stand it? 'Tis comfortable enough here for rough folk; but we don't live in a cowcumber frame" (124). It is hardly surprising that Tess affirms her ability to perform the "rough" dairy work with "zeal" and "willingness": she is ready to leave behind the artificial pastoral that Alec created in his strawberry "frame" and expose her complexion to the vicissitudes of the outdoor world (ibid).

There delicacy mattered; here hands do: Tess declines Crick's offer of a formal meal, declaring that she would rather "'begin milking now, to get my hand in'" (ibid). Again, she does not feel as though her working life has begun until her hands are involved. "When Tess had changed her bonnet for a hood, and was really on her stool under the cow, and the milk was squirting from her fists into the pail, she appeared to feel that she really had laid a new foundation for her future" (ibid). That repetition of the unusually casual "really" indicates that the narrator is trying now to immerse himself in Tess's consciousness: she can hardly believe that she has "really" managed to skirt her unfortunate past by donning a new outfit—a "hood"—and wrapping her "fists" around a new warm, productive animal.

Even here, though, Tess has yet to escape the world of appearances; to the narrator she only "appeared" to feel; the attempt at a close third person is exactly that. Perhaps Tess's actions are easier for narrators and readers to interpret than her feelings. Just before assuming her work as a milkmaid, Tess tastes the milk she is about to pull in lieu of a real meal:

> She drank a little milk as temporary refreshment—to the surprise—indeed, slight contempt—of Dairyman Crick, to whose mind it had apparently never occurred that milk was good as a beverage. "Oh, if ye can swaller that, be it so," he said

indifferently, while one held up the pail that she sipped from. "'Tis what I hain't touched for years—not I. Rot the stuff; it would lie in my innerds like lead." (124)

Even before donning the hood and employing her fists, Tess can taste the product that will sustain her financially and physically throughout her stay at Talbothays. In this sense, her work has more in common with her poultry managing at Trantridge than with her grain-reaping or swede-cutting, and it provides her more satisfaction. Tess's eagerness to taste the milk straight from the pail also presents an odd contrast with Crick, specifically called "Dairyman" in this passage to emphasize the strangeness of his refusal to taste dairy. Even lactose intolerance should not block him from imagining that milk might be "good as a beverage" for those many unseen others to whom he sells his milk. Hardy includes this detail to emphasize the difference between Dairyman Crick, who sells his product to London consumers and turns into the gentlemanly "Mister Richard Crick" on Sundays, and lowly Tess, a daughter of the Wessex soil for whom the product is more nourishing than the profit it brings. Tess's admirers notice this appreciative quality: we know that Angel Clare, the handsome apprentice she meets at Talbothays, would often say "gaily that her mouth and breath tasted of the butter and eggs and milk and honey on which she mainly lived, that he drew sustenance from them, and other follies of that sort" (261).

Dapes Inemptae

When Farmer Groby approaches Tess on the road as she marches toward his bleak farm, he reminds her of the way her "fancy-man," Angel Clare, once punched him for insulting Tess's purity (296). Nancy Barrineau's notes to the Oxford edition of *Tess* explain that the term can mean either "a man who is fancied or loved," or in slang terms a pimp (436). Either definition

could certainly apply here: Tess loves Angel, and Groby has every reason to wish to insult both her and him. A third definition pertains, too: even before he meets Tess, Angel is a "fancy" man in the same way that The Slopes contains a "fancy" farm, a place where desire matters more than practicality. Angel, the unmoored son of a middle-class preacher, has the rare chance to choose whatever profession and way of life suits his fancy. His eye, therefore, is always seeking appearances that might make him happy; his observations are so extensive that he becomes the primary reader of Tess and British agriculture in the novel. The narrator's initial descriptions of Angel suggest where his readings of Tess and Talbothays Dairy might be sharp, and where weak. Much of the tension lies in Angel's inability to interpret Tess's attitude toward and expertise in agricultural work—in his willingness to view her behaviors in an aesthetic rather than practical light. Jane Mattison argues that work is a metaphor for knowledge in Hardy's novels; if this is the case, then Angel both fails to understand the meaning behind Tess's hard work and fails to interpret the rustic knowledge she tries to impart to him correctly (Mattison).

Angel's blindness in this matter is especially interesting given that Hardy's narrator introduces Angel as a collection of sensory organs, as a consumer of observations and producer of analyses. Angel is marked from his entry into the novel, in other words, as both a reader and a sort of narrator himself: "Angel Clare rises out of the past not altogether as a distinct figure, but as an appreciative voice, a long regard of fixed, abstracted eyes, and a mobility of mouth… something nebulous, preoccupied, vague, in his bearing and regard, marked him as one who probably had no very definite aim or concern about his material future" (130). It is easier for someone with a secure material past to lack concern for his material future. Angel may not come from wealth, but he does come from a background of stability and *enough* wealth to allow him ample choice in his life. As Tess realizes with wonder, Angel is at Talbothays because "he was

studying what he wanted to know. He did not milk cows because he was obliged to milk cows, but because he was learning how to be a rich and prosperous dairyman, landowner, agriculturist, and breeder of cattle" (140). Angel's "fixed, abstracted eyes" have the luxury of fixing only on the images they find intriguing, pleasing, or meaningful; his "voice" exists not just to communicate or explain but to "appreciate," a word that connotes, in this context, a penchant for aesthetic judgment. Angel enters the narrative bearing the adjectives "abstracted," "nebulous," and "vague," all of which suggest their absent opposites: concrete, solid, concerted. His genteel upbringing has vested him with the former three; he seems to hope that an education in farming will draw his being closer to the latter three.

But why does Angel choose farming, of all the options available to him? He seems to believe that the agricultural life offers him a singular opportunity to cultivate his own mind even as he cultivates vegetables and animals. He decides to get training in agriculture, rather than in a town-based profession more befitting his social class, like the law, ostensibly because the former option is less constricting: "farming, at any rate, after becoming well-qualified for the business by a careful apprenticeship; that was a vocation which would probably afford an independence without the sacrifice of what he valued even more than a competency—intellectual liberty" (134). The passion is not for farming itself, but for the supposed freedom from administrative trivia that the livelihood might offer. Angel feels that a profession seeming to require less critical thinking, like farming, leaves the mind more open to daydreaming and therefore to one's choice of critical thoughts, to "intellectual liberty."

Throughout the novel, Hardy takes some pains to dispel the notion that an agricultural livelihood requires less mental energy than a Victorian office job — especially for a soft gentleman "prentice" not born into the work. Angel's eventual trip to Brazil is presented as an

utter disaster, and not just because Angel is mourning the loss of the picture of Tess he had sketched; he also fails as a farmer because he does not understand South America's geography or its climate or the first thing, really, about starting a farm in the Western Hemisphere. Kerridge says Angel's relentless disaster with Tess "might be called a tourist's failure"; recall Garrard's assertation that "pastoral and wilderness tropes typically imply a perspective of the aesthetic tourist" (Kerridge 132, Garrard 108). As an apprentice, Angel successfully fulfills the manual tasks of a farmhand, which do seem to permit workers to daydream while their bodies labor; we know, for example that at Talbothays "…some of the women, when milking, dug their foreheads into the cows and gazed into the pail. But a few…rested their heads sideways. This was Tess Durbeyfield's habit, her temple pressing the milcher's flank, her eyes fixed on the far end of the meadow with the quiet of one lost in meditation" (Hardy 165). Angel seeks this "quiet," this chance to "meditate," this promise of pastoral *otium* in the thick of agrarian labor; he represents pastoral misperception in a georgic world.

But the opportunity for "intellectual liberty" that Angel perceives at the milcher's flank is an illusion. Tess's mind, the reader knows, isn't wandering freely; it is constantly storming with anxious thoughts of her stained past and stunted prospects for a happy future. Even the rustic characters not dogged by their past lack the liberty to think at leisure: Dairyman Crick, the actual "rich and prosperous dairyman" whose success Angel seeks to emulate, seems to have a mind full to the brim with the complexities of running a dairy. It is possible that the narrator simply never permits the reader access to Crick's rich inner philosophical musings for the sake of concision and attention to the main plot. But the absence of Crick's interiority in the novel suggests that the dairyman spends too much time worrying about keeping the milk free of a garlic tang and keeping the cows amenable to all the milkmaids to allow himself the luxury of

"intellectual liberty." A modern, commercial farmer, he does not even have the pleasure of enjoying his own product. Angel's rustic idyll does not exist in the upper echelons of British farm management.

To give Angel credit, his pastoral illusions do not prevent him from learning a lot over the course of his stay at Talbothays. But he is not always learning the lessons that might prove relevant in a future dairying or farming career. He seems to treat the dairy's working population, rather than the work itself, as the most instructive manual for his practice. But Angel's practice, in keeping with his narrator-like qualities, is truthfully more concerned with understanding the subtleties of human nature than with absorbing the complexities of farming. On his shifting view of keeping company with the farm workers, for example, the narrator tells us Angel "soon preferred to read human nature by taking his meals downstairs in the general dining-kitchen, with the dairyman and his wife, and the maids and men, who all together formed a lively assembly" (134). The phrase "to read human nature" is significant: Angel approaches his exposure to the "lively assembly" as he would approach a book — by "reading" it. The verb suggests intelligent interest on Angel's part, certainly, but also an aloof self-distancing commensurate with his "abstractedness." Angel learns a lot of valuable and demystifying information about the workers, namely that they are not all the same rustic caricature but are rather "varied fellow-creatures," "beings infinite in difference," and "one here and there bright even to genius" (134). Still, though, Angel is seated not at the general table but by the fire: he comes to the dining-kitchen as an observer of farm life, not a full participant in it.

So, too, does Angel position himself in relation to Tess. He has grown up reading literary books and misguidedly attempts to make sense of Tess as though she were a work of literature — specifically, of pastoral literature. Seated by the fire at a convivial farmhouse meal, Angel

first becomes conscious of Tess when he hears her voice and thinks to himself "'What a fluty voice one of those milkmaids has'" (135). The word "fluty" carries a pastoral connotation, linking Tess's body with the "oaten flute" played by rustic shepherds, according to poetic tradition, in outdoor song contests. Angel's first perceptions of Tess establish her in his mind as contiguous not just with farm life but with song, with poetry, with a rural literature made available to him by his genteel education.

Angel's pastoral perception of Tess persists, unfortunately, into his acquaintance with her. Once the two are established lovers, the narrator tells us Angel "loved her dearly, though perhaps rather ideally and fancifully….He had entertained no notion, when doomed as he thought to an unintellectual bucolic life, that such charms as he beheld in this idyllic creature would be found behind the scenes" (222). On first reading, this passage contradicts the narrator's earlier assertion that Angel hoped farming would, to repeat, "probably afford an independence without the sacrifice of…intellectual liberty." Now, Angel seems to have decided that farming has "doomed" him to an "*un*intellectual bucolic life." The earlier passage suggests that Angel chooses farming because he thinks it might allow his critical brain more freedom than other livelihoods; the later one suggests that Angel thought he was, in fact, sacrificing intellectual liberty by committing to farming. One imagines that he is still discovering what this profession could mean to him.

Perhaps he is trying to learn by deploying the language left from his genteel education: the passage above is littered with pastoral adjectives and adverbs like "ideally," "bucolic," and "idyllic"; these underscore Angel's obsession with pinning down Tess as a model for rustic womankind. In pastoral poetry, the "ideal" is linked with the perfect, distanced land of Arcadia, where shepherds sing and pasture their flocks at leisure. In his abstracted love for Tess, Angel thinks he has landed himself in a blissful pastoral; he is rather blind, though, to the "blighted"

reality of a working country life. For Angel, agrarian life is still a set of "scenes" — of composed artworks, of theatrical sets, of frames observed and recorded by humans whose perspective is broader than that of one confined to a valley. It is worth noting that Hardy subtitled his early novel *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which Robert Langbaum calls Hardy's first and most "purely pastoral" novel, "Rural Painting of the Dutch School" (Langbaum 68). Perhaps *Tess*'s narrator is correcting for a sentiment experienced by Angel, and earlier by Hardy.

With his genteel upbringing (if not university education), Angel ought to have known the *Georgics* as well as any number of bucolics and idylls, and probably enough Latin to stumble through them too. Hardy filters his most obvious allusion to the *Georgics* through Angel's consciousness, when he is visiting his family for the first time after a period of rustification at the dairy: "The walk had made them hungry, Angel in particular, who was now an outdoor man, accustomed to the profuse *dapes inemptae* of the dairyman's somewhat coarsely-laden table" (178). In the Oxford edition of *Tess*, Nancy Barrineau ties Hardy's use of the Latin phrase "*dapes inemptae*," or "un-bought feasts," to Horace, *Epodes*, ii.48, and the expression is indeed to be found in that lyricist's satirically ecstatic vaunting of country life over city life (in English, the poem is often called "Country Joys"; in its last stanza, the speaker is revealed to be not a contented farmer but a greedy urban moneylender) (Hardy, Notes 430; Rudd 273).

The "*dapes inemptas*" signify the glories of a meal whose ingredients are provided entirely by the bounty of the cook's husband's farm, so ample that they obviate the need for the market or money exchange. Barrineau does not note, however, that Vergil also uses the phrase in the *Georgics*, iv.133, embedded in a section of much more ambiguous tone in which the failings of farmer and poet are only sometimes balanced by successes and glories. In the Modern Library edition (2001), Daniel Burke notes both the Horace and Vergil references (Vergil and Thomas 23;

Hardy and Burke 487). Angel, who speaks of farming joys but really only *knows* the joys of urbane education, perhaps shares traits with Horace's moneylender; the tone of *Tess*, however, has more in common with the emphasis on work's difficulty in the *Georgics* than with Horace's lyric.

Arum Maculatum

The word "pastoral" appears exactly once in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.[11] Tess and Angel are still at Talbothays, and Angel is indicating interest in Tess but has not yet declared his passion for her. Tess is equally interested, but also "dejected, disheartened" by the apparent "distance between her own modest mental standpoint and the unmeasurable, Andean altitude of his" (141). Tess does not value, or perhaps does not recognize, her own wealth of agrarian knowledge; compared to Angel's foreign bookish knowledge, her own rustic supply does not seem to count for much. Unfortunately and oddly, given his professed career goals, Angel agrees with Tess. He would rather inculcate his ways than try to absorb hers. Angel "observed her dejection one day when he had casually mentioned something to her about pastoral life in ancient Greece. She was gathering the buds called 'lords and ladies' from the bank while he spoke" (ibid). The narrator leaves the details of Angel's remarks on "pastoral life in ancient Greece" tantalizingly obscure. The conversation immediately switches to the cause of Tess's dejection, and the narrative loses interest in the pastoral except as a metonymy for genteel knowledge.

Pastoral tropes seep into the form of the narration even as the topic evaporates from Tess and Angel's conversation. Few activities beyond actually herding sheep are more marked "pastoral" than picking flowers (beautiful, easily idealized natural objects) while sitting by a pleasant riverbank (enjoying a moment of *otium*, of leisure). We might even infer that the image

[11] The solitary uses of the other pastoral buzzwords "bucolic" and "idyll" are quoted above.

of lovely Tess plucking lovely buds subconsciously inspired Angel to think of and mention ancient Greek pastoral in the first place. Consciously, however, he does not recognize that the scene has pastoral connotations; in fact, he goes so far as to eschew Tess's speech about the flowers in his excitement at the prospect of replacing her rustic knowledge with bookish knowledge:

> "…Why," he said with some enthusiasm, "I should be only too glad, my dear Tess, to help you to anything in the way of history, or any line of reading you would like to take up—"
>
> "It is a lady again," interrupted she, holding out the bud she had peeled.
>
> "What?"
>
> "I meant that there are always more ladies than lords when you come to peel them."
>
> "Never mind about the lords and ladies: would you like to take up any course of study—history for example?" (ibid)

In his essay "Violence of Style in *Tess*," Jean Jacques LeCercle reads this scene as an example of Angel's linguistic violence against Tess. LeCercle claims Tess's flower-peeling game, a "pre-linguistic semiotic activity," "is repressed by the articulate language of the dominant culture" (LeCercle 149). Angel's question about what subject Tess might like to study is not a question, LeCercle claims, because it is "preceded by an imperative," "'Never mind,'" confirming Angel's belief in the superiority of his own language and knowledge system to Tess's (ibid).

LeCercle's reading provides a foundation for my own attempt to establish how knowledge shapes Tess in this scene. LeCercle picks up on the symbolism of flowers called "lords and ladies" and notes that Tess's observation "'there are always more ladies than lords

when you come to peel them'" "ironically expresses the truth of the situation" in which Angel and Tess are enmeshed (ibid). He means that there are more women who have a truly lady-like nature than men who have truly lord-like natures in Hardy's world. The lack of communication about the lords and ladies flowers represents an instance of Angel dominating Tess via language, though I would argue that the flowers do not just signify genteel language dominating Tess's "pre-linguistic" flower-peeling, but also dominating her dialect and her associated knowledge. What knowledge is Tess trying to convey here? On one level, she wants to pass along her observations about a species of flower. On another level, she is providing a neat metaphorical lead-up to her famous speech about her suspicion of Angel's varieties of knowledge: the piles of identical flowers are similar to the existentially depressing "'thousands and thousands'" of people whom books would tell her were "'just like'" her (142).

And Tess is also trying to teach Angel a lesson about her native language, the Wessex dialect. "Lords and ladies" is just one of many local English names for the species of flower Tess is dissecting; others include "cuckoo pint," "devils and angels," "cows and bulls," and more prosaically "wake robin" ("lords and ladies, n."). She is trying, in a small way, to explain to Angel her particular way of naming things in the world. To be fair, Angel might not be able to take away useful farming information from Tess's lesson on plant taxonomy. But he might use the information she chooses to pass along to create a better-informed, less-idealized image of her in his mind. And perhaps tragically, if he combined his genteel knowledge with Tess's rustic knowledge here, there is a possibility that Angel and Tess might actually have learned something about each other, and might have avoided the fallout that takes up the second half of the novel. The scientific name for "lords and ladies" is *Arum Maculatum*, a tidbit one would expect Angel to have asked about had he been paying any attention to Tess. Raised as a gentleman, he would

likely have been able to interpret the Latin words: "*arum*" means wake-robin, a genus of plant; "*maculatum*" means "polluted" or "stained." That participle is probably applied to the plant to account for its highly poisonous berries. In the context of *Tess*, it's one of a great many hints about Tess's "stained" past—a hint that Angel might have noticed if he had paid more attention to Tess's lesson.

Even without Tess's help, Angel learns a lot about rural living during his stay at Talbothays: "he made close acquaintance with phenomena which he had before known but darkly—the seasons in their moods, morning and evening, night and noon, winds in their differing tempers, trees, waters and mists, shades and silences, and the voices of inanimate things" (Hardy, 134). All this, according to the narrator, he manages before Tess's arrival. But were Angel's mind more open, his relationship with Tess might have deepened his understanding of the outdoor world even further. Imagine, for example, if he paid attention when Tess says to him "'The trees have inquisitive eyes, haven't they? — that is, seem as if they had. And the river says "why do ye trouble me with your looks?"'" (140). Tess tries to teach Angel about the voices of the ecosystem in which they work, just as Gabriel teaches a willing Bathsheba and they combine their best qualities to form a robust modern union. But Angel is too blinded by Tess's beauty to learn from her experience; the tragedy of Hardy's late georgic is that bookish and experiential modes of education cannot combine to form a modern whole.

Chapter 2: Selecting Agrarian Wisdom in Willa Cather's Pioneer Novels

Willa Cather's agrarian novels *O, Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) are perfect American counterparts to Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, respectively, though no critics have yet noted the novels' striking similarities as testaments to the way modern farms shaped, and were shaped by, the conditions of the Industrial Revolution and its attendant shifts in migration and gender norms. All four novels are built upon a strong georgic foundation of agricultural labor and tough human negotiations with landscape, climate, and other species. Where Hardy's novels show how the social and technological changes of modernity threaten to change an ancient agrarian society in southwest England in ways both good and bad, Cather's depict the development of a new agrarian society from a mix of European traditions and distinctly American innovations. I trace some specific similarities between the two novelists in my readings of *O, Pioneers* and *My Ántonia,* which follow an introduction to Cather's conception of the Nebraska frontier, the pioneer farmer, and the changing modes of education in the early twentieth century. The environment of the Great Plains is very different from that of Wessex, and the demands on the farmers who wish to tame it are accordingly different, too, but like Hardy, Cather relies on a georgic tradition of didacticism and commitment to agrarian labor to guide her characters through the daunting job of creating an effective system of land management and—through this system—landing on a set of social and environmental ethics suitable for the modern era. Her Nebraska novels trace the development of georgic characters who are determined enough to overcome serious obstacles, smart enough to seek and listen to advice from farmers more experienced than they, and flexible enough to understand when to stick to traditional techniques and when to experiment with innovations.

I. Cather's Imperfect Pioneer

In 1923, a decade after the publication of her first "Nebraska novel," Willa Cather wrote a short piece for *The Nation* titled "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." After providing an admiring history of the early white settlers' cultural and agricultural conquests on the Great Plains, Cather turns her thoughts to the future generations of the state in which she spent her adolescence and early adulthood, hoping that they will become as tough and resourceful as their forebears. Recalling those early years of settlement from a Nebraska graveyard filled with the bodies of immigrant pioneers who lacked college degrees, Cather writes "I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in *elasticity of mind*, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination" (237, emphasis mine). Cather identifies "elasticity of mind," rather than any particular set of knowledge, as the key ingredient in the founding and progression of a modern society. All of Cather's pioneer heroes—Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Àntonia Shimerda—possess it, and it marks them as different from and superior to the more rigid and conformist mortals in Cather's fictional universe. This elasticity manifests as the ability and, just as important, the willingness to learn in a variety of conditions and from a variety of sources, be they as conventional as a classroom teacher or as eccentric as a bird-loving hermit. Those cultural institutions that foster elasticity of mind, Cather favors; those that shut it down, she disdains. She grows suspicious of the twentieth-century university because she fears that modern education discourages elasticity. If Cather approves of the University of Nebraska, her alma mater, for allowing bright people to exercise their elastic minds regardless of gender or country of origin,

she also chastises it for admitting people who favor education for the money it might earn them, rather than the more nuanced and vague rewards of "feeling and imagination":[12]

> There is even danger that that fine institution, the University of Nebraska, may become a giant trade school. The men who control its destiny, the regents and the lawmakers, wish their sons and daughters to study machines, mercantile processes, "the principles of business"; everything that has to do with the game of getting on in the world—and nothing else. The classics, the humanities, are having their dark hour. They are in eclipse. Studies that develop taste and enrich personality are not encouraged. But the "Classics" have a way of revenging themselves. One may venture to hope that the children, or the grandchildren, of a generation that goes to a university to select only the most utilitarian subjects in the course of study—among them, salesmanship and dressmaking—will revolt against all the heaped-up, machine-made materialism about them. They will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom—not as a duty, but with burning desire. (Cather 238)

Few would argue today that Cather's call for renewed attention to "the old sources of culture and wisdom" has borne out in the institutions of higher education in this country. Indeed the novelist's lament sounds remarkably prescient, remarkably contemporary in the context of today's chronic panic about decreasing funding for, and student enrollment in, the diverse fields that constitute what we now call the humanities. How do humanities academics convince students and institutions with eyes fixed on the future to contemplate what we teach, which

[12] It is worth noting that Cather evolved toward this meritocratic view on higher education and never completely believed that all people could develop the capacity to learn. Reviewing Thomas Hardy's *Hearts Insurgent* in 1895, shortly after she graduated from college, she writes "I suppose [Hardy] meant to show what idiots a little learning makes of people of the downright plebeian stock. Analytical powers are a great misfortune to working people, for they take them too seriously…" (Cather, *The Kingdom of Art* 359). In her novels, written decades later, "working people" benefit tremendously from "analytical powers." Even in the fiction, though, Cather's elastic-minded heroes tend to have a clever grandfather or musical aunt, so that their stock cannot quite be called "strictly plebeian."

comprises, at root, the "old sources," even when we teach works published only a few years ago? In her novels, particularly the frontier works *O, Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia,* Cather confronts the distinctly modern problem of how to use artifacts of the past to interpret the present and shape the future. Despite the rancor of her rhetoric in 1923, her solution is not to ignore all innovation in favor of tradition. Rather, Cather recognizes that modernity is unique precisely because it offers people choices about how to use the past. If older societies relied entirely on "the 'Classics'" because they could not access other sources of wisdom, newer societies suddenly had such a wealth of wisdom—from literatures, from time-honored customs, yes, and now from technological and social innovations too—that the past became just one of many tools available for shaping the twentieth century. Before the modern era, her novels indicate, one could only learn from the past; in modernity, one can choose whether to listen to it.[13] The question is which parts to choose, and how to use them.

In several of her novels, Cather turns to agriculture as an example to show how Americans might incorporate many strains of tradition—classical and otherwise—together with new technologies in order to create an intellectually vigorous version of modernity. The past alone is not enough, but neither is the present: wise people combine the two. The term "georgic"—which has been used in connection with *My Ántonia* because the novel begins with an epigraph from Vergil's *Georgics* and because its narrator, Jim Burden, quotes from it—applies just as well to *O, Pioneers!* and other works in Cather's oeuvre. A georgic work is moderate; it is didactic; it teaches the reader the best way to live and especially the best way to work given the constraints of nature, society, and uncontrollable factors. Cather's frontier novels

[13] This is not to suggest that "modernity" dropped like a bomb in the early twentieth century and that in previous centuries people did not have to interrogate their relationship with the past. The process of modernization has always involved a renegotiation of how we use the past at least since the Renaissance—though in that period, the question was less *whether* to use the past, but *how* to use it.

ostensibly provide real farming advice, and in doing so they also teach readers that the best way to approach modern life is by drawing from the resources of the present without neglecting the wisdom of the past. The American farm, which modernists too often dismiss as backward and irrelevant to the predominant story of modern cosmopolitanism, proves in Cather's modern georgics to be a microcosm of the technological, demographic, and intellectual changes transforming the country in the early twentieth century and a force of modernization in its own right.

Cather's characters are mostly amateur farmers and newcomers to the land they want to farm. In other words, they are the type of aspirational agrarians who desperately need guidance as they consider which of their customs to transplant to the American West, and which to abandon as unsuitable for new conditions. Cather's writings demonstrate her respect for this dreamy generation of pioneers, one older than her own, that settled the plains west of the Missouri River in the last decades of the nineteenth century. She famously encountered examples of the breed when, at age 10, she moved with her family from Virginia to the plains of Nebraska. Not everything she has to say about the first-generation settlers is flattering, but on the whole she approves of the people she sees as "courageous," particularly those who survive the first hard years that "winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents who are ever seeking a land where man does not live by the sweat of his brow" (Cather 237-8). There is no question that Cather romanticizes, glorifies, and idolizes her pioneers, particularly those who work hard, but at the same time she identifies faults in them—as she does in all humans who fall under the scrutiny of her pen—and she simply loves the faults as much as she loves the virtues.

The question, throughout the novels and nonfiction, is what exactly the faults are. The image of the ideal pioneer shifts over the course of Cather's career. In *A Lost Lady* (1923),

written not long before she published her "Nebraska" piece, her pioneer character Captain Daniel Forrester lets a marsh on his land stay wild rather than drain it and put it in wheat "because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture" (Cather, *A Lost Lady* 11). This is a sentiment of Thoreauvian attraction to wilderness, yet the wealthy Forrester does not scorn profit generally; indeed he makes a great deal of money from the development of the Western railroads. But Forrester is not wedded to the idea that financial gain is the only important end. He plays "the game of getting on in the world" but believes in a less tangible good, too (ibid). His pioneer vision combines elements of aesthetic satisfaction and productive exploitation of land, values that align, in Cather's works, with tradition and innovation, respectively. Yet he is a man of the late nineteenth century, and Cather, writing from the third decade of the twentieth, is always looking back on his generation with nostalgia. In the second half of *A Lost Lady*, the aged Forrester must rent out his beloved marsh after his immaculate scruples cost him his fortune. The villainous Ivy Peters, an unscrupulous but successful young lawyer, immediately puts the land into wheat, to the dismay of the narrator:

> The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men…who had never dared anything, never risked anything. They would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous, easy life of the great land-holders. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest. All the way from the Missouri to the

> mountains this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh. (Cather 106-7)

"Unpractical to the point of magnificence" reads like the world's greatest backhand compliment or its most ambivalent praise. The paragraph contradicts itself and a number of representations of pioneers in Cather's fiction as neatly as that improbable epitaph. For in general Cather venerates the most practical of her pioneer characters; the unpractical specimens—those too dull or lazy or stubborn to do things the best way—are her "drifting malcontents." Practicality is a problem for her pioneers only if it gets in the way of innovation—if, in other words, it is false practicality, as for example in *O, Pioneers!* when Alexandra's brothers refuse to try new farming methods on the grounds that they are too risky. This later interpretation of the pioneer ethos in *A Lost Lady* is distinctly at odds with Cather's earlier writing—it is difficult to imagine her venerating, when she wrote with glee of the taming of the prairies in 1913, the idea of "princely carelessness." Nor would it make sense, in the context of *O, Pioneers!* or even *My Ántonia*, to equate the early pioneers with the kind of conservationist environmentalism that Cather conjures here, as the counterpoint to the profiteers who would destroy the landscape "as the match factory splinters the primeval forest." In *A Lost Lady*, the pioneers sound a lot like John Muir eulogizing the redwood forests; in earlier novels, the pioneers are doing the splintering. The general critical consensus of Cather as an enthusiastic industrialist, unconcerned about protecting or caring for the land, is complicated by her later writings.

This fickleness, this hedging over the course of her career, is precisely the point: pioneers are never just one thing for Willa Cather. Literary critics love to hate Cather for her often conservative, colonialist politics—Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*

traces the long-lived phenomenon of critical hatred for Cather—the problem being that Cather is just daring enough, just "progressive" enough, to whet critical interest and avoid being forgotten, yet she also refuses to yield completely to the sort of feminist, anti-colonialist, or environmentalist readings that contemporary scholars might like to foist upon her (Acocella). The pioneers are modern, and they are old-fashioned; they are compelling, and they are repugnant; they benefit from the tragic expulsions of Native Americans, and they bring new diversity to the west; they romanticize and preserve the western landscapes, and they destroy them; they are practical to the point of mastery, and they are unpractical to the point of magnificence. They do not know the rules of the land.

In her novels, Cather shows how they learn these rules, how they make new rules by combining their separate pasts and their shared present. There is danger in relying too much on either extreme to the exclusion of the other. "The sense of 'our way,'—that was what she longed to leave with her daughter," thinks Cecile AuClair's dying mother, a French immigrant to early Quebec, in the later novel *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). "She wanted to believe that when she herself was lying in this rude Canadian earth, life would go on almost unchanged in this room." This continuation depends on "the mother's unswerving fidelity to certain traditions, and the daughter's loyalty to her mother's wish." The AuClair household is orderly, warm, and very traditionally French, a source of comfort and reliability in the Canadian wilderness—all very good in the world of the novel. But in a 1931 letter about the novel to Wilbur Cross, then governor of Connecticut, Cather suggests that all this emphasis on the comforts of tradition in the early history of Quebec did not benefit the contemporary city: "There another age persists…a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past, lacking in robustness and full of pious resignation" (*Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, 966). The "way" of the

French settlers is perhaps too rigid, not open enough to adaptation to the new world for Cather's taste: it suits the seventeenth century well enough, but it does not age well. In an article for *The Denver Times* (1916), Cather writes precisely the same critique—down to the linking of religion and repetition of the past—of the extinct Indigenous people of Mesa Verde, who carved beautiful homes into the cliffs of southern Colorado:

> "Everything in the cliff dweller villages points to a tempered, settled, ritualistic life, where generations went on gravely and reverentially repeating the past, rather than battling for anything new….The most plausible theory as to their extinction is that the dwellers on Mesa Verde were routed and driven out by their vulgar, pushing neighbors of the plains, who were less comfortable, less satisfied, and consequently more energetic" (Cather, "Mesa Verde Wonderland is Easy to Reach" 250).

Here Cather manages to express both admiration and disdain for both the Mesa Verde people and their conquerors. She approves of the aesthetics of the cliff dwellers and writes at length of their architectural prowess, yet she acknowledges that their satisfaction renders them complacent; she approves of the "energy" of their "pushing neighbors," but dismisses their culture as "vulgar."

The Ivy Peterses of the world, and the public universities, go too far in the "pushing," "vulgar" direction, neglecting the past in favor of fleeting "machine-made materialism." A truly modern society, an ideal society in Cather's thinking, is one that preserves the best parts of its heritage while remaining "energetic" open to new ideas. Cather envisions such a society emerging in pioneer-era agricultural Nebraska, and her novels set there are manuals—are georgics—for how a new generation might achieve similarly spectacular results.

Imperative dialogue in *O, Pioneers!*

There are many parallels between *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *O, Pioneers!* Each novel takes its title from a poem about an earlier iteration of the countryside it illustrates—Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), in the case of Hardy's novel, and Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! O, Pioneers!" (1865). Each novel follows the management of one farm; each portrays agrarian comedies and tragedies and mundanities; each defies critical attempts at categorization by concluding with an anti-romantic, overdue marriage—that traditional marker of comedy—that comes about after the tragic death of a major character. Most crucially, each novel features a female farmer whose sturdy will to manage land independently at once confuses her compatriots and galvanizes an instructive agrarian narrative. Hardy's Bathsheba, a remarkably intelligent and beautiful woman for whom the cliché "fiercely independent" might have been invented, inherits a large English farm from her uncle and makes the unusual decision to manage it herself rather than retain a male bailiff to do the day-to-day work of keeping animals, plants, and people in order. Cather's Alexandra Bergson similarly comes into her Nebraska farm when her father dies, and she scandalizes her dull, conformist brothers by working to innovate and improve upon the farm rather than simply maintain it with proper deference to the customs of the time.

Placing a woman at the helm of a complex farm—the kind that hires employees, raises a diverse selection of plants and animals, and requires astute business acumen alongside the hard physical labor and intuitive understanding of land management long associated with successful agricultural operations—opens up unique narrative possibilities for Hardy and Cather. Many critics have examined the ways in which normative gender roles are disrupted in each of these

two novels; the general tendency is to imagine the farm as a convenient, nonessential backdrop against which characters might enact essential questions about gender in late Victorian England or frontier Nebraska.[14] I would flip this equation: Hardy and Cather do not locate their novels on farms simply to buoy their studies in gender; rather they give their female protagonists an unusual amount of managerial and financial power to show what happens when an inexperienced but smart and determined farmer tries her hand at learning how to farm well. The farm, in other words, is a primary, not secondary, concern, and the female farmer who runs it is as much farmer as female.

In fact, being women affords both Bathsheba and Alexandra distinct opportunities as they pursue these agrarian careers. Deprived of parents who can pass down their farming expertise, both women must learn their trade in unconventional ways by seeking wisdom from elders and innovative young farmers alike. Since women were not raised to run farms at the turn of the twentieth century and required more education than men, writing women as protagonists allows Hardy and Cather to include more scenes of agricultural education that show readers how farms work. The scenes in which they seek or accept advice provide narrative opportunities for Hardy and Cather to instruct the reader, in the georgic tradition, about good farming practices: when Alexandra learns the proper way to care for pigs, the reader learns too. The lessons in farming also, inevitably, contain lessons about how to live a good, moderate life—an environmentally

[14] The two novels have been subjected to such similar gender analysis that an occasional claim about *Madding Crowd* could easily fit into an article about *O, Pioneers!*. The opening sentence of William Mistichelli's "Androgyny, Survival, and Fulfillment in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*," for example, is: "In *Far From The Madding Crowd* uncertainty or ambiguity about sexual identities and roles becomes a recurring motif, especially in connection with the heroine, Bathsheba Everdene" (Mistichelli 53). In "'I Like to Be Like a Man:' Female Masculinity in Willa Cather's *O, Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*," Daniel Worden suggests "Rather than reading Alexandra Bergson as defying conventions of womanhood, yet 'a woman nonetheless,' we might more fruitfully read her as adopting conventions of masculinity to become masculine" (Worden 275). In both cases, swapping names and titles would yield lucid sentences about the opposite novel: through Alexandra and her friend Carl in particular, *O, Pioneers!* dwells constantly on shifting sexual identities and gender roles; *Madding Crowd* experiments with imposing conventionally masculine qualities on Bathsheba and feminine ones on her eventual husband Gabriel.

responsible life, according to the lesson-giver—and so skirt the novels' avoidance of explicit imperatives. To recall Vergil's insistence on the importance of *tenuis curas*, or humdrum tasks, foregrounding farming allows Hardy and Cather to embed large ideas, *praecepta veterum*, in everyday chores: "*Possum multa tibi veterum praecepta referre, / ni refugis tenuisque piget cognoscere curas*," or "I could tell you many old sayings and many maxims / (Unless you're unwilling to hear such trivial things)" (Vergil and Ferry 14-15). Hardy and Cather show their farmers learning "trivial things" in great detail in order to pass along old and new maxims without breaking the narrative fourth wall of fiction: a character is allowed to be preachy even when a narrator is not.

Cather envisions a robust version of rural modernity in *O, Pioneers!,* her second novel, but the first that was written in the voice that would define her literary career and set in the "familiar country" that matters to her, according to her 1931 essay "My First Novels (There Were Two)" (Cather, *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* 963). Of her very first novel, the urbane, James-esque *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), she writes she selected her subject based on observations that "The drawing-room was considered the proper setting for a novel, and the only characters worth reading about were smart people or clever people," where "smart" means "stylish" and "clever" means "witty." That novel would come to feel shallow and stale to Cather not long after she completed it. When working on *O, Pioneers!*, on the other hand, she writes, she felt excitement and insecurity in equal measure, because the novel:

> …interested me tremendously, because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbors, once very dear…but I did not in the least expect that other people would see anything in…a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards—set in

> Nebraska of all places! As every one knows, Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background; its very name throws the delicately attuned critic into a clammy shiver of embarrassment. (964)

Just as in her 1923 "Nebraska" essay, Cather thinks first of the "kind of country" she loves before the "old neighbors" who populate it. The place precedes the people, though these "heavy farming people," so different from the "delicate" coastal critic, have to plough the cornfields, fence the pastures, and build the pig yards that will give the place its modern character. What these rural people lack in wit, they make up for in other manifestations of intelligence, like elasticity, which allows them to piece together a new country and culture from very limited resources. Cather attributes the unexpected success of her novel, which dares to explore so supposedly backward and mundane a place as a provincial farm, to the fact that she has written about a place that she knows well and that matters a lot to her. Certainly her affection for the land and its inhabitants invigorates the prose. But perhaps the popular and critical success of the novel has just as much to do with her ability to show Nebraska as a place that, though rural, is as exciting and contemporary as New York: "One saw Nebraska under a brilliantly quivering, modern light," writes Celia Harris in a 1913 review. "[Cather's] style, like her Nebraskans, was both European and American" (Cather, *O, Pioneers!* 361).

The novel opens early in the pioneer years, when most of the sparse inhabitants have emigrated from Scandinavia or Bohemia with no relevant farming experience. Most families live in the precarious squalor of sod or dugout houses, but the Swedish Bergson clan, whom the story will follow, has achieved a modicum of stability through diligent hard work. Its patriarch has dug his farm out of debt, and its matriarch insists on a log house and has "worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very

difficult…her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways" (19). The narrator traces Mrs. Bergson's activities as she seeks out new species of plants to preserve and pickle, and new animals to eat, using methods she inherited from her ancestors in Sweden. She is analogous to Madame AuClair of *Shadows on the Rock* in her determination to recreate European life in the New World, yet Mrs. Bergson demonstrates intense ingenuity and a willingness to adapt to her new country as she forages ground cherries and fishes for channel cat. She is willing to combine old and new, providing the safety of tradition for her family by tempering that tradition with novel ingredients.

Older immigrant women like Mrs. Bergson and the wizened *O, Pioneers!* character Mrs. Lee made a strong impression on Cather when she visited their homesteads as a child living on the Nebraska prairie. In an interview that ran shortly after the publication of *O, Pioneers!*, she says, "…these old women on the farms were the first people who ever gave me the real feeling on an older world across the sea….I have never found any intellectual excitement more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women at her baking or butter making" (Cather, *O, Pioneers!* 155).[15] The word "intellectual" is unexpected in this context. Willa Cather read Vergil in college, frequently attended the theater and opera in Boston and New York, and worked her way up to managing editor at *McClure's*, one of the best-regarded New York literary magazines of her day. She accrued, in other words, a substantial arsenal of typically intellectual credentials. Yet all this experience does not lead her to overlook or downplay the importance, intelligence, and even artistry of immigrant farmers' wives who have to employ all their Old World knowledge and New World ingenuity as they create stable domestic strongholds

[15] And, in a 1921 interview: "The old fashioned farmer's wife is nearer to the type of the true artist and the prima donna than is the culture enthusiast" (Cather, *O, Pioneers!* 160*)*. It was not just the experience of observing these women that Cather found stimulating, but the minds of the women themselves.

in a strange new country. The "intellectual excitement" that Cather recalls derives from learning firsthand from these women about a continent that she has never seen, while at the same time watching them adjust their food-making traditions to suit their new environment. It is stimulating, for Cather, to watch a new society being made by hand.

Fortunately Cather's protagonist, the eldest Bergson child Alexandra, feels similarly—though her talents and interests trend more toward the art of husbandry than housewifery. The first part of *O, Pioneers!* is the story of Alexandra's learning how to become a farmer; the second part follows her through the flush of agrarian success; the last part reveals how much she has sacrificed to achieve and retain her prowess at earth work. Alexandra's sense of "intellectual excitement" is most apparent in the first part, aptly titled "The Wild Land," which begins when she is a teenager and John Bergson lies dying of an unnamed illness. The Bergsons seem as ill-equipped to adapt to the new land as the French settlers of Quebec. They have a tremendous opportunity before them in the breaking of the vast prairie. Native Americans inhabited the land before white settlers arrived, but Cather neglects them; to her the grassy "Wild Land," for which Part I of the novel is named, "seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes"; "The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings" (Cather, *O, Pioneers!* 14-16). The simile seems alarming in the sense that the land overwhelms human efforts; the native grasses of the Plains infinitely outnumber the first furrows of agriculture. Yet a strain of excitement runs through Cather's insistence on agriculture as "insignificant," "feeble," and "indeterminate": in this early stage of development, human work is indistinguishable from its environment precisely because humans are living so close to the land; they are enmeshed with it and their work is a part

of it. In a single sentence, Cather connects land, farming, and writing into one simmering portrait of "striving." From the settler's perspective, the land is a *tabula rasa* that requires stronger "scratches" so that it might become recognizable as a human habitat. A farm is a particularly interesting case study as a place where societal changes can occur simply because humans often have tremendous agency to make—literally, physically and also theoretically to make—a farm look precisely how they want. This is all the more true of farmers breaking sod for the first time, who do not have to deal with structures, soil diseases, or (more recently) harsh chemicals left over by earlier farmers.

Of course a farmer must obey the demands of a region's climate and topography and of the relevant markets, but beyond these physical concerns she is free to grow whatever crops she wants, to raise whatever animals she wants, and to do all this in any way she wants: according to specific traditions, by experimenting and learning cutting-edge techniques, by intuition and intelligence, conventionally or organically, with sustainability in mind or not. The last two categories would have meant nothing to Alexandra Bergson, the genius farmer of *O, Pioneers!,* and the reason my imaginary farmer is a "she." According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, women were the principal operators of only 8.2% of farms in Nebraska at the time of the survey. Only South Dakota has a lower percentage of female-run farms (USDA 1). Near the turn of the twentieth century, when Cather's novel is set, the idea of a woman running a farm would have been preposterous. And yet, on his deathbed, Alexandra's father leaves the management of his struggling farm to his daughter rather than his sons. This decision represents an important form of rural social innovation: John Bergson would rather leave the farm to his sons, but he chooses practicality over patriarchy. I think it is actually easier for him to defy conventions on the frontier than it would be in a city at the same period, where there would be more neighbors to

gossip and less chance for Alexandra (if left to run a restaurant, say) to prove her competence before ill-wishers shunned her.[16] On the Divide, a common culture is as sparse as the homesteads; a community is forming but not yet codified out of immigrants from Germany, France, Norway, Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic), and Sweden, like the Bergsons. The diverse, progressive stew that Cather presents bears more resemblance to the modern city than modernists might have liked to believe.

Once Alexandra has her land, she uses this unusual mix of human resources to learn how to build a productive, prosperous farm. Many recent readings of the novel focus on how ethically sound Alexandra's farming is: Sharon O'Brien argues that her nurturing skills are an improvement over her father's desire to dominate, and Neil Gustafson counters that Alexandra does a good deal of dominating land herself; Louise Westling reads Alexandra as a nostalgic fantasy of imperialism, and William Conlogue and Allison Carruth add that she is a pure and unappealing representative of the new industrial farmer (O'Brien, Gustafson, Conlogue, Westling, Carruth). I would argue that all of these critics paint too simple a portrait of an author who regularly contradicts herself, and who (as shown above) espouses conservationist as well as industrialist principles. Instead of measuring how well Alexandra's efforts match contemporary political and agricultural ideals, I want to analyze precisely how she obtains and uses the tools available in her rural surroundings to create a place of her own.

Like Bathsheba, Alexandra Bergson suddenly assumes a great deal of agrarian responsibility at a young age without any formal training in the field. She also recognizes her lack of expertise and is proactive and resourceful about finding the best sources of agricultural information. Indeed part of Alexandra's genius is knowing how to ask for and use advice: she

[16] Consider for example the difference between fictional Alexandra, who gets her farm, and real-life, extremely urbane Virginia Woolf, who never could work her way into University with the men.

has a knack for discerning who is trustworthy and what of their knowledge might be useful to her. Her curiosity opens up many georgic possibilities for Cather, who makes ample use of the imperative mood in Alexandra's dialog with her allies on the Nebraska Divide.

In the first few chapters of the novel, Alexandra accepts or seeks farming advice from her father, her eccentric neighbor Ivar, and far-off farmers that her neighbors would not deign to talk to because of their dangerously innovative methods. Her father, the Swedish immigrant John Bergson, leaves the management of his farm to Alexandra rather than her brothers upon his death because he recognizes his daughter's ability to learn from experience and adapt in order to succeed: "He had come to depend more and more upon [Alexandra's] resourcefulness and good judgment….It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors… Lou and Oscar were industrious, but [John] could never teach them to use their heads about their work" (14-17).

Here Cather puts pressure on a classic myth that urbanites hold about agriculture—that hard work alone leads to success. Running a farm does, of course, require a tremendous amount of manual labor. But an "industrious" body alone does not suffice: the exceptional farmer must use her "head" to analyze her own options and choose which methods to adopt and which to discard; she must "learn" from year to year. Good farming, Cather suggests, requires not just working *hard* but working *smart*—especially when no methods have yet been proven to work, as they had not on the still-wild Nebraska prairie of Alexandra's youth.

The narrative acknowledges that John Bergson would have preferred to leave the management of his farm to a male heir: "He would much rather, of course, have seen [intelligence and strength of will] in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice" (15). Cather seems not to blame Bergson for his desire to conform to the gender norms of his era;

instead, she applauds him for ignoring this instinct in favor of a more important one—keeping the farm alive. In the fight-or-die world of the Divide, survival matters more than social niceties. In fact Alexandra's gender gives her more time to do the management work at which she thrives. As he is dying, Bergson calls his children to his side to explain his parting wishes, telling his sons to listen to their older sister's guidance and adding, in an initial list of imperatives: "'Alexandra must not work in the fields any more. There is no necessity now. Hire a man when you need help. She can make much more with her eggs and butter than the wages of a man'" (16). The reader assumes that up to this point Alexandra—like Ántonia from *My Ántonia*—has worked in the fields performing the same tasks that a man typically would in order to save the family money they might have spent hiring outside help. Now he suggests that her business-oriented mind adds more value to the farm than her physical labor (raising chickens requires more arithmetical skill than muscle strength). The suggestion at once conforms to and diverges from expected gender norms: unlike Lou and Oscar, Alexandra "should" be removed from the fields because she is a woman and therefore supposedly unsuited to physical labor. But removing her from the fields gives Alexandra more freedom and capacity to act as farm *manager*, to direct her brothers, to lead a homestead in a way that would have been unusual for women of her time.[17] By constricting her physical freedom, Alexandra's gender actually boosts her capacity to grow her family's farm through the strength of her mind.

After expressing his wish for Alexandra to control the farm, John Bergson offers his three oldest children a set of pioneer farming advice—the first of three major lessons Alexandra hears on her way to becoming a successful farmer. Each set of imperatives stretches Alexandra's flexible mind in different but equally important ways. Her father's words, which are essentially

[17] Carruth explores the dark side of Alexandra's farming intelligence; for her, Alexandra is an early and eager proponent of the methods that would come to constitute what we now call industrial agriculture (Carruth).

advice on being a good person swathed in agricultural metaphor, are the most conventional. He admonishes:

> "Try to break a little more land every year; sod corn is good for fodder. Keep turning the land, and always put up more hay than you need. Don't grudge your mother a little time for plowing her garden and setting out fruit trees, even if it comes in a busy season. She has been a good mother to you, and she has always missed the old country." (Cather 16-17).

Each practical directive matches an abstract quality that Bergson hopes to see grow in his children. "Breaking a little more land" would require them to work very hard every year to increase the value of the farm. Saving sod corn to feed animals would indicate a commitment to avoiding waste and employing thrift. Storing "more hay than they need" would require having the wisdom to prepare for an uncertain future through present prudence (to avoid having to shake that acorn tree). Helping their mother with her garden indicates respect for elders and a healthy capacity for love. None of this advice is original or particularly imaginative in terms of farming or ethics, which makes sense: Cather portrays Bergson as a good and hardworking but not brilliant man.

Alexandra's brothers take their father's advice at face value: they remain industrious and utterly committed to Bergson's dutiful farming methods without demonstrating any ability to adapt to changing times. But they do not read the ethics. Alexandra, meanwhile, takes the tenor of her father's metaphor without the vehicle: she remembers the importance of hard work, of saving money, of preparing for the future, and of respecting the past, but she does not pay too much heed to Bergson's literal suggestions. I would argue that Alexandra's gender allows her to

take a unique outsider's view of the traditional patriarchal transferal of property and wisdom. This perspective does not hinder her; it allows her to learn from her father more creatively.

If Alexandra learns how to farm in the pioneer *spirit* from her father, she must look elsewhere to discover how to farm using effective practices. We already know she learns what *not* to do from the "mistakes of their neighbors," but sources of true agricultural wisdom seem to be in short supply on the Divide. The Bergsons' neighbors are as amateurish as the Bergsons themselves: the new Nebraskans are craftsmen, merchants, and laborers who are just now taking their chance at farming without any particular training. Alexandra knows she needs to consult someone with real experience, so she eccentrically turns to the neighborhood eccentric, "Crazy" Ivar. Her brothers, who "disliked to do anything different from their neighbors" because they "felt that it made them conspicuous," don't trust Ivar, who is conspicuously different from his neighbors (27). Alexandra insists "'if you get him on a clear day, you can learn a great deal from him. He understands animals'" (20). As long as he can increase her knowledge of livestock, she does not mind that he lives far away from the other settlers in a clay bank with "a door and a single window…set into the hillside….without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (22). Several critics cite this passage as a wholesale demonstration of Ivar's nature-loving, gently misanthropic nature: he adores birds, despises guns, lets the landscape keep its wild prairie look. Louise Westling, among others, even claims that Ivar stands in for the Native American culture that Cather has expunged from her book.[18] Certainly it makes sense to say that Ivar stands in for the lost Indians along with all the rest of the rural wisdom threatened by modernity and, frankly, by pioneering. So what might Alexandra, the aspiring pioneer, learn from him?

[18]Cather herself said she did not write about the Indians near Hancock, the fictionalized version of Red Cloud, because they were all gone by the time her family arrived.

Westling and her school argue that the novel works to subdue Ivar (and by extension the land) by bringing him gradually under Alexandra's firm control, which the novel condones and indeed celebrates. In this early scene, however, the novel has not yet made its approval of the pioneer project explicit; the earth is not yet yielding to the plow "with a soft, deep sigh of happiness" as it does later (76). In the passage quoted above, the word "defiling" does not issue from Ivar's mouth, or even from the speech or thoughts of a character reflecting on Ivar. The narrator herself, rather, tells us that Ivar lives "without defiling the face of nature," suggesting that she considers more visible forms of human civilization—like houses and certainly plowed fields—to be a form of defilement and therefore by definition bad. Now the narrator puts Alexandra, an aspiring defiler, in a position to seek advice from one who shuns defiling. It is important to remember here that Alexandra was not born with a pioneering instinct; she *learned* to want to pioneer by observing her father and promising him that she would maintain the land. Just as she learned to pioneer from her father, she can learn a different way of relating to the land from Ivar.

When Alexandra tells Ivar she is worried about her pigs, he responds with the second list of agricultural imperatives in the first three chapters of *O, Pioneers!*:

> "You feed them swill and such stuff? Of course! And sour milk? Oh, yes! And keep them in a stinking pen? I tell you, sister, the hogs of this country are put upon! They become unclean, like the hogs in the Bible. If you kept your chickens like that, what would happen? You have a little sorghum patch, maybe? Put a fence around it, and turn the hogs in. Build a shed to give them shade, a thatch on poles. Let the boys haul water to them in barrels, clean water, and plenty. Get them off the old stinking ground, and do not let them go back there until winter.

Give them only grain and clean feed, such as you would give horses or cattle.

Hogs do not like to be filthy." (26)

Like John Bergson's farming advice, Ivar's carries a moral undertone: the admonition not to feed pigs cheap trash food or keep them on dirty ground is essentially a warning against taking agricultural shortcuts and expecting to harvest high yields. Raising pigs properly might require more money and effort in the short term ("clean feed," "hauling water"), but it will pay off in the form of healthy hogs and abundant meat. Ivar even claims that the Bible provides evidence for his fastidious farming methods, a move that both reinforces his association of good farming with moral purity and also serves as a reminder Ivar does not just stand in for the lost Indians; he stands in for all time-honored rural wisdom, Western or otherwise, that is threatened by modernity.

In some ways Alexandra's trajectory in turning to Ivar mirrors Bathsheba's: she must acquire business skills largely on her own, but she seeks specific advice from someone who has dwelled in one spot for a long time without much interrupting its ecosystem.[19] And she walks away with the advice she needed, plus a set of general good practices *and* the foundation of an environmental ethic. Ivar is certainly helping Alexandra advance her economic interests by telling her how to raise hogs well, but he is also telling her how to avoid cruelty to animals—for the hogs' sake as much has for her own. "'Hogs do not *like* to be filthy,'" Ivar says: he is thinking from the hog's perspective, not the human's; as he speaks, he is teaching Alexandra how to hear and appreciate the "multitude of interests" that exists alongside her on the Nebraska prairie. She exhibits the kindness she has learned from Ivar more than a decade later when, after

[19] Gabriel fits this mold despite living in a domesticated countryside simply because Southwest England had been farm and pasture land for so long before he would have been born into it; Ivar fits because he refuses to domesticate the landscape.

her farm has become hugely successful and Ivar has lost his undeveloped land, Alexandra takes him into her house and treats him with the type of dignity that her neighbors deny him.

Ivar's is not the only non-traditional advice on which Alexandra relies: before agreeing to give up on her family farm, she takes a research trip down to the prosperous river farms and encounters new methods that she realizes can transform the place where she lives. In particular, "She spent a whole day with one young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new kind of clover hay. She learned a great deal" (48). "Young," "school," "experimenting," "new," "learned": these two sentences are bursting with the language of innovation, change, and modernity. And Alexandra pays just as much attention to this farmer's modern ideas as to her father's stolid advice—it is her willingness to "experiment" that later leads Alexandra to install the Divide's first—and wildly successful—grain silo on her growing modern farm.

The Old World and the New in *My Ántonia*

Book Three of Vergil's *Georgics*, which covers the care of livestock, is considered, along with Book One, to be one of the dark, pessimistic books of the poem as compared to the more joyful books Two and Four. From it comes a typically gloomy passage about breeding strong cattle for plowing:

Aetas Lucinam iustosque pati hymenaeos
desinit ante decem, post quattor incipit annos;
cetera nec feturae habilis nec fortis aratris.
interea, superat gregibus dum laeta iuventas,
solve mares; mitte in Venerem pecuaria primus,

atque aliam ex alia generando suffice prolem.

Optuma quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi

prima fugit; subeunt morbi tristisque senectus

et labor, et durae rapit inclementia mortis. (Virgil and Ferry 96)

The proper time for motherhood and mating

Falls between the fourth year and the tenth;

After that time she's no longer suitable,

Nor is she strong enough for the work of plowing;

But while she's in this youthful fertile time

Let the young males out, loose and free in the fields

And be the first to see to the annual mating.

Over and over, renew your stock by breeding.

The best days of life, for all poor mortal creatures,

Are the soonest to be gone; then illness comes,

And sad old age, and trouble; and pitiless death

Soon carries us away. (Virgil and Ferry 97-99)

These lines include the most famous and frequently cited passage of the *Georgics*: "*Optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi / prima fugit*," or "The best days of life, for all poor mortal creatures, / Are the soonest to be gone." The lines are often truncated to "*optima dies prima fugit*," or "the best days flee first." It is easy to understand why a statement of such aphoristic melancholy has lodged itself in readers' minds over the past two millennia. Humans worry about mortality; we cherish our youth. "*Optima dies prima fugit*" makes a good slogan, or cocktail

party interjection, or even an epigraph for a novel. Indeed, Willa Cather used it for just that purpose at the start of her most celebrated novel, *My Ántonia*, the story of a boy and girl whose families are trying to make farms on the Great Plains of Nebraska.

Fans of "*optima dies*" seldom remember to read the quotation in its Vergilian context. This generally gloomy section of the *Georgics* outlines the steps a farmer must take if he or she wishes to raise and breed cattle successfully. The "wretched mortal creature" under consideration for "lawful wedlock" is a cow; Vergil is urging readers to breed their stock in the brief period in which the animals are young, healthy, and fertile. And the image of the decrepit, barren old cow matters to Vergil, even if it is less compelling than the image of a nostalgic human, which *optima dies* might conjure out of context. In this instance the idea of "care" for domesticated animals is not particularly warm and fuzzy—in fact, immediately after this passage, the speaker of the poem advises farmers to be diligent about culling all the cows in the herd that do not look perfect. Instead, the caring emerges in Vergil's willingness to empathize with animals and to write about animal suffering in such a way that humans can relate to it—*miseris mortalibus*, or wretched mortals, applies to all of us, cows and humans alike. The twinned emphases on the didactic potential of agrarian literature, and the exploration of the practical and abstract connections between human and environment, are key features of the georgic literary tradition.

Willa Cather knows this; her narrator, Jim Burden, is not necessarily so wise. He opens up the copy of Vergil's *Georgics* that he is reading for a college course and encounters the lines in which Vergil, writing in the first person, declares "'Primus ego in patriam mecum… deducam Musas'"; 'for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the muse into my country.' Cleric had explained to us that 'patria' here meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood in Mincio where the poet was born" (Cather 190). Vergil may have lived in Rome

as an adult, but he was probably born to a farming family near the provincial city of Mantua. Cather, likewise, was living on the urbanized East Coast, primarily in New York, when she wrote *My Ántonia*, but she had history on the Great Plains of Nebraska, and it is no stretch to say that she thought of herself as the first person to bring the Muse to the American prairie. The story of *My Ántonia*, like *O, Pioneers!*, records how incoming humans attempt, with some success and a lot of failure, to inscribe themselves on what she called "this newest part of the New World" with the plow. But Cather's use of georgic tropes is not only an attempt to stamp her own name on Nebraska; she also wants to demonstrate the value of thoughtful farm work in creating a modern, multiethnic nation, in breaking down sexist assumptions about women's work, and in defying stereotypes about the backwardness of farming in an urbanizing century.

Our Friends the Russians[20]

Two less obvious examples of georgic influence shed light on hints of an emerging set of environmental ethics in Cather's novel. The first, a seemingly benign vignette embedded into the nostalgic memory scape of *My Ántonia,* melds agricultural content with literary technique to illustrate a new way in which people might learn modern tolerance and cooperation through agricultural practice. The novel is presented as the memoirs of Jim Burden, the non-farmer who writes about his youthful "*optima dies*" of romping around the Great Plains of Nebraska, where (like Cather) he moves from the East Coast at age nine. In Nebraska, he befriends the eponymous Ántonia, a girl a few years older than he who has emigrated with her family from the area in central Europe then known as Bohemia; English is her second language. At one point, Ántonia's family becomes friendly with a pair of bachelor Russians who have set up a homestead on the

[20] "While the autumn color was growing pale on the grass and dornfields, things went badly with our friends the Russians" (Cather 77).

Plains, and Ántonia takes Jim to visit one of these neighbors because her language is close enough to theirs that she can translate. When the two children arrive at the Russians' cabin, Cather has set up a very cosmopolitan scene in which with three people, born in three different countries and speaking three different languages, share an afternoon. She is alerting us to the fact that farms, and the Plains, are not so backward and homogenous as we tend to believe.

Cather's description of one of the Russians, Peter, adds to this unusual atmosphere: she calls him "short, bow-legged, and fat as butter." This last simile, "fat as butter," is interesting because it does not suggest disgust, as descriptions of fat people often do in literature (68). Butter is pleasant and rich; we expect that Peter will be the same. Even more interesting is that we soon learn that Peter does not just resemble butter; he churns it: "He told Ántonia that in his country only rich people had cows, but here any man could have one who would take care of her….he could make butter by beating sour cream with a wooden spoon" (68-9). Although he has just recently moved to Nebraska, Peter is already incorporating himself into the land, and the land into himself, by caring for a cow and consuming her milk products. And he is doing this in a loving spirit: "Peter was very fond of his cow. He patted her flanks and talked to her in Russian while he pulled up her lariat pin and set it in a new place." Peter is working hard, in georgic fashion, to keep his homestead afloat—in fact when the children first see him he is perspiring over a washtub—but he is thoroughly enjoying this agricultural work.

The list of parallels between Peter's physical presence and his relationship to the land is long, and I want to focus on two more that are contained within this passage: "At a distance, on his wagon, [Peter] looked like an old man; his hair and beard were of such a pale flaxen color that they seemed white in the sun. They were as thick and curly as carded wool. His rosy face, with its snub nose, set in this fleece, was like a melon among its leaves" (68). Again, in this brief

passage, Peter's head is compared to three different agricultural products: flax, wool, and melons. Essentially he resembles Santa Claus: he is a man of girth, actually described as "jolly," with a big red face and a big white beard. And Jim tells us that, to him, "Russia seemed…more remote than any other country—farther away than China, almost as far as the North Pole. Of all the strange, uprooted people among the first settlers, those two men were the strangest and most aloof" (76). Jim's feelings about Peter and the language he uses to describe him are contradictory: on the one hand, he imagines Peter as superlatively strange and foreign; yet on the other hand he relates him physically to the very familiar and comforting figure of Santa Claus, whose contemporary outlines had entered the popular imagination by the early twentieth century. In "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Cather even writes that the Plains *look* like Russia: "it resembles the wheat lands of Russia, which fed the continent of Europe for so many years. Like Little Russia it is watered by slow-flowing, muddy rivers, which run full in the spring" (Cather, "Nebraska" 236). And adding to that sense of strange familiarity is the connection between the way Peter looks and the look of what he grows: Peter may be "uprooted" from Russia, but he has literally put down new roots in Nebraska.

This is a modern environmental action, a modern method of linking the fact of agriculture to the art of writing: you can travel to a new land; you might be perceived as a foreigner; but you can make yourself a part of that land by working that land, and working it well, with respect and care and pleasure. This is a georgic ethic. Just as many modern authors portray characters moving to modern cities and becoming part of them simply by partaking in their atmosphere of oxymoronic mass isolation, Cather shows Peter becoming part of a piece of the country by mixing his intense foreignness with seeds and a cow raised on Nebraska soil.

Initially this combination of Old World and New World seems like an unabashedly wonderful development. In "Nebraska," Cather praises the diverse influx of immigrants, writing: "It is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up; that we may hope to find young talent which will challenge the pale proprieties, the insincere, conventional optimism of our art and thought" (Cather 238). Unexpected as this passage sounds in the twenty-first century, when (unfortunately and falsely) many Americans think of the Midwest as the seat of homogenous "provincialism" and the diverse urban coasts as the epicenter of American "art and thought," Cather wants us to imagine a middle America made rich by its multiculturalism, which is best expressed through generative and generous use of the New World soil. In *My Ántonia*, Peter, of the melon-like face, harvests a load of ripe, homegrown watermelons and splits them to share with Jim and Antonia while eating tremendous quantities himself and telling stories about how people loved to eat melons in his old country—another instance of Russia and America mixing in the soil. With Santa-like generosity, he loads up Jim and Ántonia with cucumbers from his garden and fresh milk to take home to their families. He even breaks out a harmonica and begins to play folk tunes for his guests, and it is really difficult to argue that this moment, with the jolly peasant playing simple tunes while taking a break from work, is not quintessentially pastoral.

But remember: the epigraph of this novel is *Optima dies prima fugit*. Within three chapters of this bountiful scene, Peter loses his companion to tuberculosis and his homestead to predatory mortgage lenders. We learn that he never fully owned the cow that he loves so much that, when she sells at a foreclosure auction, he kisses her before handing her off to a new owner. His story concludes with the most tragic moment in *My Ántonia*: "after all his furniture and his cookstove and pots and pans had been hauled off by the purchasers, when his house was stripped

and bare, he sat down on the floor with his clasp-knife and ate all the melons that he had put away for winter. When Mr. Shimerda…drove up…to take Peter to the train, they found him with a dripping beard, surrounded by heaps of melon rinds" (82). The well-fed comfort of Peter's good days has devolved into slovenly gluttony; his long, careful attention to building a pantry for the year disappears in a moment of misfortune. The joyous consumption that symbolized connection with the land has become a desperate indulgence as Peter breaks with the land. This moment directly echoes lines from Vergil's *Georgics* in which farmers lose their stored food to unavoidable accident, the ill will of the gods, or poor care, and the result is always the same: they go hungry; they fail: *concussaque famem in silvis solabere quercu*, "in the woods / You'll shake the oak tree, frantic for something to eat" (Virgil and Ferry 14-15). Cather has modernized this scenario: it is not the gods but rapacious financial institutions that threaten farmers' ability to care for the land. And even Peter's fall from homesteading happiness carries proto-environmentalist undertones: it is not enough for farmers to care well for their animals and plants; they also need the power to stand up to the forces that want to exploit the land rather than steward and share it.

It's Just Right for Tony[21]

The second instance of georgic thought in *My Àntonia* concerns the ending, which is set a few decades after the bulk of the narrative and is often read as terribly tragic for Àntonia, even though she seems pleased with the way her life has turned out. In *Willa Cather & the Politics of Criticism* (2000), which explores the unusual degree of critical consternation surrounding Cather's confusing and often contradictory politics, Joan Acocella writes:

In a move that has given more pain to her feminist critics than almost anything

[21] "'I shouldn't care for a family of that size myself, but somehow it's just right for Tony'" (Cather 221-2).

> else she ever did, [Cather] placed a male narrator, Jim Burden, between the reader and Àntonia: men silencing women all over again. Furthermore, *My Àntonia* is really Jim's book, Àntonia drops out of it for a long stretch, and as the title indicates, the subject is not really her, it is Jim's vision of her, and the meditations on memory and art to which that vision prompts him. Finally, Àntonia is not victorious. She has a hard life: poverty, toil, an illegitimate child. Eventually she marries a good man, Anton Cuzak, and we find her at the end of the book in her kitchen, doing the dishes, with her sons and daughters gathered around her. But this is not what most feminists would call a victory. As a culminating insult, the last section of the book is entitled "Cuzak's Boys," not "Àntonia's Children"….[Feminist critics] saw her as an oppressed woman. (Acocella 37-38)

Just as environmental critics chastise Cather for not disapproving strongly enough of land development and industrial agriculture, feminist critics claim that in *My Àntonia* she does not go far enough in representing liberated women who resist the status quo. Once again, though, Cather's stance is more complicated than it at first appears; I argue that the ending of *My Àntonia* does, in fact, show that the title character becomes an independent woman who frees herself from gender stereotypes, including those of the imperfect narrator, Jim Burden, and who models a set of modern environmental ethics in the process. Àntonia accomplishes these feats by embracing the central georgic principle, *labor omnia vincit*, work conquers all.

The ending of *My Àntonia*, which, as Acocella writes, finds Àntonia happily living a life of hard physical labor and rural poverty on her well-managed Nebraska farm, is a triumph for feminism because it depicts a woman who is no longer attractive to men—who is no longer *Jim's* Àntonia—yet who still feels fulfilled by her ability to work hard and succeed in agriculture.

When Jim learns from a mutual friend that "Àntonia had not 'done very well'; that her husband was not a man of much force, and she had had a hard life," he delays going to visit her in Nebraska because he remembers her as a beautiful, energetic young woman and "did not want to find her aged and broken; I really dreaded it" (221). *His* Àntonia is defined in large part by her good, youthful looks. When he finally works up the courage to go see her, this fear is partially confirmed. Upon reaching her farm, and before he sees the woman herself, Jim encounters some of Àntonia's many children, including a daughter described as a "buxom girl with dark hair and eyes" (223). The focus on her breasts serves as a contrast to his first view of the present-day Àntonia, whom Jim soon sees and whom he regards as "a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled" (223). The sexual appeal has migrated from the "flat-chested" mother to the "buxom" daughter. Later in his visit, Jim tells some of Àntonia's sons that he was "'was very much in love with your mother once,'" a sentiment he has never expressed throughout the novel. But when he returns to Nebraska and sees Àntonia as a middle-aged woman, "battered but not diminished," he is forced to relegate his fantasy of her to the past and can therefore safely state his feelings—he was in love with Àntonia "once," but he no longer is (230, 223).

If this change saddens Jim, Àntonia's brown, weathered skin, graying hair, and wiry frame do not faze the woman herself because they do not prevent her from living life as she desires. She says to Jim: "'You've kept so young yourself. But it's easier for a man. I can't see how my Anton looks any older than the day I married him. His teeth have kept so nice. I haven't got many left. But I feel just as young as I used to, and I can do as much work'" (225). She acknowledges that her life as a farm wife, bearing many children and working long hours both in the fields and in the kitchen, has worn down her body; she might even be recognizing that her

work has taken a disproportionate toll on her precisely because she is capable of performing such a broad variety of demanding tasks—more so than her husband and the other men in her life. This is the woman who, as a child earlier in the novel, brags after a day of plowing, "I can work like mans now….I can work as much as [my brother Ambrosch]….I help make this land one good farm" (116). Àntonia pins her identity not on her decision not to eschew a traditional ideal of femininity that would keep her indoors, trying to stay pale and delicate and young looking, but on her ability to work hard and make her land productive. She values her strength over her appearance, her georgic rather than her pastoral capacity. Of the earliest, poorest days of her marriage, she says: "'We'd never have got through it if I hadn't been so strong. I've always had good health, thank God, and I was able to help him in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came'" (229). Àntonia understands even her most obviously feminine role, as a mother, in the context of her ability to participate in agrarian labor. And she takes proper credit for her work and her strength.

Àntonia is not "oppressed" by her position as a woman, a mother, or as a poor farmer because she freely chooses her work; nobody forces her into it. In this way she is a modern farmer, having selected her life on the land rather than remaining there because she has no other options. Jim even claims that the force of her will keeps her husband on the land, not the other way around: "It did rather seem to me that Cuzak had been made the instrument of Àntonia's special mission. This was a fine life, certainly, but it wasn't the kind of life he had wanted to live" (241). Àntonia reiterates this claim herself, recalling the days she worked as a housekeeper in Black Hawk, the fictional town where Jim spends his adolescent years: "'I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town….I don't mind work a bit, if I don't have to put up with sadness" (229). Once again, she defines herself in terms of the work that she enjoys, which

is “on a farm,” where she can use her considerable strength to raise her children, plow the fields, and cook *dapes inemptae* with the produce, grains, and meats that she and her family have raised themselves. But when Jim suggests that she ought never to have gone to do domestic labor in town, Àntonia responds with another expression of her modern outlook: “‘Oh, I’m glad I went! I’d never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping, if I hadn’t. I learned nice ways at the Harlings’, and I’ve been able to bring my children up so much better….No, I’m glad I had a chance to learn’” (229). In town, the bright and diligent Àntonia has “a chance to learn” urbane ways that she can now apply to enrich her rural life. Though she chooses to live on a farm, she does not reject the ways of town entirely; her farm is a modern hybrid of two different systems of living, made possible only because she has had a chance to sample both ways and select the elements that suit her best.

Though he is disappointed in her looks, and though he relinquishes his romantic claims on her, ending his narrative just as his midlife encounter with Àntonia makes him realize that she is no longer “his,” Jim acknowledges that Àntonia remains a remarkable woman and that the essence of her identity has more to do with her work than her feminine appeal: “She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things” (234). Jim does not explicitly refer to the *Georgics* here, but the phrase “common things” bears strong resemblance to *tenuis curas*, humdrum tasks. Given Jim’s explicit interest in the *Georgics* elsewhere in the novel and the Vergilian epigraph, I think it is very likely that Cather was thinking of the *Georgics* when she composed these lines. Were I to edit a critical edition of *My Àntonia*, I would note this possible reference; the Broadview Press critical edition does not do so. Recall the full lines from Vergil: *Possum multa*

tibi veterum praecepta referre, / ne refugis tenuisque piget cognoscere curas, or "I could tell you many old sayings and many maxims / (Unless you're unwilling to hear such trivial things)" (Vergil and Ferry 14-15). The *Georgics* makes "trivial things" appealing by framing them in appealing language; Àntonia makes "common things" "meaningful" by the force of her indefatigable personality. In this sense, Àntonia is herself a georgic.

In her persistent desire to make a living for herself through the honest work of farming, Àntonia is a mirror image of Hardy's Tess, who desired the same rustic fate for herself. But unlike Àntonia, Tess succumbs to the men who force her to conform to their ideal of delicate, urbane femininity, unblemished by agricultural labor. That version of femininity, that forcible removal from the field to a house in town, literally kills Tess. By foregrounding Tess and Àntonia's desire to work on the land, Hardy and Cather also make an environmental statement. The people immediately around them and the tide of history itself are telling them to leave the farm, to seek a city or indoor work, to find money and meaning away from the land. They reject this idea; they find enough meaning and sufficient material wealth (if not money) through their work on the farm. For these characters, resisting the appearance and labor practices of traditional femininity parallels to resisting an exploitative relationship with the land: in a sexist and capitalist system, they are both worth less if they stay on the farm, but they want to stay because they value other things than money, namely their own physical and mental independence and the satisfaction of working on the land. Cather and Hardy may have moved to the city and built their careers with the pen rather than the plow, but in their fiction they stress that it is acceptable—it is essential, even—for bright, capable, hardworking people to keep living on the land, living off the land, and to steward the land well.

Chapter 3: Leslie Silko's Novels as Global Georgics

Leslie Marmon Silko might seem like an unusual author to link with Thomas Hardy and Willa Cather. She was born in 1948, two decades after Hardy died and a year after Cather died. Although her period is later, Silko shares Hardy and Cather's agricultural concerns: in the years following World War II, the Laguna Pueblo reservation where she grew up was under increasing pressure from the U.S. government to abandon Indigenous agricultural methods in favor of the industrial, chemical-heavy methods that were being developed by private corporations and in land grant universities, yet the people living in the reservation seemed to be growing more miserable even as they experimented with more aspects of white culture and agriculture (Silko, *The Turquoise Ledge* 69-70). History has been a central theme of Silko's work throughout her career, most apparently in her extremely ambitious *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), which spans generations and nations. In *Ceremony* (1977) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), the works studied in this chapter, she explores the violent course of Native American history by writing about an earlier time: *Ceremony* is set in the years of her early childhood, and *Gardens in the Dunes* looks back to the very end of the nineteenth century, precisely the period in which Cather and Hardy were writing. I conclude this project with *Gardens*, interspersed with writings from contemporary farmers, to serve as a retrospective and alternative way of thinking about agricultural modernity: Hardy and Cather, the contemporaneous writers, imagine an agricultural modernity that never quite emerged; Silko imagines a modernity that might have been.

I. Learning How to Hybridize in *Ceremony*

In Book Two of the *Georgics*, Vergil praises several varieties of wine grape grown around the Mediterranean before conceding that the world contains too many great grapes for him to name them all. He ends the list with the line *Nec vero terrae ferre omnes omnia possunt*, "to tell the truth, not everything can grow in every place," or more colloquially, you can't grow every species everywhere on the planet (Virgil and Ferry 54-55). In his notes on this line, Vergil scholar Richard Thomas writes, "It is a central premise of the *Georgics*, as of agricultural reality, that productivity is restricted by region" (Virgil and Thomas 175). The narrow, challenging limits of "agricultural reality" define the purported mission of the *Georgics*, which is to teach farmers how to farmer. This emphasis on the real and the local stands in complete and intentional contrast to Vergil's earlier work, the bucolic *Eclogues*, in which the poet invokes a lost, fantastical Golden Age with the line *Omnis feret omnia tellus*, "every land [can] bear everything," or "everything can grow everywhere"—bananas in Iceland, blueberries in Madagascar (Virgil and Lee, 58-9). In the real, contemporary world of the *Georgics*, farmers must learn how to be smart about raising livestock and crops in ways that are specific to their regions, which is why Vergil instructs his readers on how to adjust their methods depending on their individual climate and landscape. For example, he advises farmers to adjust their tilling methods based on local soil quality: "So, if the soil of the field you're getting ready / Is rich and fertile, set your oxen to work / In early spring to turn the earth…But if the soil is sandy, leave it alone; / In early September it will be enough…to rake it lightly" (Vergil and Ferry 7).

The agricultural world of Leslie Marmon Silko's first novel *Ceremony* (1977) operates on the same localist premise, in which stewards of individual regions need to know how to tend the

land in the specific way that their land requires. But her narrative presents a problem. The farmers, shepherds, and cattle herders are forgetting what grows best in their local landscapes, and global events have conspired to derange the climates and species upon which humans have learned to rely. When the novel opens, the Laguna Pueblo Indian reservation in New Mexico is gripped by drought. The central character, the World War II veteran Tayo, blames himself for the lack of rain to water the desert. Tayo has returned to the reservation after his tour in the South Pacific, and he needs to figure out how to live in the desert, the only place where he can grow and thrive. But he thinks that he has ruined his home because he has "prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry; the grass turned yellow and it did not grow. Wherever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying; the gray mule grew gaunt, and the goat and kid had to wander farther and farther each day to find weeds or dry shrubs to eat" (Silko 13). The "praying" refers to Tayo's wishing for the rain to stop in a very different context: when he serves as a soldier in the Philippines, the "jungle rain had no beginning or end; it grew like foliage from the sky…the jungle breathed an eternal green that fevered men until they dripped sweat the way the rubbery jungle leaves dripped the monsoon rain" (10). It would be possible to write an entire study of the language of water in *Ceremony*, analyzing, for example, the way water in the atmosphere here both causes and mimics the bodily functions of humans.

But I am primarily interested in the way Silko uses water and the idea of hybridization to explore the idea of a moderate modernity, to reclaim a threatened tradition that links agricultural and spiritual practice, and to connect local and global concerns in *Ceremony*. When Tayo prays for the rain to stop in the jungle, he believes that he actually causes the rain to stop falling years later in the New Mexican desert, many thousands of miles away from the Pacific theater. The worldwide war affects specific places within the world in specific ways, even those that do not

witness battle. Suffering from what we would now call PTSD, Tayo cries at "how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time" (17). Neither time nor space, Tayo feels, operates the way it should, or maybe the way it once did, to organize people and environments; instead, everyone and everything blend together in a way that is confusing and traumatic. This is a dystopian inversion of the whole world bearing all things.

So I want to consider a *u*topian, or at least an optimistic and high functioning, version of agricultural reality in which we can *celebrate* the fact that the whole world doesn't bear all species. This is the version of the global that Silko narrates: one in which the whole world is connected, and species and landscapes co-exist harmoniously, but in which every region maintains its distinctive ecological and cultural character without being exhausted or exploited by another region.

Perhaps ironically, Silko presents hybridization in cultural and agricultural practice as the solution to the preservation of regional difference. Tayo's family and peers never let him forget that he has a white father whom he has never met but who has given Tayo eyes that are hazel rather than dark, and skin a shade lighter than the rest of the Lagunas. As a result, Tayo feels consistently out of place and inferior to the people closest to him and unable to connect with the Laguna traditions with which he was raised. But over the course of the novel, he comes to learn that his hybridity makes him stronger and uniquely capable of engaging with Laguna culture and the agricultural realities of the New Mexican desert. Several mentors help teach him this lesson, of whom the most significant are the mixed race medicine man Betonie and Tayo's deceased uncle Josiah. Both of them offer Tayo advice, ideas, and wisdom about the land and his own

situation; both teach him how to steward Laguna culture by means of incorporating foreign and modern knowledge and methods into local traditions.

Really there are two reasons for reading *Ceremony* as a modern georgic novel. First, *Ceremony* envisions a world of climatic and agricultural regions that must be stewarded according to longstanding wisdom that developed in those regions. The farmers have to know how to work their particular land with its particular needs. This is a novel about human and ecosystem learning to achieve a working equilibrium, a balance that in the twentieth century depends on humans learning how to adapt traditional wisdom to suit changing conditions. There is a drought, and the Laguna Pueblo must learn how to adapt their agricultural practices to a changing environment. The white people are developing the desert and tearing up the land in search of uranium, and the Laguna people must learn to protect their culture, counter-intuitively, by incorporating certain aspects of the ideologies and epistemologies that compete with—indeed threaten to conquer—their own.

The second reason *Ceremony* fits into the georgic category is that Silko inserts many of the teachings already outlined—the importance of balancing region and globe, the necessity of hybridization—into instructional dialogue that is often agricultural in content or metaphor. There is a strong didactic aesthetic at the heart of this novel. Tayo learns how to heal himself and the world by listening to Josiah and Betonie—specifically, he learns by listening to their advice about stewarding the land through management of its resources, especially water; from this advice, he constructs his own worldview by the end of the novel which coincides with the conclusion of the ceremony designed to heal him of battle fatigue.

Why is it important to align *Ceremony* with a georgic tradition rather than simply to foreground the instructional and agricultural aspects of the novel without mentioning the georgic?

It is certainly possible to talk about the global/regional divide in *Ceremony* outside of the georgic framework, and many critics have done so.[22] But discussing the novel in the context of a modern flowering of the georgic mode highlights how instructional language can function to present multiple ideological viewpoints within a novel, within conversations about changes in agriculture in the second half of the twentieth century, and within broader conversations about environmental and cultural thought. Silko shows us that didactic dialogue about agriculture can persuade people to change the way they think about the land without coming off as overly preachy, outdated, or stilted. Just as important, she shows that the mentors speaking the didactic language—in this case, Josiah and Betonie—are learning and changing even as they speak, are exploring ideas from the present day as much as they are offering the wisdom of the past, are engaging in a georgic conversation. Critics have not generally thought of novels as georgic because the tradition began with poetry, but dialogic instruction in the modern novel is uniquely supple: it allows us understand advice not as written in stone, but as part of an ongoing, ever-changing conversation, at once preserving ancient knowledge by recording it in text and adapting it to fit present realities.

I will examine two instances of georgic instruction embedded in *Ceremony* that offer Tayo, and also readers of the novel, lessons about using hybridization to manage water, to take seriously both tradition and innovation, and to cultivate a balance between local and global forces. I suggest that Silko uses georgic instruction to advocate for a balance between cultural and ecological resilience, a term that has become very important in the environmental sciences, and resistance, a term that is taking on new political implications, notably for indigenous American communities seeking to retain their rights to water in this country. Silko's georgics

[22] See, for example, Joanne Freed's "The Ethics of Identification: The Global Circulation of Traumatic Narrative In Silko's *Ceremony* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*" (Freed).

may even provide a useful model for understanding one way in which indigenous communities frame water as a central force in defining both a region in itself, and a region's position in a global context—an issue that remains relevant in today.

Both of the relevant instructional moments involve Tayo's journey toward recovery from his paralyzing battle fatigue. The first is the medicine man Betonie's teaching about how Native witchery created white people, who in turn threw global ecosystems out of balance. Betonie parlays this story, which comprises the famous central poem of *Ceremony*, into a lesson claiming that the only route to recovery is to learn how to see the world not in terms of black and white, good and evil, or old and new, but to recognize alternate and intermediary solutions to the problems of modernity. The second moment is from Josiah, who teaches a similar lesson in agricultural terms: he is trying to breed cattle from a mix of modern American Hereford stock, which are ideal for the beef market, and ancient Mexican stock, which are better suited to the desert conditions of the New Mexico reservation. Betonie and Josiah experience opposite forms of resistance to their attempts at mixing epistemologies—the Laguna want Betonie to adhere to tradition absolutely, and the white people want Josiah to abandon tradition absolutely—yet they reach the same conclusion that hybridizing is necessary for survival in the modern world.

Betonie's Modern Ceremony

Betonie's central message to Tayo is that customs need to change, transition, or grow in order to survive. Tayo is wary of the relics of the white world, including calendars, newspapers, and almanacs, among other trinkets, that Betonie keeps stockpiled in his home because they are not a part of the traditional ceremonies and seem intrusive. But Betonie knows that Laguna wisdom has no power in the contemporary world unless it accounts for and even incorporates the

objects and ideas of modern change. He is less orthodox than Ku'osh, the medicine man who tries, and fails, to heal Tayo earlier in the novel. Like Tayo, Betonie is of Mexican, white, and Laguna descent—the two share the same hazel colored eyes. Betonie presents this racial mixing as natural, even necessary, if the people are to survive. He tells Tayo:

> "The people nowadays have an idea about the ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done….but long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the thickening of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing." (116)

"The people" refers here to members of the Laguna Pueblo tribe. This passage, the beginning of Betonie's lesson, contains many words and phrases that have to do with temporality: "nowadays," "long ago," "aging," "generation." Betonie describes a tension between the present day and what the people conceive as a Bakhtinian mythic past, a time when the customs and stories of the Lagunas came into being and which is barred off from the present: present must honor past, but the two times cannot communicate or collaborate; the present does not have permission to change the teachings of the past (Bakhtin 326). Mixing the two eras is taboo. But Betonie contends that the mythic past does not exist at all—not because the Laguna stories and ceremonies are false, but because there is no hard dividing line between past and present; there are, rather, the cyclical and incremental changes that inevitably occur in ecological time, so that some aspects of life stay the same while others shift. Betonie is contending that the present is, in fact, even more connected to the past than the people realize.

As the ceremony progresses, Betonie explains his unusual methods further, drawing on language that sounds half ecological, half capitalist:

> "…after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong…things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth." (Silko 120)

Elsewhere in the novel, Silko uses the term "dead things," or associates with death objects that have absorbed too much water, like the corpses in the jungle, or too little water, like the dried up desert plants. Life is found in the balance between the two extremes—just the right amount of water, delivered and consumed at the right time. In this explanation of his methods, Betonie adds another layer to the definition of life in the novel: it has to do not just with an organism's response to the climate, but with its ability to "shift" and "change" and "grow" over time—to evolve and adapt to whatever climate, or culture, or historical epoch in which it happens to exist. This language could be seen as adhering to capitalist rhetoric advocating the need for constant growth, an impossibility that many environmental thinkers, such as Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* (2014), have worked to debunk in the last half-century (Klein). But Betonie's emphasis on productive change could also be seen as participating in what environmentalists would now call "adaptation," or, more recently, "resilience," which is a term coined precisely to describe the sort of flexibility and strength—note that Betonie claims this quality keeps the ceremonies "strong"—required to overcome the challenges of threats to land use and changes in climate.

Some indigenous activists and scholars of the global south have resisted the idea that marginalized communities should adopt a strategy of adaptation or resilience on the grounds that this stance amounts to little more than capitulation to dominant colonizing forces; see for example Kyle Powys Whyte's "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene" (2017) (Whyte 206-7). There is certainly merit to the argument that any change in cultural tradition represents defeat or becomes the antithesis of resistance. But Betonie's famous story, the central poem of *Ceremony*, in which it is revealed that it is "Indian witchery that made white people in the first place," deconstructs the resistance/resilience dialectic by claiming that the need for change actually comes from within Indian culture (Silko 22). Exhibiting resilience, changing, and growing do not constitute giving up native culture *or* giving in to capitalist ideologies, but rather adjusting a culture to modern conditions on its own narrative and spiritual terms. In Betonie's ceremony, resistance and resilience are simultaneously necessary: resistance in the form of laying claim to one's own story, or version of history; and resilience in the form of finding the moderate route between the extremes of pure tradition and pure modernity. "'They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction,'" Betonie says of the indigenous witches from his story (122). For Betonie, the way forward cannot rely on separation by means of slavish adherence to ritual or the creation of an extreme "us" versus an extreme "them"; the survival of ritual depends on incorporating white people into the story, just as white or Mexican blood is incorporated into him and Tayo.

Betonie concludes his monologue to Tayo with a true georgic imperative: "'Don't be so quick to call something good or bad. There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain….It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be

cared for closely. You would do as much for the seedlings as they become plants in the field'" (120). This last sentence, the agricultural metaphor, places Betonie's advice firmly in the realm of the georgic and shows that growth is not only capitalist, for seedlings are planted, raised, harvested, and allowed to die every year. They grow and subside in cycles, not in an ever-expanding accumulation of matter. Human culture, Betonie suggests, is like agriculture: the people need to care for it closely, to watch it grow from its seedling beginnings into a full and thriving tradition, and to be prepared to try new stewardship tactics to help the plants flourish if the old methods do not work. The work of cultural preservation and practice is to find and maintain the "balances and harmonies" of the human and ecological history of the earth, and to use knowledge of the environment to even out the balance or retune the harmony of a cultural practice.

Josiah's Hybrid Cattle

Josiah, Tayo's other primary mentor, also plays a crucial role in teaching Tayo how to retune his fraught mind by regaining balance with the earth. He dies before the novel opens, while Tayo is away fighting in the war; one of the memories that tortures Tayo is the demi-hallucination he has in combat that a Japanese P.O.W., who is about to be shot by the Americans, is actually Josiah. Tayo's visceral reaction to this vision causes his fellow soldiers, including his cousin Rocky, to think that he is insane. To Betonie, though, Josiah's presence in the body of a Japanese soldier makes perfect sense: "'It isn't surprising you saw him with them. You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world'" (115). This speech subtly mixes modern anthropology and Laguna stories in a way that soon becomes essential for understanding Josiah's

contribution to Tayo's development. The "witchery" that Betonie is teaching Tayo to understand as a global phenomenon ("ranging as wide as the world," perhaps even the cause of World War II) is Indian at its heart, the product of an ancient gathering of the world's most gruesome witches. But the time measurement Betonie inserts—"thirty thousand years ago"—is very specific, not at all in keeping with the phrase "long time ago" that Silko uses throughout *Ceremony*, in both the prose and poetry sections, to denote the Laguna epic past, or, if the past of tribal stories is more permeable than Bakhtin's term suggests, then a collective past too diffuse to be measured in a set number of years. The specificity of the number hints that Betonie has been keeping up with anthropological research: in the mid-twentieth century, scientists believed that humans first crossed into North America over the Bering strait about 14,000 years ago. In the millennia before that migration, the people who would become Native Americans and the people who would become the Japanese shared a continent—Asia—and contemporary genetic research shows that the two groups share a substantial portion of their DNA (Bolnick 319). So Betonie is offering a complex explanation, incorporating the discoveries of contemporaneous science and ancient Laguna narratives, to account for the simple fact that Tayo probably saw Josiah in the Japanese soldier at least in part because the soldier looked like his uncle.[23]

Tayo's conviction that his behavior has caused the drought in New Mexico is intimately tied to his guilt about Josiah's death in Tayo's absence. "'He died because there was no one home to help him search for the cattle after they were stolen,'" Tayo tells Betonie during the healing ceremony (Silko 114). The stolen cattle are Josiah's great attempt to hybridize institutional/scientific and indigenous/experiential knowledge, to mix new and old into a species

[23] Betonie's stories are only "ancient Laguna narratives" in the context of the novel *Ceremony*. Silko borrowed some from stories she heard growing up and invented others, including the premise that Indian witchery invented white people. She relates this in her introduction to the 2007 reissue of the novel: "I remember the day I had lunch with my friend Rose Prince in Bethel and told her and her friend about my idea to have all things European invented by a tribal witch" (xvi).

stronger than either of its parents, and to bring the Laguna people back into spiritual and agricultural harmony with their patch of earth. Josiah offers nearly identical advice to Betonie's in a passage we have already encountered, when Tayo, still incapacitated by PTSD, recalls thinking about his now-deceased uncle while in a combat zone in the Pacific. It is reproduced here at slightly greater length:

> The jungle breathed an eternal green that fevered men until they dripped sweat the way rubbery jungle leaves dripped the monsoon rain. It was there that Tayo began to understand what Josiah had said. Nothing was all good or all bad either; it all depended….This was not the rain he and Josiah had prayed for, this was not the green foliage they sought out in sandy canyons as a sign of spring. (10)

"Don't be so quick to call something good or bad," says Betonie. "Nothing was all good or all bad either," says Josiah in Tayo's memory of his uncle's teachings. The two teachers use the same language to impress upon Tayo the importance of choosing thoughtful moderation when presented with two ecological—or ideological—extremes. Water is good until there is too much of it, as there is in the jungle. Better, perhaps, to avoid the categories of "good" and "bad" altogether when describing natural resources and cultural practices. We hear precisely "what Josiah had said" 30 pages later, as Tayo recalls going with his uncle to fetch water from a desert spring during the early years of the drought:

> Josiah had told him about the spring while they waited for the water barrels to fill….The water was always cold, icy cold, even in the summer, and Tayo liked the way it felt when he was sweating and took off his shirt: the splashing water made an icy mist that almost disappeared before it touched him.

> "You see," Josiah had said, with the sound of the water trickling out of the hose into the empty wooden barrel, "there are some things worth more than money…This earth keeps us going….These dry years, you hear some people complaining, you know, about the dust and the wind, and how dry it is. But the wind and the dust, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky. You don't swear at them. It's people, see. They're the ones. The old people used to say that droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave." (41-2)

Water means something very different in New Mexico from what it does in the Philippines jungle: here the spring water is "icy cold" and Tayo "liked the way it felt when he was sweating" because it touches his body in a moderate "mist." The jungle rain, by contrast, cannot cool a sweating body because there is too much of it—it actually causes the body to sweat even more. In this passage, Josiah is asking Tayo to notice and appreciate the water that the spring is offering to the people even in the depths of drought to balance the "dust and the wind." He warns against complaining about weather conditions on the grounds that humans find them uncomfortable, suggesting instead that humans have to learn how to appreciate their environment before it can become comfortable for them. "'You don't swear at them,'" he says, in direct georgic admonition, echoing Vergil's warnings to farmers that they should make offerings to the gods if they want to stave off weather calamity on their fields.[24] It is probably this speech, with its ominous warning that people can cause climate disasters through bad behavior, that convinces Tayo that he has caused the desert drought to deepen by praying for the jungle rain to stop in the Philippines.

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[24] *"In primis venerare deos, atque annua magnae / sacra refer Cereri laetis operates in herbis / extremae sub casum hiemis, iam vere sereno;"* "Above all else, / Be sure to pay due reverence to the gods. / When spring has come and winter is over and done with, / Yield to great Ceres the yearly rite you owe her" (Vergil and Ferry, 28-9).

While Josiah also advocates avoiding extremes, and while he also explains the advantages of hybridization (of cultures and, as we shall see, cattle), he ends up making the same point from almost exactly the opposite perspective as Betonie. If Betonie faces resistance from Indians who want him to keep the ceremonies exactly the same, Josiah faces resistance from advocates of modern methods—like his nephew Rocky and the U.S. government—who want him to abandon old, local wisdom entirely as he pursues agricultural success on the reservation. Betonie stresses that new knowledge must keep the old customs alive; Josiah stresses that old knowledge can strengthen new discoveries. Both mentors want to teach Tayo that no method is entirely ancient or new, just as no knowledge or circumstance is inherently good or bad.

The tension between Laguna epistemologies and scientific knowledge imported by white people arises several times in the novel, usually in Tayo's memories of the Indian school, where, for example, a white science teacher "explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for the class to see the true source of explanations," or "said those old beliefs were stupid" and "laughed loudly, for a long time" when a Navajo students explains that she and her classmates don't want to dissect frogs because "the frogs would get angry and send so much rain there would be floods" (87, 181). The indigenous children grow up in white institutions learning not just that knowledge discovered and explained by white people is the "true source of explanations," but also that the knowledge handed down to them by their own parents and elders is "stupid" and worthy of derision. Tayo's cousin Rocky, an "A-student and all-state in football and track" who "understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world," embraces this institutional dismissal of tribal knowledge; he learns to call the old ways "superstition" (47). In the process of what Eric Cheyfitz calls a "psychic colonization," Rocky "views his own

community as primitive" whereas he buys into the belief that the white colonizers, with their attendant textbooks and explanations, are advanced (Cheyfitz 151).

Not coincidentally, Tayo, who is of mixed blood whereas Rocky is fully Indian, is more skeptical of the absolute correctness of white epistemologies and therefore pays attention to Josiah when his uncle proposes a plan for raising cattle that incorporates Indian knowledge of the New Mexican terrain. The family has always assumed that Rocky would leave the reservation and go to college while Tayo stayed behind to help the family, so it is natural that Tayo should listen carefully to Josiah's ideas, but he also remembers being "proud when Josiah talked about the cattle business. He was ready to work hard with his uncle" (68). He is eager to "work hard"—a georgic sentiment—and to prove by working the land that he belongs to it.

Josiah's plan to develop a new breed of cattle incorporating wild Mexican and registered Hereford genetics incorporates several of the concepts already examined: the use of georgic instruction as a narrative technique to negotiate agricultural knowledge; the necessity of hybridization for survival in modernity; the tense relationship between indigenous and white epistemologies; the interpellation of local climates and global politics; and even the status of water as metaphor, metonym, and driver of plot. The prewar, flashback scene in which Josiah describes his scheme serves to set up Tayo's mission for the second half of the novel: by the time we read it, we know that Josiah is dead and his cattle have mysteriously vanished. Once Tayo feels more lucid after the first part of Betonie's ceremony, he immediately dreams "about the speckled cattle" and wants to "leave that night to find the cattle; there would be no peace until he did" (134). The significance of these cattle is revealed in the second crucial moment of georgic instruction in *Ceremony*.

Tayo is remembering the day Josiah purchased twenty head of unusual cattle from Ulibarri, and Tayo promised to stay on the reservation and help Josiah breed them after he graduated from high school—a promise he would break by enlisting in the Army. As they drive home from the sale, the two men plot the future:

> They would breed these cattle, special cattle, not the weak, soft Herefords that grew thin and died from eating thistle and burned-off cactus during the drought. The cattle Ulibarri sold them were exactly what they had been thinking about. These cattle were descendants of generations of desert cattle, born in dry sand and scrubby mesquite, where they hunted water the way desert antelope did.
>
> "Cattle are like any living thing. If you separate them from the land for too long, keep them in barns and corrals, they lose something. Their stomachs get to where they can only eat rolled oats and dry alfalfa. When you turn them loose again, they go running all over. They are scared because the land is unfamiliar, and they are lost. They don't stop being scared either, even when they look quiet and they quit running. Scared animals die off easily."…Tayo was used to him talking like that, going over his ideas and plans out loud, and then asking Tayo what he thought.
>
> "See, I'm not going to make the mistake other guys made, buying those Hereford, white-face cattle. If it's going to be drought these next few years, then we need some special breed of cattle." (68-9)

Recall that Betonie makes modern changes to the Laguna ceremonies because "growth keeps the ceremonies strong… things which don't shift and grow are dead things"; here Josiah uses the opposite language to make the same point: he will avoid "weak" Herefords by incorporating the

resilience of a desert breed into their genes. Again, strength in modernity comes from daring to do things a little bit differently from one's neighbors. The problem is that the Hereford breed needs to drink a lot of water and eat cultivated grasses; the conventional solution is to try to import those scarce resources to the desert. Josiah plans to avoid importing and instead breed cattle that instinctively understand the land and can take advantage of the resources that are already available on it—the "thistle and burned-off cactus." He wants to harness local environmental materials and genetics in order to participate in the global beef market: all things can't grow in all places, but with knowledge of a particular place, the thoughtful farmer can produce a good substitute.

Beyond his attention to the agricultural realities of region, Josiah displays strong georgic sympathies in this passage by transitioning from the particular to the universal in the second paragraph, represented in direct speech: the animals under discussion are "'like all living things.'" This passage, including its elaborate descriptions and the plot it spurs, is distinctly about cattle. But just as the *Georgics* is literally about farming and figuratively about becoming a good citizen of the Augustan regime, this passage of *Ceremony* it is also using the idea of hybrid cattle to explore the relationship between all organisms and the land they inhabit. The specific is an example of the general: in this case, living beings become weaker and more dependent—they "'lose something'"—when "'the land is unfamiliar'". It is easy to see how the same principle applies to the Native Americans represented in *Ceremony*, who risk losing their deep familiarity with the land because of the meddling of white people in allocating property and forcing standardized education on Indigenous children. So Josiah's speech carries double georgic force: he uses agricultural imagery to describe a universal problem, and the problem itself is the (georgic) need for knowledge about how to live on the land. Tayo plays the role of active

apprentice, listening to his uncle's recital of his "ideas and plans" and in turn developing the very familiarity with his native land that Josiah claims is necessary for sustainable strength in the face of adversity—climatic or otherwise.

Elegant as Josiah's plan sounds, Josiah faces derision for proposing a hybrid Indian/white cattle system because he does not blindly believe everything he reads in the science and agriculture manuals distributed by the U.S. Extension Agency. If the more traditional Indians denigrate Betonie for allowing *any* imported modernity into traditional rituals, "psychically colonized" Rocky grumbles at Josiah for allowing *any* traditional Indian knowledge into modern, imported agricultural practices:

> [Josiah] had a stack of books on the floor beside his bed, with his reading glasses sitting on top. Every night, for a few minutes after he got in bed, he'd read about cattle breeding in the books the extension agent had loaned to him. Scientific cattle breeding was very complicated, he said, and he used to wait until Rocky and Tayo were doing their homework on the kitchen table, and then he would come in from the back room, with his glasses on, carrying a book.
>
> "Read this," he would tell Rocky, "and see if you think it's saying the same thing I think it says," When Rocky finished it, Josiah pushed the book in front of Tayo and pointed at the passage. They he'd say, "Well?" And the boys would tell him what they got out of it. "That's what I thought too," Josiah would say, "but it seemed like such a stupid idea I wasn't sure I was understanding it right." The problem was the books were written by white people who did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which the cattle had to live with. When Tayo saw Ulibarri's cattle, he thought of the diagram of the ideal beef

> cow which had been in the back of one of the books, and these cattle were everything that the ideal cow was not. They were tall and had long thin legs like deer; their heads were long and angular, with heavy bone across the eyes supporting wide sharp horns which curved out over the shoulders. Their eyes were big and wild.
>
> "I guess we will have to get along without these books," he said. "We'll have to do things our own way. Maybe we'll even write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land*, or how to raise cattle that don't eat grass or drink water."
>
> …Rocky was quiet. He looked up from his books.
>
> "Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle. That's the trouble with the way people around here have always done things—they never knew what they were doing"….He did not hesitate to speak like that, to his farther and his uncle, because the subject was books and scientific knowledge—those things that Rocky had learned to believe in. (70)

The word "book" appears an astonishing eight times in this passage; all three characters are reading a variety of books assigned to them by American institutions: Josiah reads the agricultural extension agent's books to prepare for a venture in cattle raising, Rocky and Tayo read textbooks to complete the homework they were given at government-run school for Indians. The three Indian men represented in this passage are obsessed with absorbing the knowledge that can be found in these books—knowledge that has made the white people powerful and enabled them to take over their native land. Even Josiah's reading glasses act as a symbol of his willingness to try on the implements of the white invaders, to see the world from their

perspective. But he has the experience to disagree confidently with some of what he reads. In Josiah's reading practice, we see the development of his hybridized learning practice even before he lands on the idea of hybridizing Hereford and Mexican cattle to create a breed that "would grow up heavy and covered with meat like Herefords, but tough too, like the Mexican cows, able to withstand hard winters and many dry years" (74).

Here Josiah combines what agricultural anthropologist Glenn Stone calls environmental learning, or the information one absorbs from observing and engaging with one's surroundings, and didactic learning, which he defines as the process "whereby various [off-farm] parties bring knowledge to the farm" (Stone 5).[25] The influence of these outside parties, which include government agencies, private corporations selling equipment and materials, and nonprofit organizations, grew exponentially in the twentieth century, with a particularly huge boom in institutional involvement in agriculture in the years following World War II, when *Ceremony* takes place (Stone 7). A tension Stone identifies with this emerging form of farming education is that off-farm parties may, and often do, have different interests from the farmers themselves. A pesticide company, for example, is interested in turning a profit and therefore might instruct farmers to buy their product to control insect pests even if the pesticide is expensive and only marginally more efficacious than other methods already in the farmer's arsenal. In *Ceremony*, Silko shows the U.S. government advocating certain agricultural methods on Indian reservations in order to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream, white American culture—an important project in the mid-twentieth century—and to standardize agricultural practices across the country in accordance with the fast-developing dogmas of industrial agriculture.

[25] Stone's use of the word "didactic" is *not* synonymous with the way that word is used to discuss didactic literature, where "didactic" in the broadest sense simply means literature intended to instruct its readers. See, for example, T.V.F. Brogan and S.J. Kahn's definition of Didactic Poetry in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Brogan and Kahn 676-680).

But Josiah is quick to recognize that just as not all things grow in all places, not all agricultural methods work in all places. The cattle-raising methods advocated by the USDA, most likely pioneered at the land grant institutions of the Midwest, do not work under the conditions of "drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles" with which Josiah's animals must contend. The ideal, standardized head of cattle is not ideal for New Mexico, so Josiah envisions an animal that is. The urge to breed a perfect animal is not new to Josiah or to the U.S.; in fact Vergil devotes substantial passages of the *Georgics* to identifying the perfect mothers and studs to parent the next generation of cattle and horses. The farmer, he warns, "had better pay / Special attention to what the mothers look like. / The best-looking cows look fierce, with a great thick neck / An ugly head, and dewlaps hanging down / From her jaws to her legs; extremely long in the flank…With an unpredictable horn you have to watch out for. / Her expression's more like a bull's than a cow's…" he continues at length (Vergil and Ferry 96-97). Vergil's description of the ideal plowing cow bears remarkable similarities to the description of Josiah's beef cattle, with their "long thin legs" and "wide sharp horns" and "big and wild" eyes. In both cases, the literary representation of the animal serves to delineate both its physical characteristics and its metaphysical attributes: everything about Vergil's cow bespeaks her "fierceness;" everything about Josiah's cattle bespeaks their ability to survive in terrain not studied by the U.S. extension agency.

So Josiah decides to trust his environmental knowledge over the didactic knowledge that he pursues so assiduously. He splits the difference between the two knowledge systems by proposing that he write a book—an imported form of communication from which he usually gleans didactic knowledge—containing his own Indian environmental knowledge. Accidentally or not, he embeds ambiguity into his title, "*Cattle Raising on Indian Land.* What is "Indian

Land?" On the most literal level, Josiah is referring to New Mexico reservation land officially allotted to the Laguna Pueblo by the U.S. government. But since the novel traces a new history of the European invasion of native lands, we might also read Josiah's title as encompassing all the land that was taken from Indians. In this case, Josiah might be using his title to advertise a book that teaches readers not only "how to raise cattle that don't eat grass or drink water," but also how they might use their environmental knowledge of the terrain and climate to develop the best methods for raising cattle in their individual locations.

But Josiah dies before he can write this book, and Tayo has to take over the business of raising Ulibarri's cattle. When he returns from the war, the cattle have been stolen by a white man who drives them onto his "private property," a mountain considered sacred by the Laguna. After Betonie tells Tayo the story of the witchery, he senses that he needs to get the cattle back in order to rebalance the world. Much of the second half of the novel follows Tayo on his quest to do this. After he reclaims the cattle and brings them back to the reservation, a heavy rain falls and ends the drought. The curse that he imposed on the world while suffering in the jungle is lifted, and after the rain:

> The valley was green, from the yellow sandstone mesas in the northwest to the black lava hills to the south. But it was not the green color of jungles, suffocating and strangling the earth. The new growth covered the earth lightly, each blade of grass, each leaf and stem with space between as if planted by a thin summer wind. There were no dusty red winds spinning across the flats this year. (203)

This passage is about balance. The right amount of water, for Tayo and for Silko, means none of the "suffocating and strangling," or the death, that comes with too much water allowing too much plant growth—and also none of the "dusty red winds" that accompany drought. Silko

evokes both extremes multiple times before settling on a moderate middle made possible only by full knowledge of what the extremes look like. Appreciating the local requires understanding the global.

There is something peculiar at play here, though: what of the person who grew up in the jungle, or in a deciduous forest, or a boreal tundra, or any ecosystem that does not look quite like the desert of the Southwestern United States? Will this person never grasp the meaning of ecological, cultural, and spiritual balance simply because he or she has never witnessed the look of the desert after a healing rain? It is difficult to imagine Silko articulating such a position. It is instructive instead to recall how Betonie explains his decision to live next to a horrible dump near the highway: "'We are comfortable here.'" He likes to live with the landscape and climate to which he is accustomed. The same principle could apply to people of any climate: longtime residence builds environmental knowledge, which in turn helps people develop methods to keep themselves comfortable, to understand what balance looks like for that place, and to readjust the balance as needed.

II. *Gardens in the Dunes* as a Georgic of Global Seedsaving

In *Ceremony*, Tayo receives opposing advice from two mentors living in the same place; in *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) the protagonist Indigo receives similar advice from three mentors living in different places. In *Ceremony*, Silko's mentors teach their student to achieve ecological and cultural homeostasis by selecting a few ideas from Native American/experiential and white/scientific forms of knowledge; in *Gardens in the Dunes* her teacher characters advocate combining all knowledge into a universal encyclopedia of wisdom.[26] Or, almost all

[26] Stylistically, too, *Gardens in the Dunes* is an encyclopedia to *Ceremony's* manifesto: *Gardens* is 477 pages of margin-to-margin prose, whereas *Ceremony* is a spare 244 pages of mixed prose and poetry.

knowledge: over the course of *Gardens in the Dunes*, the young Indigo, a member of the fictional Sand Lizard tribe from the Southwest U.S., encounters a several mentors around the world who teach her that many cultural varieties of endangered Indigenous knowledge are valuable and essentially similar, while scientific knowledge that disdains tradition is essentially suspect. Like *Ceremony*, *Gardens in the Dunes* is historical fiction, but the latter reaches back farther in time, to the turn of the twentieth century. Setting the narrative in this period allows Silko to explore some of the central concerns that I have identified in the novels of writers who lived and wrote in that period: the wariness about early developments in industrial and scientific agriculture, the urge to preserve inherited cultural and agricultural knowledge, and the challenges of navigating multiple epistemologies (agricultural and otherwise) in a fast-changing, globalizing world.[27] Silko sends Indigo on an international educational tour during which she learns that humans have always understood how to have a productive, caring relationship with the earth and its organisms, and that it is her job to practice that relationship even in the face of the exploitative relationship with the earth advocated by the encroaching forces of capitalism and imperialism.

On the last of the global adventures I will examine, when Indigo is visiting the gardens of a Tuscan villa decorated with its owner's collection of ancient European artifacts, Indigo's chaperone Edward attempts to steer the girl away from objects that he thinks might be detrimental to her development. He thinks, "…it was just as well Indigo missed the serpent

[27] I generally choose the words "agriculture" and "agricultural" rather than "horticulture" and "horticultural" to describe Indigo's activities in *Gardens in the Dunes* in order to connect Silko's instructional prose in this novel to the prose in *Ceremony* and the other novels examined in this project. While Indigo's gardening techniques fall within a definition of horticulture, "The cultivation of a garden; the art or science of cultivating or managing gardens, including the growing of flowers, fruits, and vegetables," they also fall within a definition of agriculture, "the practice of growing crops, rearing livestock, and producing animal products (as milk and eggs), regarded as a single sphere of activity; farming, husbandry" ("horticulture, n."; "agriculture, n.").

figures. The child was from a culture of snake worshipers and there was no sense in confusing her with the impression the old Europeans were no better than red Indians or black Africans who prayed to snakes" (Silko, *Gardens in the Dunes* 302). The novel is Silko's effort to prove that Edward is exactly wrong—that the "old Europeans" *were* no better than the "red Indians or black Africans." Or, to rephrase the sentiment in more positive terms, *Gardens in the Dunes* compares the stories, practices, and agricultural methods of western and Indigenous American cultures to demonstrate that no one culture is "better" than another, that all of the cultures under discussion share remarkable similarities, and that colonialist capitalism and its attendant agricultural philosophy, of which Edward is a staunch adherent, is a troublesome ideological outlier in the chronicle of human history.

Much of the cultural and agricultural education in *Gardens in the Dunes* takes place, as the title might suggest, in gardens, which as Rebecca Tillett claims serve as "specifically communal educational space" in the novel and in Pueblo culture; her reading of Gregory Cajete's study of the Pueblo gardening tradition with which Silko was raised indicates that "Pueblo gardens and gardening practices emphasize the significance of the 'experiential' process of gardening as an educational process" (Tillett 223). By "experiential," Tillett means that one learns how to garden by entering the garden, watching one's elders perform agricultural tasks, and imitating the tasks as the elder instructs—a form of learning directly comparable to Josiah's knowledge of the New Mexican climate or Gabriel's understanding of English storm clouds. Tillett argues that gardens in Silko's text are fundamentally "pedagogical" in nature, designed to teach characters how to ensure the continued thriving of the plants contained within, yes, and also to teach of broader "political and cultural histories" (Tillett 227). She is calling *Gardens in the Dunes* a georgic without using the term. Identifying the novel as a georgic here, effectively

aligning Silko's twentieth-century project of celebrating and preserving Indigenous American agricultural knowledge as a model for good ecological citizenship with Vergil's ancient attempt to do the same thing for Italian farming and Roman citizenship, is precisely the type of cross-cultural and cross-temporal synthesis that Silko advocates in *Gardens in the Dunes.*

Silko traces lineages of agricultural knowledge and represents scenes of education in four different gardens: two in the American Southwest, one in southern England, and one in Italy. Indigo visits all of these gardens in her journey to establish a position for herself as a bright Indigenous child trying to survive in a world dominated by white people and their insistence on capitalism and western science as the only meaningful forms of truth. Indigo learns from well-educated mentors in the first three gardens; in the fourth, after absorbing her eclectic agricultural and horticultural education well, she becomes the gardener—and the teacher—herself.

The No-Till Native Garden

Indigo's first instructor is Grandma Fleet, her mother's mother, who teaches Indigo and her older sister how to cultivate the arid gardens that have been abandoned by the Sand Lizard tribe, but that now provide an effective hiding spot from the encroaching white civilization. When the girls are small, and then several years later after Indigo's mother disappears mysteriously, the old woman and two young girls live in the gardens alone and survive on food they can hunt, collect, and grow. Grandma Fleet teaches her granddaughters that the desert provides enough sustenance if you know how to coax it out of the earth through patient and generous care. Part 1 of the novel is dense with agricultural instruction as Grandma Fleet attempts to bequeath her considerable knowledge about surviving in the desert to Sister Salt and

Indigo before she dies. Early on, for example, she teaches them to forage wild plants and care for volunteers that have sprung up from gardens of years past:[28]

> When there was nothing else to eat, there was amaranth; every morning and every night Sister Salt boiled up amaranth greens just like Grandma Fleet taught her. …Grandma Fleet taught Sister Salt and Indigo all about such things.
>
> After the rains, they tended the plants that sprouted out of the deep sand; they each had plants they cared for as if the plants were babies. Grandma Fleet had taught them this too. The plants listen, she told them. Always greet each plant respectfully. Don't argue or fight around the plants—hard feelings cause the plants to wither. The pumpkins and squash sent out bright green runners with huge round leaves to shade the ground, while their wiry green-yellow tendrils attached themselves to nearby weed stalks and tall dune grass. The big orange pumpkin blossoms were delicious right from the vine; bush beans sprang up in the shade of the big pumpkin leaves. (*Gardens* 14)

Silko's repetition of the word "taught" in this passage emphasizes the importance of the transmission of knowledge. Tillett notes that "the knowledge exchange that these textual gardens facilitate includes an exchange with Silko's reader, who is required to trace and acknowledge the political histories not only of human relationships with the earth but, more widely, of the relationships to capitalism and empire to the environment" (Tillett 227-8). In georgic poetry, the speaker instructs the reader; here, the reader and Indigo are receiving the same instructions. The text serves at once as a technique for preserving agriculture methods, a description of a

[28] A "volunteer" is a domesticated food plant that sprouts without having been planted by a human, perhaps because humans disposed of seeds carelessly or, in this case, because Sand Lizard gardening methods dictate allowing certain seeds to rest on the ground in order to repopulate the garden the next year.

character's education and the landscape in which it occurs, and an exhortation about how to behave in the future.

Tillett's assertion about the macro implications of gardening instructions are clearly at play in the passage quoted above. Amaranth would have grown wild in the desert, but would also have to be cultivated by humans to produce significant enough quantities for a good harvest of grains, which the girls eat at other points in the novel, as well as greens. Jodi Adamson claims that highlighting the crucial role of amaranth as a food crop links the Sand Lizard tribe to the ancient Aztecs, who grew it, and to "the politics that suppressed knowledge about this once important staple crop," she writes, referring to sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadores who razed amaranth fields and outlawed growing the crop (Adamson 215). It seems likely that Silko decided to write about amaranth, a food seldom consumed in the contemporary U.S. outside of specialty stores and a few home gardens, to connect agriculture to global imperialism. She might also include the plant to point out the tendency of Indigo's family to use multiple parts of the amaranth plant—both green and grains—which is an uncommon practice in contemporary American eating, where it rarely makes financial sense to harvest two parts of a plant that will be shipped long distances.

The list of imperatives in the middle section of the passage also transcends the garden and applies just as meaningfully to human-to-human interactions as to human relationships with other organisms—indeed, the girls care for the plants "as if the plants were babies," or members of their own species.[29] "Greet" the plants "respectfully" and "don't argue or fight around the plants—hard feelings cause the plants to wither," Grandma Fleet advises. We have seen this sentence structure in georgic dialogue before: first the instructor gives a command about how to

[29] Nephi Craig, a White Mountain Apache chef who founded the Native American Culinary Association to bring visibility and support to Native chefs and food ways, writes this in a letter of advice to farmers: "I encourage you to sing to your plants as you would sing to your children" (Craig 91).

treat another species; then he or she explains the reasons for the command by adopting the perspective of that species. Recall, from Cather's *O, Pioneers!*, one of Ivar's instructions to Alexandra about how best to raise healthy pigs: "Give them only grain and clean feed, such as you would give horses or cattle. Hogs do not like to be filthy" (Cather 26). In both cases, the relationship that Ivar and Grandma Fleet instruct their students to develop with their plant and animal charges is one of care and respect rather than transactional value, the bedrock of capitalism. Good agricultural practice, for them, means empathizing with the species they are raising and taking their preferences into account. It is no coincidence that the preferences of the plants and animals up for discussion accord with respectful models of human-to-human interaction—the advice is an interspecies version of "do unto others." Hard feelings can also cause humans to wither, and we generally do not like to be filthy, either.

While I agree with Tillett's assertion that the macro implications of gardening instructions illuminate political arguments and foster interspecies empathy, I argue that the granular details of agricultural technique matter too, and that Silko is invested in teaching real Indigenous gardening practices through the text. Like many sections in Vergil's *Georgics*, the passage quoted above slides from instruction to description of the garden. Yet even Silko's descriptive images outline implicit—and radical—techniques for raising crops in a way that is easy on the earth and beneficial for the crops themselves. She depicts two-thirds of the famed Indigenous "Three Sisters" system of companion planting beans, squash, and corn, though corn is absent in Grandma Fleet's system because "Sand Lizard people barely were able to grow corn" in their arid climate (*Gardens in the Dunes* 244). In the Three Sisters garden typically grown today, corn stalks support pole bean vines, while the bean plants nourish the soil with nitrogen and the squash leaves shade the ground to keep the soil moist and weed-free. In the garden

designed by Grandma Fleet, the pumpkin and squash plants perform the same function, with "round huge leaves to shade the ground." And smaller, non-vining bush beans can thrive "in the shade of the big pumpkin leaves." The squash, not the beans, cling with their vines, and they cling to uncultivated "weed stalks and tall dune grass" that the family is not growing for food.

Allowing cultivated plants to interact with weeds seems to go against the basic logic of gardening, in which the gardener selects a set of plant species to care for "as if they were babies," and actively suppresses other species through tilling and weeding. Many modern gardeners would view Grandma Fleet's system with as much horror as white settlers viewed the Three Sisters system. Yet a growing cohort of contemporary gardeners and farmers are experimenting with growing systems that bear remarkable similarities to this one. Minnesota organic farmer Atina Diffley, for example, grows squash in hay fields without first pulling the grass or turning the earth in an effort to grow vegetables by mimicking ecosystems unaffected by humans.[30] And farmers—many in the arid American West—who use the "no till" method of soil management to conserve water and reduce labor leave dead grass and weed stalks in their fields even as they seed the next generation of plant life, producing a field that looks chaotic to eyes trained by industrial agriculture to expect neat rows of monoculture crops, but that has tremendous benefits for the individual farmer and potentially for the global climate.[31]

Grandma Fleet's advice continues in a similar vein, combining gardening imperative with moral imperative and adding description that also serves to delineate a sustainable Indigenous gardening system:

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[30] In her memoir, she writes, "Trained as a scientist, Masanobu Fukuoka teaches that the best forms of cultivation mirror nature's own laws. I dig small circles out of the hay field and set three squash seeds in each mound. The land between is left covered, like a living mulch" (Diffley 29). The marriage of scientific research and "naturally" occurring methods is a common theme in twenty-first-century organic gardening narratives.

[31] By not tilling and by allowing plant matter to collect and decompose in the field, farmers add carbon to their soil in a way that both prevents carbon from returning to the atmosphere and may allow the carbon to collect more carbon by increasing its microbiotic capacity. This process might curb global climate change by keeping carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere (Ohlson).

> Sand Lizard warned her children to share: Don't be greedy. The first ripe fruit of each harvest belongs to the spirits of our beloved ancestors, who come to us as rain; the second ripe fruit should go to the birds and wild animals….Give the third ripe fruit to the bees, ants, mantises, and others who cared for the plants. A few choice pumpkins, squash, and bean plants were simply left on the sand beneath the mother plants to shrivel dry and return to the earth. Next season, after the arrival of the rain, beans, squash, and pumpkins sprouted up between the dry stalks and leaves of the previous year. (14)

Again, Grandma Fleet's instructions—from the teachings of Sand Lizard, the original tribal ancestor—are rich with imperatives and contain both moral and agricultural advice. "Don't" be greedy and "give" generously to the nonhuman neighbors, particularly those who have aided the crops harvest. Sand Lizard cosmology envisions ancestors as rain, which sprouts the seeds and ensures that the young plants thrive; sharing with them is not so much an act of generosity as of grateful acknowledgment. Offering a portion of the harvest to the bees (who pollinate the plants), ants (who aerate the soil), and mantises (who eat pest bugs) expands the definition of "caring" beyond the concept of intent to include any organism within an ecosystem that participates, knowingly or not, in the wellbeing of another organism.

In this passage, storytelling and religion blend with agricultural instruction: The Sand Lizard people grow their gardens in a certain way because their primogenitor, the original Sand Lizard, told them to do so. When imperative commands slip into description of Grandma Fleet's garden—from "give" to "were left"—Silko's images again retain an instructional quality. If the first harvest goes to the ancestors, the second goes to the animals (whom other farmers might call "pests"), and the third goes to beneficial insects, then Silko's description teaches us that the

fourth harvest goes to the earth itself as a quasi-religious, quasi-practical offering. The pious act of sacrifice—leaving behind the "choice" fruits and seeds rather than eating them—is also an instruction to the Sand Lizard people to allow room for vigorous volunteer plants to sprout the following season, a practice that both ensures a steady food supply and reminds the people when it is time to plant. It is also a reminder not to turn the soil, but rather to leave the land undisturbed beneath the "dry stalks and leaves" from the previous season—advice that coincides with contemporary no-till farming techniques for arid climates.

As the girls get older and Grandma Fleet realizes they will have to survive on their own, without their mother or any other members of the vanishing Sand Lizard community to help them, her gardening instructions get more advanced, and we see the Sister Salt and Indigo begin to take on more of the subsistence tasks that she has taught them. She also introduces new elements of her minimalist desert growing system:

> Grandma Fleet explained the differences in the moisture of the sand between the dunes as they slowly made their way up the sandy path between the dunes. Grandma steadied herself with a hand on each girl's shoulder… Grandma explained each of the dunes and the little valleys between them had different flows of runoff; some of the smaller dunes were too dry along their edges and it was difficult to grow anything there; in marginal areas like these it was better to let the wild plants grow.
>
> Grandma Fleet explained which floodplain terraces were well drained enough to grow sweet black corn and speckled beans. The squashes and melons were water lovers, so they had to be planted in the bowl-shaped area below the big dune where the runoff soaked deep into the sand. (47)

Again, agricultural instruction serves to describe landscape, advance the plot, and provide moral grounding for *Gardens*. Three times in two paragraphs, a sentence opens with Grandma Fleet "explaining" to her granddaughters how best to grow crops on their native land by harnessing the natural resources it already has to offer. The tension arises from the fact that she is weakening, walking "slowly" and "steadying" herself on her granddaughters' young shoulders, and that she must therefore teach quickly—hence the almost rhythmic, repetitive insistence of her instructions.

Grandma Fleet's central instruction here is that the girls must learn to garden with the preexisting shape of the landscape, rather than shape the landscape to suit their needs. Each dune in the Sand Lizard gardens has "different flows of runoff" and is therefore better or worse suited for growing plants that require a lot of water. Grandma Fleet's solution is simply to plant water-loving plants in the moistest areas and drought-resistant plants, or nothing, in the dry areas. Consider the contrast between her method and the admonitions from Joel Salatin with which I opened this project:

> …the difference between a farm and any other piece of property is what a farmer—the person—brings to the landscape. Absent the farmer, the land could be anything from a condominium to a national park.
>
> Don't be afraid to carve in a road, build a pond, excavate a swale, install a root cellar, or construct a building. I call this participatory environmentalism—bringing healing and redemptive capacity to the landscape. (Salatin 72)

Salatin became famous as a farmer who eschews pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and industrial methods, and who considers responsible stewardship of the land to be one of his goals as a farmer. He understands how contemporary readers, schooled in the ways of "leave no trace" environmentalism, might see his "participatory" willingness to mold the agrarian landscape to fit

the farmer's needs as violent or intrusive. But Salatin insists that it is necessary and even good for a farmer to shape the land: if an area is too high and dry to cultivate plants successfully, why not lower it to bring it closer to the water table? If the pigs need a place to drink why not dig them a pond? Grandma Fleet might ask why you would not just grow the plants somewhere that retained water better, instead. Josiah, the cattle breeder from *Ceremony*, might ask why you would not just try to find a different pig, or a different animal altogether, instead of altering the landscape to suit the pig you have.

I am not going to claim moral or environmental superiority for Silko's methods or Salatin's; both demonstrate more thoughtfulness than the industrial agricultural system of injecting lab-made chemicals into the land to achieve a standardized composition of molecules and organisms. In fact, the diversity of methods may be a Vergilian instance of the need to tailor agricultural practices to specific locations: what works in the desert would probably not work very well at Salatin's farm in humid, subtropical Virginia. What works in a subsistence garden designed to feed three people might not work on a farm designed to feed a hundred families. Both writers argue against the tenets of conventional agriculture from different stances: Silko advocates low-impact farming just at the moment (1999) that Americans are taking a renewed interest in farms as political entities whose decisions affect everyone's lives, and Salatin is writing at a time when a critical mass of people has absorbed the Silko stance and is trying to show that the life of a farmer—even a responsible one—is more violent than it looks from the idyllic farmers' market stand. Violence is not absent in *Gardens*, either: one of the lessons Grandma Fleet teaches her girls is how to hunt for meat by chasing coyotes to scavenge from their kills; she praises them when they bring home a handfuls of newborn bunnies, still wriggling, and promptly makes a stew of them.

Grandma Fleet's prowess as a teacher of subsistence farming becomes fully apparent after her quiet death in a dugout near her beloved apricot tree seedlings.[32] Sister Salt and Indigo remember her agricultural lessons and use them to continue surviving through an excellent harvest season in the old gardens. For example, once they are on their own, they recall her gardening techniques and her methods of preserving the harvest: "Sister Salt tended the gardens as Grandma would have, pulling weeds around the squash and beans.…Sister Salt continued to follow all of Grandma Fleet's instructions: as the beans and corn ripened, she dried them in the sun, then stored them in the huge pottery storage jars buried in the sand floor of the dugout house" (*Gardens* 52). Grandma Fleet's didacticism becomes the girls' most powerful memory of her; her lessons help them manage their grief at her loss, and keep her alive in their thoughts and actions: "The harvest was gathered and Sister Salt knew Grandma Fleet was proud of her and Indigo too" (*Gardens* 54). Indigo is soon to become an ambassador for Grandma Fleet's garden teachings as she travels to Europe and encounters gardeners who are receptive to alternative modes of ecological thought.

"The kitchen garden was the modern garden"

When Sister Salt and Indigo are detained at the end of Part 1 of *Gardens in the Dunes*, the state categorizes them as minors, unaccompanied Indians who need to be assimilated. Indigo is sent to an Indian school in California, where she is exposed to a form of education diametrically opposed to the one Grandma Fleet gave her. Here all the children are given identical Western haircuts and American uniforms; here they must abandon their native

[32] Grandma Fleet's affection for her baby apricot trees indicates that she is cosmopolitan in her gardening tastes. She respects the tribal teachings on how to care for native species native species like squash and beans, but she sees no harm in trying to grow foreign plants in familiar soil alongside indigenous varieties. Apricots were originally cultivated in Asia and Europe, and only came to the Americas with European settlers in the early eighteenth century ("apricot").

languages and speak only in English; here they swap their tribal religions for Christianity. Indigo escapes; she runs through the desert to the property of Edward and Hattie, who find her and arrange to take care of her temporarily. Hattie, an academic who failed her dissertation because her advisors refused to accept her proto-feminist reading of gnostic gospels, insists that they provide Indigo yet another form of education by bringing Indigo on the couple's tour of Europe. They do not realize that she will learn plenty, but rather than learning to distinguish "civilized" culture from her "primitive" upbringing, she will instead learn, through agricultural instruction, that her culture and that of the Old Europeans have much in common.

The purpose of the trip is for Edward, a self-proclaimed "man of science," to collect citron cuttings in Corsica so that he can start growing the fruit commercially on his family's land in California. Silko consistently pits his shallow capitalist interest in plant life against the richer interest in subsistence and stewardship demonstrated by Indigo and Aunt Bronwyn, as several scholars have noted, including Tillett and Adamson. Before Corsica, the trio stops in southern England to visit Hattie's eccentric Aunt Bronwyn, an American with a Welsh name that bespeaks her interest in Celtic artifacts and mythology. Explicitly linking natural and human history in her mind, Bronwyn joins the "Antiquity Rescue Committee," a local group organized to protect an ancient grove of oaks and yews on a hilltop near a small stone circle. The reasoning is that "Old churches and old buildings had defenders but few people cared about clumps of old trees or old stones on hilltops" (Silko 240-41).[33] Her activities with them include the "protection of toads during their odd migrations; Aunt Bronwyn joined them on their hands and knees in the

[33] Bronwyn's interest in the preservation of particular trees aligns her with conservationism in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, who in "Huckleberries" writes of an ancient oak grove—and by extension natural features—he thinks worth saving: "I visited the town of Boxboro only eight miles west of us last fall—and far the handsomest and most memorable thing which I saw there, was its noble oak wood. I doubt if there is a finer one in Massachusetts. Let it stand fifty years longer and men will make pilgrimages to it from all parts of the country—and yet…Probably, if the history of this town is written, the historian will have omitted to say a word about this forest—the most interesting thing in it—and lay all the stress on the parish" (Thoreau 33).

mud to help the toads cross busy roadways safely…she discovered carved and ceramic figures of toads were worshiped as incarnations of the primordial Mother" (241). Edward dismisses Aunt Bronwyn as batty and wants to escape the ancient cloisters she calls home as quickly as possible, but it is immediately clear that Bronwyn and Indigo will be friends. From *Ceremony* we might recall the Navajo injunction against harming frogs, who are seen as bringers of rain; Indigo might warm to Bronwyn's preference for aiding and revering toads rather than killing them. And when the two first talk on the drive to Bronwyn's house, Hattie doesn't want Indigo to "make a habit of exaggeration," but "Indigo could tell that Aunt Bronwyn believed her but Hattie and Edward did not" (231).

Their intimacy deepens when Indigo discovers that Aunt Bronwyn has much to teach her about the ancient Celts and the fairies and walking stones that populate their cosmologies, about the Romans and their customs, and of course about gardening. It is no coincidence that Silko chooses to set this portion of *Gardens* in Bath, which is famous for the hot mineral spring that attracted the Romans to build there, and which is quite close to Stonehenge, a pre-Roman structure built by Celtic peoples.[34] John Purdy notes that springs often feature prominently in Silko's novels—there is an important one in *Ceremony* and another in the old gardens at the beginning of *Gardens*—and, significantly, the spring at Bath has historically drawn people from many different cultures, including Celts, Romans, and Anglo-Norman Britons (Purdy 152). Situating a portion of the narrative here allows Silko to position Aunt Bronwyn as an expert in the confluences in, and distinctions between, the cultures that have characterized her adopted homeland over the millennia, and in the process show that Western culture is neither as monolithic nor as unique as it might consider itself. Nowhere is this cultural accretion more

[34] It is also not a coincidence that Celtic stone structures appear in two novels, written in different centuries by writers of different nationalities, in this project.

evident than in Bronwyn's gardens, planted in elaborate, medieval raised stone beds and protected by high walls that the narrator approves of, indicating perhaps that Silko is not always opposed to molding the landscape when the local climate requires such measures.

For Aunt Bronwyn, a primary delight of the garden is the way it brings world geography and culture to a small plot of land. Of the first garden, we learn: "The kitchen garden was the modern garden as well, she explained. Plants from all over the world—from the Americas, tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, and sweet corn; and garlic, onions, broad beans, asparagus, and chickpeas from Italy—grew with peppers from Asia and Africa" (Silko 240). "Modern," to Aunt Bronwyn and perhaps to Silko, means cultivating plants "from all over the world" in the same plot, or more generally mixing human cultures that originated in disparate parts of the world. Deliciousness, intellectual delight, and usefulness result. In "Slow Food, Low Tech," a critique of the contemporary local food movement, Allison Carruth claims that proponents of the free global movement of seeds "paper over the fact that domesticated plants are in a sense always invasive. …the heirloom seed network is a global one in which seed packets travel long distances to be cultivated in greenhouses, gardens, and farms" (Carruth 317). Carruth papers over the fact that an "invasive" species, in biological terms, is not simply one that travels long distances, but one that harms the ecosystem in which it lands by proliferating faster than native species or by eating them.[35] While some cultivated plants do become invasive, it is perfectly possible for humans to travel with seeds and plant multi-origin gardens without adversely affecting their native landscapes, just as it is possible for humans to immigrate without

[35] The United States Department of Agriculture defines "invasive species" as "a species that is 1) non-native (or alien) to the ecosystem under consideration and 2) whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health" (United States Department of Agriculture).

harming their adopted countries. Indeed, most gardeners will tell you that greater challenge is keeping non-native species alive in a climate and ecosystem that they did not evolve to thrive in. Bronwyn, protector of native oaks and toads, is advocating for precisely the type of gardener who is willing to put in extra work to welcome introduced species, a gardener who respects her native flora and fauna while also celebrating the botanical contributions of cultures from around the world. In this way, she is just like Grandma Fleet, who cultivates native squash and beans and also treasures her introduced apricot trees.

If Bronwyn and Grandma Fleet share a gardening philosophy, and Indigo has already diligently absorbed Grandma's teachings by the time she arrives in England, what can she learn from Aunt Bronwyn? One crucial lesson is precisely that her late grandmother and adopted aunt *are* extremely similar despite their obvious differences in ethnicity and country of residence: both care about stewarding the land through ancient techniques, protecting native species while cultivating introduced plants, and passing down traditional stories. When Aunt Bronwyn tells Indigo stories from Celtic mythologies and describes the qualities of King Arthur's knights, Indigo responds enthusiastically to the stories themselves and to their relationship with her own set of inherited stories:

> Morfran was so ugly everyone thought he worked for the devil; he had hair on him like a stag.…Drem could be in Cornwall and see a gnat rising in the morning sun in Scotland….
>
> Stories like these were Indigo's favorites; she could hardly wait to tell Sister. In Needles there had been a Navajo woman, and she used to tell the girls stories about long ago when there were giants, and humans and animals still spoke the same language. Indigo told Aunt Bronwyn about the wounded giant's drops of

> blood that became the black lava peaks as the giant fled the attack of the Twin Brothers. (Silko 249-50)

By narrating Indigo's reception of Celtic tales as parallel to her Indigenous American stories, Silko defamiliarizes the European stories that her readers have more likely heard before, and that they situate within a tradition of European literature dating back to the first millennium BCE. Such readers might imagine the Old European stories as distinctly different or less primitive than the Indigenous stories; Indigo's interpretation disabuses them of this notion. Just as Edward fears, she is learning that the "Old Europeans" are "no better" than she is.

Aunt Bronwyn confirms this exchange-friendly relationship of cultures in her gardens by pointing out to Indigo all the plants she is growing that originated in the Americas. She has organized her gardens by the plants' geographical origins, with indigenous English plants like "kales, hellebores, dandelions, pinks, periwinkles, daisies," in the north quadrant, presumably because they need the least sunlight (Silko 243). "All the plants the Romans and Normans introduced" are in the east, where "grapevines nearly obscured the weathered wooden pergola that slouched down the path between the raised beds planted with cabbages, eggplants, chickpeas, and cucumbers"; the remaining two quadrants are "planted with plants from the Americas, Africa, and Asia" (ibid). By naming the plants in each quadrant, Silko indirectly teaches the reader and Indigo which plants originated in which part of the world. Indigo is thrilled to see corn plants growing in the Americas quadrant, and from them extracts a lesson about similarities and differences across climatic boundaries:

> Indigo stood before the corn plants, which were planted apart from one another—to let the sun reach all of them, she thought. At home they had to shade the plants and help them withstand strong winds, so they planted their corn close to one

> another, like a big family. Here the corn plants had the protection of the high outer garden walls as well as the old stone walls that formed the garden quadrants. (243-4)

Indigo observes a familiar species grown differently: just as Silko defamiliarizes Arthurian legend for her readers, Bronwyn's plot of corn defamiliarizes the plant for Indigo, who learns that plants, like people, can thrive in a variety of conditions as long as they learn to adapt (or in this case, as long as a gardener learns how to adapt them). She quickly understands that different climates require different strategies: in the sunny, open desert, she and her family have to limit the amount of exposure that the corn receives, while in overcast England, the stalks are planted to maximize every available drop of sunlight. Regardless of the method, Indigo learns, the plants on either side of the Atlantic will produce similar cobs: the two specimens are at once the same and different.

Seeing Indigo by the corn, Aunt Bronwyn senses an opportunity to educate the girl: "Your people," she said, "the American Indians, gave the world so many vegetables, fruits, and flowers—corn, tomatoes, potatoes, chilies, peanuts, coffee, chocolate, pineapple, bananas, and of course, tobacco" (244). Again, Silko uses Aunt Bronwyn's lesson to teach readers of the novel about the global history of plants. And she invites Indigo and her "people" into the conversation, acknowledging that the Indigenous people of America did not simply happen to inhabit the same continent as these plants, but actively "gave" them to the world through the process of selecting desirable traits in plants from generation to generation. Bronwyn is using agriculture to teach Indigo about her important place in human history.[36] When the makeshift family prepares to

[36] Indigo follows up Bronwyn's comment with her own lesson for readers: "Indigo felt suddenly embarrassed. Sand Lizard people barely were able to grow corn, and they had no tomatoes, peanuts, or bananas. The Sand Lizard people gathered the little green succulents called sand food; sand food could never grow in England or New York or even Parker. Sand food needed sandstone cliff sand and just the right amount of winter snow, not rain, to grow just

leave England, Bronwyn further establishes Indigo's role as a global gardener by giving her two gifts: a notebook, half-filled with gardening advice and half-blank for Indigo's notes, and of course many packets of seeds.

To Italy and home again

Edward, Hattie, and Indigo next travel to Italy, where they stay with Laura, a friend of Bronwyn's and "*professoressa*" who, as Edward muses, is "such an interesting woman—not only a scholar and collector of Old European artifacts, she also hybridized gladiolus" (285). Indigo finds another kindred spirit in Laura. Once again, the older woman delights Indigo with tours of her beautiful gardens, stories of her childhood and her culture's history, and lessons. Once again Edward loses patience with his host, furious that she would arrange her collection of European artifacts outside, in her gardens, rather than protect them in museums—he sees the ancient figurines as objects of a distant past that is completely inaccessible to modern people, where, as Mascha Gemein argues, Laura sees them as still living, still relevant, and therefore as deserving of display in places still used by modern people (Gemein 496).

It is in these figure-filled gardens that Edward feels glad that Indigo misses the snake artifacts because she grew up in "a culture of snake worshipers" and might think, were she to see European representations of snakes, that "the old Europeans were no better than red Indians" (Silko 302). Laura teaches Indigo that this is precisely the case, that global cultures are united, not divided, by their ancient stories. As they walk through the gardens, Indigo asks Laura about the snake figures (which she has in fact seen), and the question leads to a connection:

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under the surface of the sand. Indigo missed sand food with its mild salty green taste better than cucumbers" (244). This is still the real world and there are still limits to transplanting—not all things can grow in all places. Here, the memory of home serves as a reminder that no matter how wonderful England is, and how many things can grow there, it is still not the place she calls her own, and where she ultimately belongs.

> Laura said when she was a girl her grandmother always kept a black snake in the storeroom to protect it from mice and rats. Indigo smiled; yes, Grandma Fleet always thanked the snakes for their protection—not just from rodents but from those who would do you harm. At the spring above the dunes lived the biggest snake, very old—the water was his.
>
> Laura paused and smiled; they'd caught up with Edward and Hattie….
>
> "We've been exchanging snake stories," Laura said as she sat down. (299)

The nature of the stories and the language that Silko uses to describe the exchange are significant. Just as Bronwyn flattens the supposed drop in sophistication from Celtic to Sand Lizard stories, Laura puts her childhood memory of snakes and Indigo's on the same field. We can see this in her use of the word "exchange" to describe how she and Indigo share stories: the word suggests reciprocity, or an understanding that the two storytellers each have something equal to offer. In Italy and the American desert, cultures respect snakes for the practical reason that they trap the rodents who threaten to eat human food. Indigo explains how her culture expands the role of the snake metonymically: capturing rodents is just one part of the protections he offers to the people. Indigo "smiled" at Laura's story and Laura "smiled" at Indigo: each is equally willing to accept the other's interpretation of the relationship between snake and human. Despite the fact that she is presumably raised in a Christian culture, Laura is special because she thinks of the snake as a creature that offers "protection" rather than one who tricks them, as in the Garden of Eden. The snake is welcome in Indigo's garden, and in Laura's.

Having gained Indigo's trust through her stories and garden tours, Laura is eager to teach Indigo her most unusual lesson: how to pollinate gladiolus flowers to create hybrid varieties. Just

as in her descriptions of Grandma Fleet's lessons, Silko relies on explanation and imperative to narrate the instruction:

> At the potting shed, they found Indigo at the table with her notebook; carefully she copied the hand-printed words off the envelopes while Laura carefully poured gladiolus seed from the waxed paper envelopes. Laura explained how to prepare the florets of the mother plant for pollination; she let Indigo put the paper bonnet over the plant at the end of the procedure. Only two florets could be fertilized each day. Early morning was better than the heat of the day. Avoid damp or wet weather. (Silko 303)

"Carefully" Indigo copies and "carefully" Laura pours—again, Silko uses parallel language to express the intellectual connection. Laura is connected to Indigo through this common adverb and to Grandma Fleet through the verb "explain." Indigo is connected to Bronwyn in this moment because she is taking notes in the book that her English aunt gave her; Bronwyn is connected to Laura through mutual interest. The act of agricultural instruction connects the four women in a common mission across national borders, language, ethnicity, and generations. Indigo participates in a hybrid form of learning, writing in a western-style notebook and probably in a western language, and also learning experientially, as in the desert under Grandma Fleet's supervision, when Laura "let Indigo" join in the physical work of pollinating and protecting the gladiolus plants. She initiates Indigo into the global club of gardeners.

And Indigo brings her new knowledge, her notebook, black and colored pencils, and countless packets of seeds back to her desert. After much adventuring, at the conclusion of the novel Indigo and Sister Salt find each other and make it back to the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, accompanied only by Sister Salt's new baby. Indigo immediately begins foraging wild

foods, cultivating fruits and vegetables from her seed collection, and experimenting with the gladiolus seeds that Laura gave her as a gift. Soon her gardens are bristling with the exuberant flowers, which the neighbors consider an oddity. Sister Salt's friends, a pair of twins, for example, "teased them about the waste of precious garden space and rain on flowers. Remember how outraged their neighbors were when they found out Indigo's plants produced only flowers?" (474). In an ecosystem of desert scarcity, where every drop of water and every food plant must be cared for like a baby, there are no resources to devote to decorative flora. But Indigo has a trick up her sleeve—or rather, hidden in her in her homegrown stew:

> The twins remarked what good stew it was. Sister motioned with her chin at Indigo, who smiled proudly. They asked the ingredients beside rabbit, but she would only tell them, "A little of everything."
>
> …Indigo scooped up some stew with a piece of tortilla.
>
> "Look," she said to the twins. "Do you recognize this?"
>
> "Some kind of potato, isn't it?" Vedna fished one out of her stew and popped it into her mouth.
>
> "Ummmm!"
>
> Maytha stirred her stew with a piece of tortilla and examined the vegetable—it was a gladiolus spud! She laughed out loud.
>
> "You can eat them!" she exclaimed. Those gladiolus spuds weren't only beautiful; they were tasty! (474-6)

"'A little of everything'": some locally hunted rabbit, some vegetables grown according to ancient desert farming methods, some gladiolus spuds grown from seeds of Italian origin, all of it served with tortillas made from historically significant amaranth. In metaphorical terms, Indigo's

stew is somewhere between the "melting pot" and the "salad bowl," a dish in which the flavors of the various cultures cook together and exchange flavors, but in which the individual ingredients still retain their distinct shapes and textures. The stew represents a vision of respectful multiculturalism in which each culture is able to assert its identity—to be introduced, like a new plant species—without becoming invasive or causing harm to the existing components. It is not so different from Betonie's modern ceremonies, or Josiah's hybrid cattle.

Indigo has even learned how to make the gladiolus a more acceptable guest in her native ecosystem by figuring out that parts of it are edible, meaning that they are useful as well as attractive. The gladiolus spuds "weren't only beautiful; they were tasty!" The two adjectives in this sentence speak to the pedagogical aesthetics of this novel and of all the works examined in this project. We know that the spuds are edible, just as the agricultural instruction that Indigo has received throughout the novel are likely accurate and useful. But their usefulness is only half the point. It also matters that the spuds are tasty—interesting to eat as well as non-toxic and filling—and that the flowers they produce are beautiful, a pleasure to behold. The same conditions apply to instructions in georgic texts, from Vergil's ancient *Georgics* through Silko's contemporary novels. The instructions only work, only last, if the literary instructors present them in a way that is compelling, interesting, and literarily satisfying. The georgic text does not just "instruct and delight," according to Horace's ancient platitude. It delights *while* instructing and *by* instructing. In georgic literature, the instructions must be themselves delightful.

Coda: Agriculture and Literature in Species History

In the academy, we tend to gripe about our undergraduate students when they open their papers with expansive sentences like "Since the beginning of time, X has been true about humans." It seems ridiculous and politically suspect to think that a 20-year-old, or anyone for that matter, could claim a universal truth about our species that transcends time and all other boundaries; such broad claims are especially offensive to scholars of a particular, bounded slice of human history or culture. Yet humans—some of us, some of the time—seem unable to resist identifying, wondering at, and analyzing grand, trans-historical patterns of behavior in our species. Hardy, Cather, and Silko exhibit a stronger proclivity than most to forge links between modern humans and our ancient ancestors—to demonstrate our connectedness to our own prehistory, to prove that our linguistic, spiritual, and genetic ties to the distant past have perhaps been tampered with but have never quite been severed by the delights and horrors of modern life. These writers might amend Faulkner's famous line to claim, "The distant past is never dead. It's not even distant."[37] In his novels, Hardy takes his readers inside ancient barns, examines fossilized fauna, and leads his characters to Stonehenge; Cather figuratively digs up arrowheads and narrates excavations of desert pueblos abandoned for millennia; Silko describes pre-historical artifacts and preserves Indigenous cosmologies and medicinal traditions by embedding them in her texts. All three writers identify agriculture as crucial evidence of our connection to an ancient past: when they represent a contemporary character planting a seed, they imagine how another human might have planted a genetically similar seed a year ago, or thousand years ago;

[37] The original line from *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) is "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner 73).

when they show a character shearing a lamb, they are thinking about an ancient human shearing an ancient lamb, physically barely distinguishable from the modern generation.

In his "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2012), historian Dipesh Chakrabarty provides an ethical imperative for this type of deep-historical thinking in an era of global anthropogenic climate change ("Climate of History" 197). Climate change is the primary justification for claiming that we have entered the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch that begins at the end of the Holocene, in which humans exert such a tremendous impact on the world that we act as a geological force, capable of initiating mass extinctions and altering the future rock record of our time. The term "Anthropocene" was coined by several scientists, among them Paul Crutzen, and it remains controversial among geologists; meanwhile scholars of the humanities have welcomed the concept and have rapidly invented correctives—Capitalocone, Plantationocene, Chthulucene, or Whatever-I-don't-like-ocene, as Chakrabarty has deemed the phenomenon (Crutzen 23; Chakrabarty 2015).[38] Chakrabarty uses the concept of the Anthropocene to challenge scholars to conceive a species history beyond modernity, indeed even beyond the "ten thousand years that have passed since the invention of agriculture" ("Climate of History" 212). If scientists across several disciplines are beginning to consider the human species in the context of geological history, should not we in the humanities be working harder to reckon with the fact that the history of the human species is richer, more diverse, and many, many times longer than the history we have recorded for ourselves?

[38] The scholars who have devised alternative "-cenes" generally argue that the institution they identify (e.g. capitalism) is the real culprit of the shift in our geological reality. Jason Moore, for example, argues that the exponential growth in our global society's exploitation of natural resources, our determination to burn fossil fuels, and our tendency toward inequality are actually symptoms of capitalism, not of "Anthropo," or humans, and by extension human nature (Moore). For more on the Plantationocene and Chthulucene, see Donna Haraway's "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene" (Haraway).

Scholars in the sciences and humanities have proposed several start dates for the Anthropocene. Perhaps the most common conclusion is that the new epoch began after World War II with the Great Acceleration, the massive leap in the industrialization of agriculture and the production of goods worldwide, which led to an equally massive leap in global emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses like methane. At the early end of the historical spectrum, some have suggested the Anthropocene could have begun as far back as the extinction of the mega fauna, driven by human hunting, in the last ice age. Chakrabarty places its start at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, coinciding approximately with the Enlightenment in Europe, when new machine-based manufacturing technologies increased the human impact on the planet through higher levels of material consumption and pollution. Chakrabarty, Haraway, and Crutzen, among others, have all considered another date, too: the development and adaptation of agriculture about 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent, and eventually around the world.

With the idea of a species history in mind, I will conclude by observing that written language emerged well after humans began to develop agriculture around 10,000 years ago. In this way literature, for which I will use the etymological definition, "written language," is quite distinct. At a mere 5,000 years old, literature is a newcomer relative to other forms of human expression. The earliest cave paintings in Europe and the South Pacific, for the sake of comparison, are now thought to be approximately 40,000 years old. The oldest musical instruments, in the form of bone flutes, might be forty-two thousand years old. Humans survived for a long time without the written word.

In many parts of the world, the development of written language slowly followed the Neolithic Revolution; our first examples of written language are receipts for sales of agricultural

goods. I am more interested in asking, rather than judging, whether the rise of agriculture was a boon for the human species, or, as Jared Diamond famously called it, "The worst mistake in the history of the human race." I am also reserving judgment on whether the development of literature was objectively good, or whether, as Socrates claims in Plato's *Phaedrus*, writing is a leisurely, solitary, useless pastime in contrast to dialectic speech, which is communal, useful and endures longer. Socrates compares "speaking" to planting seeds at the proper time of year and raising them well to produce fruit, feed a community, and leave behind new seeds for next year. Writing, in his analogy, is like seeds planted in improper soil at the wrong time of year, beautiful but fruitless.

In the terms of this project, it is interesting that agriculture serves as a metaphor to think about writing itself, and to analyze the food system on which writing so thoroughly depends and to which is has always been tied. One of the foundational texts of what we call Western Civilization opens with a story that can be read as an explanation for a society's shift from a hunter-gatherer to an agrarian society. Or, more accurately, in the Hebrew Bible, the Garden of Eden supports a gatherer society in which a divine being, not a human, plants a bountiful garden from which God says, in the King James version, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat." The exception is the tree of knowledge, and when Adam and Eve eat from it, God punishes them by making reproduction more painful and by inventing agriculture with the words "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field: in the sweat of the face shalt thou eat bread." In other words, no more free lunch for humans: if they want fruit, they have to plant the seeds in the ground themselves, and the soil will be hard and dry and weedy, and it will be tough work to grow enough food to stay alive. For the authors of this early Near Eastern text,

the written story of humanity begins with the technology of agriculture, though our species existed for millennia without that innovation. Before the cultivation of plants and animals, the Hebrew Bible records less than a single generation; after agriculture, history begins. Agriculture, then, is at once very old, as ancient as human record, and yet also very new, represented even in the Bible as a beginning, a novelty, a modern technology.

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