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Wisdom From the Collard Field: Exploring Agrarian Community in Twenty and Twenty-first Century American Literature

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WISDOM FROM THE COLLARD FIELD: EXPLORING AGRARIAN COMMUNITY
IN TWENTY AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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2021

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

WISDOM FROM THE COLLARD FIELD: EXPLORING AGRARIAN COMMUNITY IN TWENTY AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

This dissertation surveys agrarian literature written by American writers since World War II. It compares the Southern Agrarians of Vanderbilt University and New Agrarians such as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Gene Logsdon to examine their understanding of place and home. I begin my inquiry with a personal frame story of time I have spent in and around the sustainable agriculture movement. Drawing on various forms of literature, including memoirs, cookbooks, novels, reportage, and other scholarship, I explore American ideals since World War II relating to the production and consumption of food.

I begin my opening chapter with a reassessment of the Southern Agrarians of Vanderbilt University as a starting off point in a defense of small-scale agriculture, organic farming, and the local food movement as antidotes for the excess of industrial capitalism. I put three members of the erstwhile group in conversation with green critics Lawrence Buell and Murray Bookchin as a way to wring emancipatory power from their argument and assess what can be reclaimed in the twenty-first century. In my second chapter, I question the New Agrarian call to stay home, examining the idea of drudgery in farming by comparing Paul Shephard's *Nature and Madness* to Wendell Berry, Gene Logsdon, Wes Jackson, and Joel Salatin's defense of agriculture. The chapter continues with examples of small-scale agricultural practices that exemplify a more correct relationship with nature, such as seed saving, by exploring the traditional practices of Gary Nabhan, Janisse Ray, Bill Best, before turning to Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation*. My last chapter continues with an assessment of various people in the contemporary agrarian movement in a discussion of privilege, equity, and accessibility. Next, I look to agrarian traditions of the past by appraising what was lost in the Great Migration through Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* and Edna Lewis's cookbook, *The Taste of Country Cooking* before concluding the chapter with a discussion of present-day Detroit.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Agriculture, Agrarianism, Ecocriticism, American Studies,
Food Studies

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05/07/2021

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DEDICATION

To Louie and Harold, for starting the conversation at our chapel in the fields. And to my wife Claire, for the encouragement, support, and love.

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INTRODUCTION

“Longing for a vanished agrarian past (that possibly never existed) dominates much of the American story.” – Wright Thompson, *Pappyland*

In many ways, this project began not in a classroom but in a collard green field on the eastern edge of Montgomery, Alabama, in the mid 2000s. Back then, I was an avid, aimless reader—accidental English major—but there, in the so-called cradle of the Confederacy, among the collards, after reading my first Wendell Berry novel, I began to understand both the nostalgic allure and the practical, dirt-stained lure of agrarianism, warts and all. That vivid work experience is exemplified in almost every line of my dissertation: the smell of tobacco and black coffee as the sun rose across the field; brilliant, green collards turned almost purple after the season’s first frost; poor Black customers eyeing me suspiciously and wistfully; white customers with chests puffed out; me leaving the fields at night both bone tired and buzzed on beer; remembering the lines “...And we pray, not / for new earth or heaven, but to be / quiet in heart, and in eye, / clear. What we need is here” (“What We Need is Here” lines 15-18). My time on the farm, part of an upper-level undergraduate course combining environmental justice and religious scholarship with part-time work in a collard and turnip field, was my introduction to the local food movement, sustainable farming, and agrarianism, but was also a refresher in food justice, racial justice, and equity. This dissertation attempts to bring those questions and observations from the farm to bear on the literature—using the term loosely—of the agrarian movement: I cast a wide net in my reading, from popular

back-to-the-land and farming memoirs to reportage, cookbooks, agrarian novels, foodie manifestos, and environmental social theory. In doing so, I assess what has gone both right and wrong in American food and farming culture, mainly since World War II, as Americans slowly stopped plowing their fields and moved to town.

One primary assumption I make is that we as a culture have lost our way, and our basic customs of producing and consuming—namely, growing and eating food—have changed in such a way that we, and the planet we live on, are all much less healthy. But our changing habits also brought a great deal of comfort and security to countless people, so a tension exists throughout my line of inquiry. How do we appropriately scale our consumptive habits so that they are good for ourselves, our neighbors, and the planet? And how do we ask people to eat less, or eat more appropriately, or buy the more expensive, locally grown kale instead of the oversalted, over-sugared, overpackaged, overprocessed, and cheaper corn-based product that pops our brains so full of endorphins that we experience a moment of temporary splendor?

In attempting to settle this tension, I look to agrarian manifestos, novels, reportage, and memoirs as I push back against common twentieth-century narratives of American progress and idealism. And through this push back, I put disparate voices in dialogue with one another as a way to exemplify what I saw during my time on the collard farm. As I learned, agrarianism lends itself well to conversation and conviviality through a shared meal, beer, or chore.

Questions of privilege, both racial and economic, also arise. Eating enough food has gotten much easier and cheaper for the average American citizen since World War II, but eating enough good, nutritious food has gotten harder, more expensive, and much more exclusive. Though calories are fairly easy to come by, poverty and hunger still exist, and many of our problems relate to overeating empty, nutritionally barren processed foods. Though there is an element of puritanical privilege in assessing the virtue of one's consumptive habits, these tensions of privilege and thoughtless consumption exist within the canon of agrarian and environmental literature and play a prominent role in my argument.

In addition to privilege and food, I attempt to reconcile the fact that moving off of a farm for wage labor, the common story of many Americans in the twentieth century, was positive for a great number of people. Black people, in particular, found solace in urban cities of the North, West, and Midwest, while many sharecroppers and farmers, both Black and white, embraced newfound upward mobility provided by factory labor and office jobs. I acknowledge that few people willingly want to go back to the "old ways" of work. Physical drudgery is likely at an all-time low in the Western world. Yet problems remain. We consume more, and our increased consumption pollutes a great deal more. Many of us exercise less, or none at all. Our relationship to food often consists of peeling off a plastic wrapper, and our spiritual lives are increasingly fractured. Mainline Catholic and Protestant churches have made way for Q-Anon conspiracies and nondenominational evangelical drivel that teaches neither morality nor edifying spiritual

practice. I do not address all of these tensions directly, but they are all extant and would benefit from the agrarian ideals I am defending.

To make my argument, I look to an ever-growing canon of food writing, back-to-the-land manifestos, novels, farm memoirs, and cookbooks that all address what Wendell Berry refers to as a crisis of culture in *The Unsettling of America*. Agrarian living, with a rightful appreciation of the soil and healthy regard for physical, spiritual, and emotional health, seems an appropriate answer to a great number of problems. Agrarianism, extolling the virtues of local food production and consumption, engages both the mind and body as a holistic reaction to wrongful excesses of the twentieth century.

In chapter 1, “‘The Duality of the Southern Thing’: Rejection and Radical Renewal of Southern Agrarianism,” I begin with an investigation and assessment of my own agrarian upbringing—mostly in the American South. In doing so, I examine my own past, family, and consumptive habits as a frame story to introduce the idea of dualities, which I examine through the stark difference in my own parents’ disparate social classes. My inquiry into dualities continues and gains traction with the Southern rock band Drive-By Truckers’ 2001 album *Southern Rock Opera*. Throughout the entire album, but especially in the songs “The Southern Thing” and “The Three Great Alabama Icons,” front man Patterson Hood posits the South as a place he both loves and hates, and a place full of false stereotypes. Hood name drops George Wallace, Bear Bryant, and Ronnie Van Zant as he sings and speaks about an Alabama and a South greatly misunderstood, and this misunderstanding is what Hood refers to as the “duality of the southern thing”

(“The Three Great Alabama Icons”). My anecdotal and musical examples pale in comparison to a much stronger duality: the Southern Agrarians who wrote *I’ll Take My Stand*, published in 1930.

I’ll Take My Stand, a much maligned and celebrated collection written by a group mostly connected with Vanderbilt University in the 1920s and 1930s, is one of the strongest literary connections to agrarianism. My basic premise in assessing the document and its authors as revolutionary and retrograde dualities—positive, prescient, and at times revolting. I want to evaluate what, if any, of the Southern Agrarian manifesto should be championed or shared alongside current agrarian or environmental scholarship, first through Wendell Berry’s defense of the erstwhile group, then through their own words, both in *I’ll Take My Stand* and out. Finally, I compare the Southern Agrarians to green critics Lawrence Buell and Murray Bookchin, chiefly through Buell’s pastoral ideology and Bookchin’s reckoning with industrial society. On the surface, Buell and Bookchin are unlikely bedfellows for the Southern Agrarians, but I attempt to reconcile the positive, redeemable aspects of certain members of the group with the environmental bona fides of Buell and the emancipatory anarchy of Bookchin.

The Southern Agrarians are often cast as racist reactionaries, and rightly so, so I pick and choose carefully what to reconcile and what to cast to the dustbin of history. For example, I do not defend Donald Davidson or his defense of segregation, despite Davidson’s position as a presumptive leader of the group. I do not engage in any sort of moonlight and magnolias defense of slavery or the Civil War, either. The South of the Civil War, the South of the Southern Agrarians, and the South of today is not an

egalitarian wonderland, but I do wish to look at the Southern Agrarian defense of the family farm and small communities focused on local issues, especially in regard to their place as cultural harbingers and champions of local, organic food and sustainable farming—all from the marginal, unfashionable South of 1930.

In assessing the Southern Agrarian argument, I focus on just three members of the group: John Crowe Ransom, because he was the chief author of their main argument, Allen Tate, because of his literary standing, and Herman Clarence Nixon, a political scientist who is largely ignored in any assessment of *I'll Take My Stand* or the Southern Agrarians. Through these three, I discuss three agrarian issues: religion, through Ransom and Tate; economics, through Tate's repeated use of the Marxist phrase production for use in an agrarian essay coming after *I'll Take My Stand*, and small-scale agriculture and agrarian community through Nixon, who wrote about his own home and small community of Possum Trot, Alabama.

In my defense of the Southern Agrarians, I acknowledge the positive work that agrarian scholar Zackary Vernon has already done in terms of qualifying what, if any, of their writing and philosophy should be saved, but I push beyond his measured defense to determine if more of *I'll Take My Stand* and beyond can be reclaimed as a positive force. Vernon, like Wendell Berry, acknowledges the Southern Agrarians as influential, but Vernon's acknowledgment contains some clear caveats that may reduce the revolutionary power of the document and the group, cutting off their argument and power as a cultural force for good relating to small-scale farming and environmentally friendly production and consumption.

Beyond Vernon's measured defense and Berry's wholehearted acknowledgment of the Southern Agrarian positive influence on his own life and writing, I attempt to resolve the two arguments. First, I look to ecocritic Lawrence Buell's notion of pastoral ideology in comparing agrarianism to pastoral, acknowledging the similarities of pastoral and agrarianism as forces both institutional and counterinstitutional. I acknowledge that *I'll Take My Stand*, written by both racist conservatives and nonracist progressives, came from the American South at a time when the default position was both racist and reactionary, so comparing agrarianism to pastoral is a helpful way to build an unlikely coalition to acknowledge a powerful argument coming from the American South, an often marginalized, lampooned area of the country. I also compare the Southern Agrarians to social theorist Murray Bookchin, whose social ecology is, on the surface, a rebuke of the social hierarchies imposed by the conservative culture of the American South. However, at second glance, certain arguments from Bookchin's *The Ecology of Freedom* concern industrial society, environmental concerns, and small-scale communities, aligning positively with Southern Agrarian arguments for a certain reverence of life, community, and consumption.

My defense of the Southern Agrarians and dialogue with other critics is chiefly concerned with religion, economics, and small-scale community. In discussing and defending Southern Agrarian religion, I look to Allen Tate's essay from *I'll Take My Stand*, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," as well as John Crowe Ransom's bloated yet underappreciated and fascinating *God Without Thunder*. Tate's essay is largely an argument reflecting his own conversion to Catholicism but includes an interesting

analysis of communal living and holistic consumption. While the specifics of Catholic Tate's argument differ somewhat from Protestant Ransom's, the agrarian tenets of their religion are fairly similar. What is interesting about *God Without Thunder* is the way Ransom compares institutionalized science to industrialism, an argument similar to Bookchin's. Yet Ransom and the Southern Agrarians chose to use their anti-scientific and anti-industrial beliefs in a defense of William Jennings Bryan and the religious fervor of the Scopes Monkey Trial of Dayton, Tennessee. This defense, one of the main reasons the Twelve Southerners began their agrarian project, is, on the surface, fairly ludicrous, especially with decades of hindsight. But in focusing on the negative way the trial portrayed the rural community of Dayton and the subsequent hollowing out of rural areas throughout the country, I do wish to take a second look at the way that institutional science can negatively impact and stereotype rural communities as ignorant hinterlands.

Tate's essay in the second, less celebrated Southern Agrarian collection, *Who Owns America*, looks not at religion but rather economics, private property, and home production. Throughout the essay, Tate uses the term production for use and in general argues for fairly progressive small-scale land distribution and redistribution. Tate finds stockholders and corporations as aberrant and immoral users of land, and his argument, more radical and progressive than the Southern Agrarians are generally given credit for, illustrates the extent to which certain members of the group agreed with leftist radicals of their time, disrupting modern lines of conservative and liberal thought, and offering more credence to the possibility of a more nuanced, defensible series of views and values within the Southern Agrarians.

Herman Clarence Nixon, more overlooked than either Ransom or Tate, is important to any defense of the Southern Agrarians. In Nixon's essay from *I'll Take My Stand*, "Whither Southern Economy," he addresses material consumption and industrialization, but more important, and more interesting, are his memoirs *Possum Trot and Forty Acres* and *Steel Mules*. In both books, Nixon describes and reiterates the importance of small-scale agrarian culture and shares stories from his home community. Nixon shares progressive views on vocational education and local folkways, and like Tate, advocates for home production and more progressive economics as a way to create lasting communities. Like current agrarians, Nixon prefers the local to the global, and prefers crop rotation to monoculture, arguing against use of bigger mechanical implements like the tractor, rightly predicting the disruption of family farms and rural areas all over the country.

Together, these three Southern Agrarians along with Buell, Bookchin, Berry, and others, combine for an interesting assessment of what has gone right and wrong since World War II. In re-evaluating their shared values and putting them into conversation, I hope to acknowledge part of the Southern Agrarian project not just as a problematic duality, but also as a positive cultural force in the fight against climate change, erosion, and the general health of communities across the world. A better, clearer appraisal of the Southern Agrarians is helpful not only in looking backwards to history but also looking forward as we begin to understand the need for coalition and conversation.

Home, homecoming, and a sense of place play primary roles in chapter 2, "America's Break with Nature, and the Potential for Agrarian Renewal." I again frame

my study with a story of personal exploration by fully explaining the role that the collard green farm, part of an experiential college course, played in the development of my dissertation and my own sense of place. The course, taught by a poet turned Episcopal priest, was my introduction to both agrarian literature and small-scale, sustainable farming. As part of the course, we started a non-profit with a local farmer that we called Project Jericho, where we helped the farmer glean his field and then donated part of the crop to local food banks. The course introduced me to writers like Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry, which led me to Wes Jackson, Gene Logsdon, and other big names of the New Agrarian movement. We read and discussed these agrarian writers and environmental ethics in the classroom, then applied what we read on weekends with a local farmer. Even after the course was over and I graduated from college, I stayed on the farm to work part-time for a few seasons, enjoying the conversation and physical skills I was learning, from plasticulture farming and other small-scale practices to the best way to make collard greens and pot likker.

My time on the farm instilled in me a sense of place, and a sense of home, and throughout this chapter, I investigate the New Agrarian call to stay home, exemplified and championed by Berry, Jackson, and Logsdon. This call to stay home questions the default twentieth century ideal of moving away from home for a better job, a bigger house, or more success, and in investigating this call, I examine not only the pervasive stereotypes against rural people, areas, and physical labor, but also the practicality of attempting to “stay home” as a “defense” of rural or unfashionable parts of the United

States. Much like my first chapter about the Southern Agrarians, this defense of place and home is a complicated, muddy issue, full of uncomfortable decisions and privilege.

The New Agrarians, like the Southern Agrarians, champion a life of labor in the soil, but problems remain regarding the practicality of farming full time the way the New Agrarians suggest. The New Agrarians, also like the Southern Agrarians, have often funded their agrarian activities or proclivities with distinctly off-farm work such as writing. This is not to say that Berry, Logsdon, and Jackson are not legitimate farmers, but it does bring up more questions of the practicality of farming as a primary source of income. In addition to the practicality of making a living from farming, there are many other reasons a majority of Americans no longer farm, including the fact that much of farming is mindless drudgery. In addressing the problems of drudgery, I look to self-proclaimed “lunatic farmer” Joel Salatin’s push back against the idea of drudgery. Salatin and others argue against the idea that farming is tedious, instead arguing that a life on a small-scale, polyculture farm is the best way to connect humanity to nature and create lasting communities.

For Salatin and the New Agrarians, their argument is that farming the proper way brings us closer to nature, both spiritually and materially. And this form of farming is the best way to right societal and cultural wrongs largely caused by large-scale industrial production and monoculture farming. However, ecologist Paul Shepard famously contends in *Nature and Madness* that our break with nature was caused by the development of agriculture, a stark contrast from Salatin and the New Agrarians. I contest Shepard’s claim that farming caused irreparable harm in our relationship to

nature, and I instead take up Salatin's point that increased industrial scale is the reason our relationship with nature was severed. In contrasting Salatin and Shepard, though, I acknowledge some of their shared critiques of civilization and contend that through small-scale agriculture and local communities, we can repair our relationship to nature. Though Salatin and Shepard come to different conclusions on the role of agriculture, they both argue that modern civilization is destroying the planet. It is only through traditional practices and ecologically sound wisdom that we can repair our relationships to nature and better enact the New Agrarian call of homecoming.

In the next section of this chapter, I explore practical examples of these traditional practices and wisdom that are still in use. Seed saving, the simple act of preserving the seeds of this year's plants for next year's crop, is an ancient, practical wisdom that meets with both Shepard's and Salatin's sense of ecological sanity. The practice is also a sort of homecoming practiced in real time as a defense of a home place or home community. Seed saving is as likely to come from rural America as it is from urban America, as it can be done on a farm, a house, or in a tiny studio apartment. It has been written about extensively in the nonfiction of ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan, Appalachian tomato farmer Bill Best, and writer Janisse Ray, and I look to these three disparate sources as inspiration and examples of how seed saving helps create this ecologically sound community as a connection to the past worked out in real time.

Nabhan, Best, and Ray share examples of their own seed saving habits as well as stories and examples from around the U.S. and, in Nabhan's case, the world. Their examples explain how seed saving and narratives describing the practice preserve not

only cultural memory but also our taste for good food, and the accounts that the authors share are just as important as the proper production methods. The story of the seed, I am arguing, is just as essential as the actual act of saving seeds. Saving seeds—and sharing stories of saving seeds—is not just the preservation of an anachronistic tradition of the past; rather we are using wisdom passed down to find connections to a past in order create an ecologically sane society.

Through the discussion of these texts, I also attempt to explain why seed saving and other practices like it went by the wayside—and how they might come back. Like the New Agrarian idea of homecoming and place, there are real implications that preclude certain people from doing things like saving seeds, and I attempt to address these issues while also drawing attention to the fact that seed saving has radical potential as a more palatable act of political radicalism than other similar forms of environmentalism. Simply put, seed saving, at its core, is a radical twenty-first century environmental act available to anyone.

In the last section of this chapter, I look to Ruth Ozeki's novel *All Over Creation* and explore how the novel dramatizes issues of homecoming, seed saving, and the decline of rural communities. Published in 2002, Ozeki's novel works out in fiction what Ray, Nabhan, and Best describe in their reportage and personal memoirs. In the novel, two starkly different groups, the conservative Lloyd Fuller and his wife Momoko, and the Seeds of Resistance, a merry band of activists who travel the world in a van running on vegetable oil, join together in a strange confluence of unlikely allies, who get along because of a mutual respect for seed saving and other healthy, ecologically appropriate

practices. The novel reiterates the importance of home and place as well as the cultural power of saving seeds, despite stark differences in the two groups' personal politics and ethics. Lloyd Fuller, proprietor of Fullers' Seeds, is a straitlaced, conservative Christian, and the Seeds of Resistance are leftist political agitators who finance their travels with vegetable pornography, yet the two groups find commonality over a shared passion for saving seeds—a practice they both agree can cure a lot of the planet's ills.

Seed saving brings the community together at the end, and the surprising connection between Lloyd, Momoko, and the Seeds of Resistance helps Lloyd and Momoko reconcile their relationship with their daughter, Yumi, who left town years ago after an illegal affair and an abortion. After a number of shenanigans and shared tragedies, the characters in the novel create a lasting communal bond made possible by Fullers' Seeds. Lloyd and Momoko's legacy of seed saving created a pathway to shared conversation and conviviality, despite stark differences among members of the community. This shared community is an interesting representation of the larger potential for seed saving as a cultural balm, and Ozeki seems to reiterate that seed saving and gardening are radical acts practiced by and available to a large portion of society.

In chapter 3, “‘Out Here in the Middle’: Food, Farming, and Re-Settling Post-World War II America,” I focus on two main issues relating to food and farming: privilege and movement. I continue my discussion from chapter 2 on place but focus on how it relates to the pervasive migration and re-settling of America during the twentieth century. Because of the Great Migration and other global forces, countless Americans moved across the country for new work opportunities thousands of miles away. This re-

settling of the country created material wealth, higher wages, and better opportunities for many, but it also upset our customs, foodways, and a sense of shared community.

Throughout the chapter, I assess the privilege and potential of the local food and sustainability movement as well as looking to literary examples of pre-Great Migration foodways as a way to understand how and why we got here, and where there is potential for the local food movement to be more egalitarian and gain more widespread adoption.

Agriculture, sustainability, and local food are again in vogue, but they come with a high price tag and steep cost of entry. In this discussion, I turn to contemporary nonfiction of the local food movement: journalist Mark Sundeen's *The Unsettlers*, Will Allen's autobiographical *The Good Food Revolution*, and journalist turned farmer Kristin Kimball's *Good Husbandry* and *The Dirty Life*. The books all foreground issues of affordability and privilege in farming and sustainable living: Sundeen through his profile of Ethan and Sarah, a young homesteading couple who move to Missouri mostly because it's affordable; Allen through his issues funding *Growing Power*, his urban farming project in Milwaukee; and Kristin Kimball and husband Mark, seeking to convince their local community to rely on their CSA to almost completely replace the grocery store. In addition to affordability and privilege, these shared stories of sustainability and ecologically sane living share similar positives: convivial conversations, transformative experiences through shared meals, and a new respect for pragmatic, practical decision making in building lasting communities.

In describing these three "re-settlers," I also look at how we, as a culture, got here, and what happened to our diets that made the type of lifestyle exemplified by Ethan

and Sarah, the Kimballs, and Will Allen so desperately needed for their respective communities. One of the chief reasons is the way our diets have changed since World War II. Organic farming advocate Maria Rodale and British food writer Bee Wilson explain why: changes in agriculture and the rise of convenience foods. Rodale, Wilson, and food writer Eric Schlosser further explain that the mass adoption of pesticides made us and our food less healthy. Pesticides and chemicals made our food less clean, and meant that there was more of it, driving food prices down and caloric consumption up. Throughout the rest of this section, I explore other issues, including cost, packaging, declining quality and loss of common eating time as intertwining reasons for our deteriorating eating habits.

These issues of privilege, affordability, and changing diet all relate significantly to the Great Migration, as well. As people were coerced to move across the country, we lost a lot of established, traditional foodways. By default, the sheer number of people who stopped participating in agriculture on a daily basis declined greatly, and this loss of proximate skills by an entire generation who moved “off the land” was sure to cause changes to our relationship to food. In the next section, I explore the changes of the Great Migration as this loss of agricultural skills caused by a move from rural to urban areas often resulted in worse material conditions making diets worse.

Harriette Arnow’s agrarian tragedy *The Dollmaker* and Edna Lewis’s iconic cookbook *Taste of Country Cooking* both capture this downgrade in diet. They both describe in compelling, vivid detail what was lost in the move from the farm to the city. Throughout this section, I examine what we lost in exchanging our rural foodways for

more materially rich city lives as Lewis and Arnow both celebrate the seasonality of food, the strong flavor of food produced on a small farm, and express a strong affinity for the shared community and conviviality around a shared table on a small farm or in a small farming community. The Dollmaker traces one Appalachian family's move from a rural Kentucky farm to Detroit during World War II, and Arnow's description of the food they eat while living on the farm contrasts with the food they purchase and eat after their move to Detroit, and the stark differences illustrate a portion of what was lost as we exchanged agrarian life for opportunities in the city. Lewis's narratives that precede her recipes do much the same, describing a forgotten food paradise sustainably in tune with the seasons. Both narratives, coming from the middle and lower class, are also important counternarratives against the general assumption that farm-to-table food is commonly only available to the upper class. The two texts, paired together, both describe a forgotten, nostalgic way of living that is in one sense gone forever, but at the same time increasingly accessible to a new generation, thanks to the work of people like Will Allen or Kristin Kimball.

In the conclusion of this chapter, I return to Allen, Kimball, and Sundeen's work to determine how they are doing in terms of building sustainable practices and creating lasting communities, and then I turn to present-day Detroit in a discussion of the contemporary local foodways. Detroit, site of so much so much pain for Gertie Nevels in *The Dollmaker*, and the site of immense industrial progress and decline in the twentieth century, is a place of hopeful yet contested possibilities in regard to sustainability and local food. Detroit, and other places like Detroit, are experiencing agrarian revival as

people move back downtown to city centers, but problems remain as long-time citizens struggle, intent on building sustainable community, yet are often forced out by gentrification and other market forces. Despite the struggles, local food movements are seeing some success as everyday citizens are questioning the status quo and seeking alternative solutions that offer a safer, healthier path forward.

CHAPTER 1. THE DUALITY OF THE SOUTHERN THING”: REJECTION AND RADICAL RENEWAL OF SOUTHERN AGRARIANISM

Introduction: “Proud of the glory, stare down the shame / Duality of the southern thing”

My own relationship to and affinity for an agrarian lifestyle started early in life, though I would not learn to call it agrarian until college. My father grew up poor white trash in Conecuh County in south Alabama, home of the famous (to me, anyway) Conecuh Sausage Company that opened just two years before he was born. Conecuh County was close enough to the Gulf of Mexico for the heat and humidity, but too far away (and too destitute) for ocean breezes or fresh seafood. The youngest of eleven (who survived), my father was an accident who his much older siblings called something like their “angel baby” or “miracle baby,” since their parents were well into their 40s when Dad was born. They lived on a subsistence farm and my dad likely smoked his first cigarette before his house was electrified.

My dad, who died in 2000 at the age of 50, had cancer for more of my life than not, but between bouts with chemo or radiation, I was able to glean snippets of his hardscrabble, agrarian upbringing: when he felt well, we gardened, growing and canning tomatoes, butter beans, zucchini, watermelons, okra, figs, and whatever else was in season, dodging the black widows in the garden and banana spiders in the fig trees, one of which (fig tree, not spider) grew to a truly mutant size, probably due to its close proximity to our septic tank. We put up beans, tomatoes, okra and fig preserves for the winter, and our freezer was generally filled with venison from the woods or snapper from the Gulf. Not to say that this was some sort of arcadian splendor for me, though, even though my Uncle Paul repeatedly

told me I was going to turn into a butter bean since I ate so many. At the time, I would have strongly preferred video games, television, or baseball to picking weeds and tomatoes, and I spent many nights incessantly asking for Pizza Hut. My dad also loved Vienna (pronounced “vie-E-ner”) sausages, Velveeta (pronounced “vel-VEE-ter”) cheese, potted meat, and SPAM, and smoked a pack or two (or three?) of Doral Reds a day with a generous pour of Jim Beam. Despite those pizza protestations and mixed messages on the purity of our meat consumption, I am thankful for the memories of gardening and canning, and I can directly trace my own adult eating habits, academic interests, and moral compass to putting my hands in the soil in my childhood backyard, no matter how much I complained at the time.

My mother’s family, on the other hand, was wealthy enough to sell the family farm in downtown Atlanta to put my great-aunt Mamie through something as frivolous as college (she also later completed a doctorate), and my mother grew up attending luncheons, teas, and balls in downtown Atlanta, playing violin in the city’s junior symphony while her sister competed in horseback riding competitions. Mom later taught ballet, tap, and jazz at her own dance studio in Atlanta until I was born. Her family, by no means extravagantly wealthy, were at least well connected to the history of Atlanta, as family lore suggests that at one point we had an early chance at buying half of the formula for Coca-Cola, as one of my great-something grandfathers owned a drug store with Asa Candler just as Candler acquired rights to the mixture. Another great-grandfather of mine grew up next door to Margaret Mitchell, which I share not as something that I am proud of, necessarily, but to suggest my mother’s connection to the city, which she imparted to both my brother and

me, giving me a strong sense of place as a child—another component of agrarianism. Atlanta felt like my city when I was growing up, as we drove over from Alabama to spend major and minor holidays and summers with my mom’s family.

This confluence of highbrow and lowbrow Southern culture impressed upon me a strong interest in and affinity for not only the agrarian South (when I learned to call it that) but also what liberal Southern musical icon Patterson Hood calls “the duality of the Southern thing.” This duality, which Hood writes about in “The Southern Thing,” a song from the Drive-By Truckers’ iconic album *Southern Rock Opera*, explores the idea of loving and defending the South but also recognizing its immense failures, Hood sings “Ain’t about no cotton fields or cotton picking lies / Ain’t about the races, the crying shame / To the fucking rich man all poor people look the same,” as a man of the South both wanting to feel pride in his heritage and hating the South filled with plantations and slavery, clearly aligning himself with the distinctly non slave-owning yeoman or poor dirt farmers. Hood continues, “Ain’t no plantations in my family tree / Did NOT believe in slavery, thought that all men should be free” before ending the song with “Four generations, a whole lot has changed / Robert E. Lee / Martin Luther King / We’ve come a long way rising from the flame / Stay out of the way of the southern thing,” again aligning himself with the poor white Southerners who were simply defending their land as pawns in a rich man’s war. In sharing how he is “Proud of the glory” while he “stare[s] down the shame,” Hood is drawing a line in the sand and insisting that there is a South to be defended, though it is undoubtedly not the South of the Confederacy or slavery (“The Southern Thing”). As I thought about my own upbringing and sense of pride, I thought about how I felt this duality

of the South in my mother's and father's families—some of my mother's kin proud to be buried in a Confederate graveyard, and virtually all of my father's kin mostly concerned with eking out a basic subsistence, living close to the land but unbothered and indifferent to the more romantic notions of the South. This is not to stereotype either family as wrong or better, but I began to comprehend the nature of the South through this lens, and this comprehension has strongly influenced my academic study of agrarianism, though my anecdotal and familial example of this Southern duality pales in comparison to the Southern Agrarians, one of the strongest dualities of the South.

Section 1: Shortsighted defense or unfair dismissal?

Southern Agrarianism is a movement of sorts associated with the Twelve Southerners, a group mostly connected with Vanderbilt University in the 1920s and 1930s. The group most famously wrote *I'll Take My Stand*, a manifesto explaining grievances against post-Civil War Northern industrialists who the Southern brethren felt were ruining, among other things, the environment, the Southern economy, art, literature, education, religion, sense of vocation, and race relations. The twelve men, famously comprised of Fugitive poets and Vanderbilt academics John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Nelson Lytle, also included progressive political scientist Herman Clarence Nixon, who organized various political movements, advocated for tenant farmers, and, at various times, influenced President Franklin Roosevelt's farm policy.

In *I'll Take My Stand*, the group self-identified as agrarians and laid out their argument in the introduction, written primarily by John Crowe Ransom, stating that “[t]he theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers” (li). That is, the culture found primarily in the American South (and portions of the rest of the country) was best for a number of reasons, chief among them the ameliorating, holistic qualities found in agrarianism, as this high regard for farmers and farming raised questions of proper labor, religion, education, and leisure. In contrast, life under the industrial economy of the urban North brought unhappiness and a sense of alienation: “The amenities of life...suffer under the curse of a strictly-business

or industrial civilization. They consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, [and] romantic love” (xlvii). Each essay explores one or more aspects, amenities, or grievances of agrarian culture contrasted with what the Southerners saw as the isolating, unhealthy, and materialistic qualities of the Northern industrial lifestyle.

Though none of the group were full-time farmers, the point of the collection was to vocalize and organize answers to these questions at a time clearly still haunted by the specter of the Civil War. The group saw themselves as chivalrous defenders of a Southern tradition during a time of tumultuous change throughout the world. *I'll Take My Stand* was published in between world wars when the global economy was on a rocky path, and many countries were facing communist insurgencies and various forms of social and economic discontent. The 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, had made a laughingstock of the South, and Ransom, Davidson, Tate, et al. felt it necessary to publicly defend their Southern tradition and lifestyle.

This argument, a defense of agriculture and rural communities from the alienation and excess of the encroaching Northern industrial factory system, coming from the American South in the early twentieth century, seems downright revolutionary, and not out of place in some of the radical environmental critiques of the twenty and twenty-first century. Much-lauded agrarian sage Wendell Berry is perhaps their strongest defender. Berry writes that he “know[s] no criticism of industrial assumptions that can equal it in clarity, economy, and eloquence,” and he has traced his own academic lineage through the Southern Agrarians (“Still Standing” 155). Berry also writes of the various twentieth

and twenty-first century agrarians who owe a great debt to the arguments of *I'll Take My Stand*, including his close friend Wes Jackson of The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, and Sir Albert Howard, the father of modern organic farming and composting (“Still Standing” 159). In other essays, Berry lauds the Southern Agrarians with as much vigor. Throughout “The Whole Horse,” Berry furthers his sympathy with the Southern Agrarian case by looking at *place* not just through a sectional or regional lens, but on even a smaller scale, as he says “[t]he agrarian mind is...not regional or national, let alone global, but local” (116). Berry calls for smaller supply chains and highly engaging work in a local economy, claiming “[t]he overriding impulse of agrarianism is toward the local adaptation of economies and cultures” (119). Berry sees *I'll Take My Stand* as an accurate predictor of the negative aspects of the global economy, manifest in the environmental destruction and agricultural displacement caused by the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement. He defends *I'll Take My Stand* as he argues that the manifesto “perceived accurately the character and motive of the industrial economy,” and this character and motive, abstracted away from the local is undoubtedly negative (120).

Though Berry’s magnum opus, *The Unsettling of America*, does not explicitly mention the Southern Agrarians, their argument has clearly impacted Berry’s line of thinking throughout the work. One of the most influential documents in twentieth and twenty-first century agrarianism, and a particularly important work tracing the deep environmental degradation of rural America, *The Unsettling of America* is largely a critique of industrial society, with a strong rebuke of the ecological damage and loss

caused by industrial capitalism, monoculture farming, and colonialism. Berry's argument is not unlike John Crowe Ransom's argument in the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand*, as Berry writes that

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life (86).

And like the Southern Agrarians, Berry acknowledges that true craftsmanship and right labor come from a close relationship to the cycles of life and death that farming offers, as he observes “an inescapable kinship between farming and art, for farming depends as much on character, devotion, imagination, and the sense of structure, as on knowledge. It is a practical art” (87).

So, why then are the Southern Agrarians considered such a strong duality, and what is the point of investigating both their failures and their successes? As my academic interests developed and I began reading the literature of the New Agrarians, extending beyond Wendell Berry to Wes Jackson, Gene Logsdon, Barbara Kingsolver, and Michael Pollan, along with the burgeoning collection of back to the land and farming memoirs from writers such as Kristen Kimball, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Gary Nabhan, I noticed that the Southern Agrarians, perhaps the strongest literary connection to agrarianism other than Thomas Jefferson, were at best unfashionable and at worst considered outright racists. With the exception of Wendell Berry, the current crop of agrarian writers and

defenders largely ignored or glossed over the Twelve Southerners' contribution to back-to-the-land or farm-to-table agrarian trends. By investigating this duality of the Southern Agrarians, my goal is to investigate the arguments made in *I'll Take My Stand* and assess why they have been largely excluded and ignored from the academy, and whether their argument, which Berry defends, has merit in defending not just a Southern tradition, but a rural tradition that is applicable to agrarians throughout the country.

In literary circles, the sentiment and legacy of the Southern Agrarians is largely negative, and *I'll Take My Stand* is certainly not fashionable or held in high regard amongst progressives; no one in my English department was bragging or proclaiming that *I'll Take My Stand* was part of their scholarship. But as my investigation into the Southern Agrarians continued, I found that someone had beaten me to the case. Agrarian scholar Zackary Vernon explores the legacy of the Southern Agrarians in "The Problematic History and Recent Cultural Reappropriation of Southern Agrarianism," while also examining the resurgence of the term *agrarian* in larger society. Vernon, though, for reasons he makes clear, can only offer a precise, lukewarm defense of *I'll Take My Stand*.

As with my recognition that the Southern Agrarians mostly were proscribed in literary studies, Vernon writes that his attempt to study them in a graduate school English department was met with consternation. He notes that his endeavors were considered "academic suicide," for two reasons: racism and New Criticism (338). It is true that New Criticism, the formalist literary criticism associated especially with John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, is indeed not in vogue and is read much less now

than in, say, the 1950s, for a good number of valid reasons relating to the evolution of literary theory. And these accusations of racism are, on one hand, amply warranted, but they too easily dismiss what was, and is, an immensely important cultural critique, one that could and should be both lauded and deplored as a clear case of Patterson Hood's duality of the South.

Vernon corrals a small part of the Agrarian canon as acceptable, such as Andrew Lytle's essay "The Hind Tit" "as a groundbreaking proponent of slow foods, localism, and sustainability" (349). Vernon also lauds the Southern Agrarians for being "early harbingers of the American environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s," but Vernon more strongly advocates for their importance because it was "important to the development of [Wendell] Berry's platform" (349, 346). But I will argue with Berry that a larger portion of *I'll Take My Stand*, though not without warts, should be part of a more nuanced cultural and environmental critique of global excess. *I'll Take My Stand*, like other important historical documents such as "the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Gospels," as Wendell Berry suggests, can appeal to both conservative, racist reactionaries in, say, 1930s Alabama, and progressive organic farmers in, say, present day Oregon or Vermont because it is, at times, both racist and reactionary *and* progressive and prophetic ("Still Standing" 160). At various points, the collection both rebukes and deifies yeoman farmers, aristocrats, and race reconciliation, among other things, showing a multiplicity of voice and contradictory nature present in most revolutionary documents advocating large-scale social, political, or economic change.

Before beginning his reclamation project, Vernon observes that the term *agrarian* is undergoing a renaissance, as it is “used by many of the leading scholars and public intellectuals of the contemporary environmental movement,” especially regarding local food and sustainable farming or back-to-the-land living (338). Despite this positive trend, Vernon notes, *agrarian* is still a charged term in literature departments, but the word and its associated movement is largely acceptable in popular circles because of writers like Barbara Kingsolver, Michael Pollan, and of course Wendell Berry, who Vernon acknowledges as the “most significant link” between the Southern Agrarians and contemporary culture (346). Vernon also lauds agrarian religious scholar Norman Wirzba for normalizing and exalting the term as a beacon of positive environmental stewardship, which is not insignificant given the religious nature of a number of the Southern Agrarian essays, which I will discuss at length later.

Vernon concludes his argument by stipulating that only limited aspects of the Southern Agrarianism of *I'll Take My Stand* should be reclaimed and reappropriated by scholars. His recommendation has some clear caveats:

The reappropriation of the word ‘agrarianism’ is acceptable if, and only if, a reexamination of language can enable people to reanalyze and reclaim words and corresponding concepts that have faded from the lexicon. However, many contemporary users of agrarianism have skipped the first step, thus deploying the word without first investigating its history. If we are aware of the full history of this philosophy, we can make well-informed decisions about which of its tenets we hope to save and which we must repudiate (348).

While this sort of exact historical analysis and more systematic understanding of agrarianism might be helpful, it is hard to imagine that any such cultural or literary deep dive such as Vernon asks for would leave any term, philosophy, or movement without both virtues and warts. Such an exacting and careful dissemination of the “appropriate” knowledge to be gleaned from *I’ll Take My Stand* usurps the revolutionary potential of the document, and a more contextual reading of the collection places it firmly to the left of Vernon’s conclusion, certainly economically and even politically.

To his credit, Vernon does praise the Southern Agrarians as influential, but a stronger defense could be made of the radical potential in such a document coming out of the agrarian South. The common narrative coming out of post-World War II America is that of industrial progress at all costs, and *I’ll Take My Stand*, albeit with the power of hindsight, should be included in the canon of emancipatory, revolutionary documents of twentieth-century radical thought, as radical as anything from countercultural or New Left authors and activists such as Herbert Marcuse or Theodore Roszak. In his defense of agrarianism, and particularly the main arguments of *I’ll Take My Stand*, scholar David W. Orr acknowledges that though industrial progress did bring “good things” that “should not be minimized,” industrialization also “gave rise to moral ills hardly less destructive than slavery.” Orr continues to describe the importance of agrarianism, noting “the industrial world has spun off biotic impoverishment, degraded landscapes, depleted resources, and a climate altered to the great disadvantage of our descendants” (“The Urban-Agrarian Mind” 96). While Vernon’s points are fair, so are Orr’s, further

illuminating the dualistic nature of not just the Southern Agrarians, but Southern—and American—culture at large.

Starkly put, the Southern Agrarians, though not without flaws, should not be cast aside to the dustbin of history. Returning to *I'll Take My Stand* acknowledges the possibility of revolutionary, progressive coalition building not just in the American South but in rural areas all over. While it is true that the racist and classist hierarchical improprieties of the Southern Agrarians should be admonished, given the time and place it came from and the fact that it originated in the stereotypically unfashionable rural hinterlands, *I'll Take My Stand* should take its place as an important historical cornerstone of both a progressive environmental and economic movement.

But rather than cordoning off a tightly controlled section of *I'll Take My Stand*, looking to preeminent ecocritic and scholar Lawrence Buell's notion of *pastoral ideology* offers a path forward. Agrarianism as propounded in *I'll Take My Stand* is perhaps best explained and understood through Buell's explanation of the term *pastoral* as a duality. In *The Environmental Imagination*, the seminal text of American historical ecocriticism, Buell traces both the reactionary and liberatory side of pastoral in American literature, noting that its romantic ideals are “simultaneously...counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored” (50). Pastoral, a literary genre not unlike agrarianism in its lauding of nature, though more centered on the bucolic beauty of landscapes and shepherds than farm life and consumption, is equally useful as a subversive force of democracy, ecology, and organic farming practices while at the same time functioning as a whitewashing trope of American empire. Buell acknowledges the usefulness of pastoral

as a positive force, writing “[p]astoral’s likely future as an ideological force makes it all the more important to grasp its double-edged character,” and this double-edged character, like the agrarianism of *I’ll Take My Stand*, provides a constructive middle ground for both admonishment and praise. Buell sees pastoral as a “bridge, crude but serviceable, from anthropocentric to more specifically ecocentric concerns,” and it does not take a huge leap to see Buell’s pastoral critique running parallel to and extending to agrarianism. If recast or extended to include *agrarian ideology*, Buell’s term is useful in assessing and negotiating the cultural value and potential for agrarianism as, yes, a harbinger of the early American environmental movement, as Vernon suggests, but also a touchstone for modern-day American cultural renewal. While Berry’s strong defense and Vernon’s acknowledgment of a limited revitalization of the Twelve Southerners are important to the reconciliation of agrarian ideology, it is more crucial to reexamine some of the essays of the original document as well as other works of agrarianism put out by key Southern Agrarians.

Section 2: Finding a baby in the bathwater: *I'll Take My Stand* and beyond

It is helpful then, to identify the arguments of the individual Southern Agrarians within *I'll Take My Stand* and further inquire into extracurriculars, literary or not, that may lead to a fuller understanding and more robust defense of Southern Agrarianism. Given that *I'll Take My Stand*, the introduction notwithstanding, is a document with a multiplicity of voices, giving concern and play to a variety of attitudes and arguments, I won't assess the entire document or investigate all twelve apostles of Southern Agrarianism. Some essays, such as Henry Blue Kline's "William Remington: A Study in Individualism," John Donald Wade's "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius," or Stark Young's "Not in Memorium, But in Defense" are largely irrelevant. Additionally, Vernon's defense of Andrew Nelson Lytle as "a groundbreaking proponent of slow foods, localism, and sustainability" is a strong, fair assessment of his essay, "The Hind Tit," and highlights Lytle's importance as an advocate of small farms (348-49). Despite Wendell Berry's defense of Donald Davidson's "excellent essay on the meaning of arts in an industrial society," I will not investigate his essay as his racism and views on segregation were unrepentant, even to the bitter end of his life. Instead, I will focus on three individuals: John Crowe Ransom, who, as the de facto leader of the group largely led the argument to its zenith; Allen Tate, the most "canonical" of the authors, given that his poetry is still read in American literature seminars; and, surprisingly, Herman Clarence Nixon, who, as a political agitator of sorts was deeply embedded in protecting and preserving local culture.

As mentioned, John Crowe Ransom largely wrote the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* and, in many cases, set the tone and tenor of the group, so he is a clear starting point for this line of inquiry. He was the most prolific scholar and critic of the group, but he also fully left the South, though not for a major metropolis of the North or West, as he left the still ascendant Nashville and Vanderbilt for Kenyon College in Ohio in 1937. As Berry acknowledges, Ransom's flight to Kenyon College coincided with a dismissal of Southern Agrarianism, but prior to devoting his academic life to New Criticism, Ransom criticized industrial culture and science, offering poetics and religion as a defense against what he felt was the growing twentieth-century supremacy of science, technology, and capitalism ("Still Standing" 156).

Ransom's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, other than the introduction, is his essay entitled, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in which he argues against the "reconstructed" industrial society that has been the default idea of progress since the Civil War. Ransom explains that

latter-day societies have been seized—none quite so violently as our American one—with the strange idea that the human destiny is not to secure an honorable peace with nature, but to wage an unrelenting war on nature. Men, therefore, determined to conquer nature to a degree which is quite beyond reason so far as specific human advantage (7-8).

To Ransom, this "reason" driving the ideals of economic and scientific progress was not only violent, but it was also irrational and negatively irreligious, leaving humanity in a

worse state. Though Berry scholar Kimberly K. Smith contends that “the Vanderbilt Agrarians showed no awareness of ecology at all,” it is notable that Ransom mentions nature and the unrelenting war on nature and advocates for “so simple a thing as respect for the physical earth and its teeming life,” which inculcates a “primary joy” the likes of which industrialism erases (*Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition* 31; “Reconstructed but Unregenerate 9). While Smith’s point may be technically true, Ransom’s foregrounding of respect for the planet and soil, written prior to something like *Silent Spring* or *A Sand County Almanac*, is downright radical. Additionally, Ransom’s critique of industrialism, according to Agrarian historian Paul Conkin, is “[t]he very same sentiments [that have] reverberated through almost all the social criticism of the prior hundred years, and most forcefully in that of Karl Marx,” despite Ransom and the rest of the Agrarians having no interest or proclivity for Marx’s writing, seeing science and communism as dual threats against their agrarian project.

Ransom’s argument in “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” universalized the industrial experience as one with negative implications for everyone in society. According to Ransom, “[i]ndustrialism is a program under which men, using the latest scientific paraphernalia, sacrifice comfort, leisure, and the enjoyment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance” (15). Ransom, admittedly without specific answers to twentieth century maladies of poverty, hunger, or environmental degradation, relies on a grand sweeping narrative: “industrialism sets itself against the most ancient and the most humane of all the modes of human livelihood,” that is, farming, says the writer and critic (19). Ransom’s argument is, by even today’s

standards, as Conkin suggests, not out of step with other progressive critiques of society, and the essay reverberates with a kind of passionate messaging and mythology that could find great success today.

Like “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” much of Ransom’s other agrarian writing, written prior to his move to Kenyon College and distance from agrarianism, critiques the industrial path of twentieth-century society, mimicking his argument from both his essay and the introduction of *I’ll Take My Stand*. For Ransom, two things helped in this agrarian critique of industrialism: poetry and religion. According to historian Mark Malvasi, Ransom felt that poetry represented the dual nature of reality, in direct contrast to science, which worked in tandem with industrialism to make life miserable. Science, for Ransom, “brought the modern world to the level of civilization enjoyed by a refined caveman.” Modern man could not and should not try to tame nature through science, but should rather look to poetics and art to learn respect for nature (Malvasi 22). For Ransom, only someone with a poet’s mind could know things without the desire to possess and exploit them, as science desired power over nature and poetry (and religion) desired power over destiny. Ransom saw the traditional, agrarian South as a place to develop this aesthetic theory, as the social relations still found (or potentially found) in agrarian society reminded its citizens that their lives were contingent on the whims of God. To Ransom, agrarians knew that men were not gods, a view starkly contrasting with the audacious fearlessness and irreverence with which Northern industrialists were pursuing “progress” and ignoring tradition (Malvasi 44-45).

In addition to poetics, Ransom, who came from a long line of Methodist ministers, also wrote extensively about philosophy and religion in his defense of agrarian society. At some point in his career, he turned from the Methodism of his father and grandfather and replaced it with a metaphysical defense of literal and mythical forms of religion in an argument that echoed his agrarian argument in *I'll Take My Stand*. He articulated and affirmed this new religious outlook in *God Without Thunder*, an underappreciated work that is at once bloated and bizarrely fascinating. Throughout the work, Ransom meanders around the massive subject of Western religion with critiques of science as he did in *I'll Take My Stand*, explaining the main problem of religion (and society) in the early twentieth century: "God [had become] rational and knowable, and ceased to be magical and irresponsible" (23). That is, Ransom's complaint of science and technology was that science presupposes to know everything, a stance Ransom dismissed as not only inaccurate, but irresponsible and anathema to the good life set forth by agrarianism. Simply put, Ransom seems to argue that agrarianism, and his religious beliefs that sprung forth from his agrarianism, provides a pathway to joy, whereas the emerging scientific outlook did not.

Despite a number of turns and a strange mythological bent, Ransom's main point of *God Without Thunder* is pushing back against scientific determinism and the subsequent narcissism of the scientific industrial mindset. Despite Ransom's meanderings, Louis Rubin called *God Without Thunder* "a complex, relentlessly reasoned book principally concerned with demonstrating the inadequacy of scientific knowledge as an explanation of reality." In it, Ransom "criticizes modern theology for being so

intimidated by the claims of science and rationality that it sanctifies these as God and removes from religion the sense of man's limitations and dependence on God, so that man becomes a god to himself" (*The Wary Fugitives* 54-55). For Ransom, the God of science and industry was a "God who wouldn't hurt us" since the new and improved, friendly deity "had the goodness to invite man to profiteer upon the universe" (*God Without Thunder* 5, 25). What industrialism did, according to Ransom, was soften the punitive measures for violating the laws of nature and allow the scientific industrial mindset to reign supreme at the expense of a safe, sane respect for nature, production, consumption, and morality.

In one example of science's undue, unjust privilege in industrial society, Ransom curiously invokes a defense of the Scopes Monkey Trial that is, on the surface, controversial and awkward, but may have merit or, at the least, provide interesting fodder for discussion. The trial, which took place in Dayton, Tennessee, was famously one of the events that instigated the Southern Agrarians to publish their defense of Southern culture. In his argument, Ransom admits that "the religionists," led by William Jennings Bryan, in an attack against the teaching of human evolution in state-funded schools, "were teased into giving battle on a field which they were bound to lose" as "[t]hey were infatuated in their devotion, [and] they were so brave that they were foolish." That is, the group should not have been goaded into a court battle with rational scientists, as they were facing a losing battle, irrationally arguing against rational science in a rational courtroom. Ransom admonishes the scientists for "alienat[ing] the public sentiment of the region" by so smugly dismissing local culture and for pushing for such a belittling public spectacle

(*God Without Thunder* 101). Ransom is essentially arguing that though the religious prosecution technically won the court case, public sentiment, in siding with Darrow and Scopes, over time became another of Ransom's "Pyrrhic victor[ies]" from "Reconstructed but Unregenerate." That is, Darrow et al. also won a victory for unfettered scientific progress, alienating and leaving behind the holistic agrarian joy that Ransom passionately argued for (15). This is not to say that Darrow and Scopes were incorrect, but one could argue, as Ransom did, that the optics and fervor that insulted and infected Dayton and the surrounding area, no matter how warranted it might have been, was also a loss for local culture.

While Ransom's defense of William Jennings Bryan and the Scopes trial seems shortsighted and almost comical now, food journalist Mark Bittman offers an interesting perspective on both William Jennings Bryan and the twentieth-century disdain for any narrative deviating from the standard belief that science and industrial progress are infallible and unassailable. Though not addressing the Southern Agrarians or Ransom directly, Bittman provides insight into why the group would defend Bryan so strongly. Bittman traces the rise of industrial farming and monoculture as a chief reason why our current diets and system of agriculture are so unhealthy, also acknowledging the role Bryan played in trying to make life better for farmers, working for "better transportation rates from the railroads, better loan rates (and loan forgiveness) from the banks, better tax rates (including heavier taxes on land speculators), stronger and better-enforced antitrust legislation," among other things in his run for the Presidency in 1892 (96). This by no means absolves Bryan or Ransom from the less savory views that emerged from Dayton,

but it at least offers a more nuanced understanding of why the Southern Agrarians felt such an affinity for a figure such as Bryan.

In a vacuum, it is hard to argue *for* William Jennings Bryan and the religious fervor of Dayton against Clarence Darrow, John T. Scopes, and the defense, but Ransom's agrarian perspective provides an interesting perspective. The science of evolution, while correct, was, for Ransom, just a small part in a larger battle that has much larger implications not just for religion and culture, but local communities, supply chains, and the global environment at large, which I will discuss at length in chapters two and three. Set in these different terms, it may be easier to understand where Ransom was coming from. Ransom defends religion against science because

[s]cience is an order of experience in which we mutilate and prey upon nature; we seek out practical objectives at any cost, and always at the cost of not appreciating the setting from which we have to take them. Science is quite willing to lose the whole for the sake of the part (136).

As we have seen from World War II and beyond, unfettered industrial production and science, while serving a purpose for small communities and the people of places like, say, Dayton, Tennessee, all too often serve at the mercy of large corporations and governments, and as hard as it is may be to even think about siding with anti-evolutionists in even a small way, the spirit of the Southern Agrarians' futile attempt at defending their misguided, irrational local culture is worth a second look and even a philosophical debate given our current dismal future involving Global Warming, sea rise,

erosion, and so on, which Ransom would argue is due to the victory of industrial consumption through correct, rational science.

Ransom's argument, then, is mainly against the primacy of science in modern life. On the surface, Ransom's argument may seem too high-minded and not specific enough in his ode to mythology and creationism, but agrarian scholar Paul Conkin sees Ransom as an important figure who, "[l]ike William James, . . . saw this scientific proclivity as dangerous if not kept in its proper and purely practical sphere. It so dwarfs life, leaves out so many valuable aspects of experience, as to destroy all richness and beauty" (*The Southern Agrarians* 40). While some of Ransom's arguments may be hard to follow or seem quaint given the enormous positive impact that scientific progress of the twenty and twenty-first century has made on mankind, his pushback against unfettered progress is a prime tenant of agrarianism and not one that should be spurned or denied place in the modern agrarian canon.

Harder to pin down is poet, critic, and novelist Allen Tate. Although his essay in *I'll Take My Stand*, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," deals mostly with, as the title suggests, religion, his agrarian essays that followed offer a far more interesting, useful critique. Tate's initial dalliance with and later conversion to Catholicism marked his belief system as different from his protestant agrarian brethren and colored much of his literary and agrarian philosophy. According to Mark Malvasi, Tate's agrarian project was a return to the way that society functioned prior to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution: "For Tate, mind had to resume its former awareness of the unifying order of a myth, tradition, and faith in which men remained forever submissive

to God” (89). It is not that society, for Tate, needed to become more religious, necessarily, but rather would be better off if it resembled the more closed system of the religious, Catholic Middle Ages.

For Tate, this sort of salvation, while nostalgic and backwards looking, would also be more communal than the post-Enlightenment Christianity that he, like Ransom, felt led to damaging, unfettered industrialism. In “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” Tate explains that the “modern mind,” which he associates with industrial progress, “only sees half of the horse,” because of its reliance on and preference for industrial progress over the patterns of nature (157). This idea of the whole horse is further explored by Wendell Berry in his essay of the same name, which begins with this very quote from Tate in the epigraph. His exploration of *I’ll Take My Stand*, in this essay, at least, concludes with Berry explaining that the Southern Agrarians “perceived accurately the character and motive of the industrial economy,” and Tate’s notion of industrial economy replacing the holistic use of a “full-dimensional, grass-eating horse” with a “machine which represents only half of him” is a key tenet of Berry’s argument, even though Berry would not agree that Catholicism was the key component missing from modern society (Berry 120; Tate 157). Regardless of his fixation on Catholicism, Tate’s religious argument is not unlike Ransom’s, as Tate explains that the South failed when confronted by industrialism and the North—what Tate calls “the post-bellum temptations of the devil, who is the exploiter of nature”—because the South’s “had no defense” (173). The correct religion, for both Ransom and Tate, would have offered this defense, though they differed on the specifics.

Tate's conversion to Catholicism did, however, allow him to step back and universalize his argument away from just the American South. According to Malvasi, Tate "recognized that southerners had the same idolatrous and heretical vision of their society as the salvation of mankind as did New Englanders, whose ancestors had built a 'city upon a hill' in the wilderness of the New World" (127). As he aged, Tate continued this criticism of the South, as he realized that neither North nor South had come close to achieving the type of closed religious society he felt would redeem Western civilization, as the industrial crisis "transcended the dichotomy between North and South and was rooted in the decline of the medieval system" (Malvasi 131). However, the agrarian pursuit of and respect for religion, contrasted against the transcendental move away from orthodox Christianity, afforded the South a closer chance at redemption.

Interestingly, Tate's essay in the second Southern Agrarian collection, *Who Owns America*, looks not at religion but rather private property. *Who Owns America*, published in 1936, is a much less focused collection that has nowhere near the legacy of *I'll Take My Stand*, as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. calls it a book that "attracted little attention" because "it lacked not only the unity and coherence of *I'll Take My Stand* but also its excitement" (*The Weary Fugitives* 253). The collection does, at least, contain an interesting essay from Tate. His contribution to the collection, "Notes on Liberty and Property," criticizes not religion but early twentieth-century views on property and legal ownership. In the brief essay, Tate criticizes not only "the collectivist State" but "large corporate property" as well (81). In an essay not out of step in a modern-day agrarian critique of monocultural farm production, Tate laments the loss of small agrarian land holdings as large

corporations have bought up more and more property. Tate instead argues that we should focus on redistributing land away from these large corporate holdings as their *legal* ownership does not at all insinuate *moral* ownership. Tate goes on to argue that small private businesses on land should be the focus of the agrarian movement, as farmers and agrarians can, to use Tate's example, kill or sell their own hogs, or whatever it is that they produce, whereas stockholders in large companies can merely sell their stocks—items of no real value in nature.

The most interesting part of Tate's argument, however, is his use of the Marxist term "production for use." Tate reminds readers that "it should not be forgotten that the nearer a society is to personal production for use the freer it is," as he argues for local economies and small farms over nameless, faceless corporations (92). The term is famously used in the film *His Girl Friday* as reporter Hildy Johnson, played by Rosalind Russell, interviews Earl Williams in an effort to overturn his murder conviction for shooting a cop. Hildy, in the film's famous fast-talking dialogue, convinces Earl that he is innocent through her appeal of the term "production for use," asking him, "What's a gun for, Earl?" to which he happily exclaims, "a gun, why, to shoot of course," as Hildy convinces Earl that he was not responsible. The term, which Earl heard in the park from a presumably Marxist agitator, "one of those fellas who talk too much," is Hildy's evidence that Earl is not fit to be tried as a murderer (*His Girl Friday*). Film usage aside, Tate's use of the term, indicating his preference of home production or production for use over, say, capitalist production for profit, is an interesting take from the 1930s American South.

Mark Malvasi explains Tate's emerging views on capitalism, explaining that Tate felt that

[m]odern finance-capitalism destroyed private property. By removing men from responsible control over the material conditions of life, it also inhibited the development of man's moral nature. Under this system, 'moral nature' reduced to 'economic purpose,' and 'Economic Man' substituted for 'Moral Man.' Economic Man was a living abstraction (if such were not a contradiction in terms) wholly subservient to a system of production and utilizing reason, science, and technology only to subdue and master nature and turn it to his profit (*The Unregenerate South* 116-117).

Tate's critique and argument for small holdings and a more democratic system of ownership strongly shows the extent to which the Southern Agrarians, or at least some of the Southern Agrarians, agreed with leftist radicals of the time. Emily Bingham and Thomas Underwood, in an introduction to a collection of Southern Agrarian essays that followed *I'll Take My Stand*, further Tate's point, explaining just how radical an economic critique essays like Tate's were proposing. While the Southern Agrarians are often cast as retrograde neo-fascist conservatives, Bingham and Underwood explain that "[i]n the early 1930s, conservative Agrarians and leftist radicals alike fervently believed that the entire system [of capitalism] was in its death throes," and subsequently,

"[t]he Agrarians' New Deal essays confirm the now familiar scholarly view that there was much common ground between the Southerners' ideas and those of the

1930s radicals, for both groups nursed a hatred of the corporate domination of the United States. So great was the Agrarians' hatred of the industrializing forces of monopoly capitalism that by the mid-1930s they advocated federal intervention to ensure massive rural resettlement" (*The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal* 17).

This is not to say that the Southern Agrarians are not without their own warts, as discussed earlier, but it at least foregrounds the notion that there is a much more radical and nuanced series of views and values within the Southern Agrarian project, which can and should be re-examined as an appropriate critique of the excesses of capitalism and consumption.

More than John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, however, the Southern Agrarian who should be more widely read is Herman Clarence Nixon. Though he had an enormous, practical impact on subsistence farming and economies in the southern United States, Nixon exists largely on the margins of Southern Agrarian literary discussion and discourse. A political scientist from rural Possum Trot, Alabama, who served in France in World War I and later taught at Tulane University in New Orleans as well as Vanderbilt, Nixon was described by biographer Sarah Newman Shouse as "a synthesis of Jeffersonian agrarianism, Wilsonian pragmatism, and hillbilly realism." "Like Jefferson and Wilson, Nixon was both a conservative and liberal," who "opposed the politics of Black Belt leaders who, cooperating with big business leaders of the up-country [in Alabama], restricted the suffrage and supported economic policies that deprived the yeomanry of its land and means of livelihood" (13). Interviewed and cited by the House

Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, he was the most progressive, and most politically influential, of the Southern Agrarians. While his writing did not compare to that of Tate, Davidson, Warren, or Ransom, he did publish, in addition to his article in *I'll Take My Stand*, treatises on subsistence farming as well as a memoir about growing up in Possum Trot, not unlike much of Wendell Berry's nonfiction such as *The Hidden Wound* or "The Long-Legged House."

Throughout both his own writing and his political agitating, Nixon's project remained the same, with a strong focus on the defense of rural culture and an emphasis on how to ameliorate the lives of his fellow yeoman farmers, both white and black. In his essay from *I'll Take My Stand*, "Whither Southern Economy," Nixon laments the invasion of industry to the South and cautions against embracing the material allure that industrialization offers, instead supporting the agrarian critique at large by espousing a broad return to and embrace of the small farm. Throughout *Possum Trot*, he echoes this lament: "[g]one are local loyalties," he complains, "[c]ommunity spirit and community identity have declined," because "[i]t is hard to be loyal to a highway, a rural route, or a bus line" and "hard to be loyal to a consolidated school which is located somewhere else" (71). *Possum Trot* is a look back at a bygone era. Nixon traces his affinity for rural culture by telling the history of a rural area that was once, if not prosperous, a strong example of a prudent, caring agrarian community.

Throughout his overlooked writings, Nixon reiterates themes affirming small-scale, agrarian culture, not unlike the contemporary work of new agrarians in the twenty-first century. Nixon, like Wendell Berry—and Robert Penn Warren in his essay from *I'll*

Take My Stand—advocates for local, vocational education instead of the homogenized brain-drain that pushes burgeoning academics to industrial city centers instead of back to their local communities. In *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, his discussion of the move from farming with oxen to tractors in Alabama, Nixon specifically mentions the work of “[t]he Berry school in north George” (now Berry College) as well as “Berea in Kentucky” and Tuskegee in Alabama as positive examples of schools that not only support *local* communities but also activities and skills that create sustainable, lasting, cooperative communities and might bring these communities up from poverty (75). In regard to higher education, Nixon specifically refers to “handicrafts,” but for general community development, he calls for a return of shared cooperative sawmills, feed mills, and canning lines as he advocates for a return to local folkways and artistry to develop and improve these communities (71-75). In *Possum Trot*, Nixon again mentions Berea College and Tuskegee Institute but more in terms of how Southern society should have more mindfully addressed industrialization in an effort to preserve local folkways and community institutions through vocational education (116).

Nixon’s advocacy for expanding vocational education runs parallel to his advocacy for a return to subsistence farming and home production, part of both his rural upbringing and his radical economic beliefs. As Sarah Shouse notes, despite Nixon’s liberal beliefs, he still “embraced the myth that Southern backwardness stemmed from the region’s exploitation by Northeastern capitalists in alliance with Southern conservatives.” And, despite his slight reorganization of the Lost Cause of the Civil War myth, he did agree with the other authors of *I’ll Take My Stand* in their mutual embrace

of the “good life exemplified by the Southern gentleman farmer.” This good life, to Nixon, included “love of land, attachment to family and community, hatred of money-grubbing, need for stability and continuity, sense of honor and noblesse oblige, and love of leisure” (187). It is important to reiterate that this advocacy for the good life also came with a strong critique of the free market for as Shouse again notes, Nixon was “one of the South’s leading critics of modern capitalism” (189).

Nixon also writes that this sustainable home production, or production for use—and the potential for political radicalization—has been shuttered by monoculture farming, namely King Cotton and the one-crop system pervasive throughout both the pre- and post-industrial South. In *Possum Trot*, Nixon essentially blames cotton for most of the South’s ills, as it was the farming practice most akin to the Northern industrialism that the Agrarians so vehemently railed against:

King Cotton preached slavery, and then, with that institution gone, turned to farm tenancy and the crop lien system. Tenancy, coming largely as a result of the Civil War and the ensuing scarcity of cash, credit, and capital in the South, permitted much less subsistence farming and compelled more single-cropping than had been the practice under slavery. After the Civil War, King Cotton required that many a farmer buy corn to raise cotton ‘to buy some more corn to raise some more cotton,’ and so on, in a cycle of debt and poverty (85).

And in addition to his recognition that monoculture farming was not only bad for the soil but also the community, Nixon also wrote against increased use of machines such as the

tractor, which had “played havoc with family-size farms [and] driven people off the land as if there were a plague” (93). Nixon’s advocacy for home production and sustainable crop rotation, as well as sanely-scaled production methods, is written specifically about the hill country around Possum Trot, but his critique of monoculture and materialism falls directly in the lineage of other twentieth and twenty-first century critiques of environmentalism and sustainable agriculture, such as Masanobu Fukuoku’s *One Straw Revolution*, Helen and Scott Nearing’s *The Good Life*, or any number of books on permaculture or sustainability. His legacy skirts the margins of an unfashionable, misunderstood movement of the early twentieth century, but if there is a Southern Agrarian who remains aboveboard and free of dubious social values, it is Herman Clarence Nixon.

Section 3: Southern Agrarians as radical environmentalists?

Wendell Berry and a few other fairly conservative historians have defended and espoused the Southern Agrarians as mentors or inspirations, but there has been little attempt to align their work with other green social theorists who make similar critiques of industrial society. One theorist, Murray Bookchin, like Wendell Berry—and as predicted by the Southern Agrarians—believed that “society is faced with a breakdown not only of its values and institutions, but also of its natural environment” as he recognized and lamented, like the Agrarians, the “massive destruction of the environment that has occurred since the days of the Industrial Revolution, and especially since the end of the Second World War” (*The Ecology of Freedom* 19). Bookchin and the Southern Agrarians, though strange bedfellows in terms of personal politics and geographies, make surprisingly natural allies.

Bookchin, an influential social theorist and social ecologist, spent most of his career in Vermont advocating for democracy and freedom through anarchy and ecology. His most prominent work, *The Ecology of Freedom* is, though not without vastly different social politics and assumptions, not unlike *I'll Take My Stand* in its critique of industrial society with its prescient forewarning against globalization and wasteful, extended supply chains. *The Ecology of Freedom* espouses ideas ranging from anti-specialization and anti-science to organic or natural food cultivation, decentralized governance, and a strong advocacy for folkways and a return to crafts and unalienated labor, much as *I'll Take My Stand*. Bookchin, like the Southern Agrarians, did not trust the industrial economy or the state, but did believe in the power of small communities

and small-scale production, and, in questioning the veracity of the emerging scientific worldview, championed a different sort of reverence for life and knowledge.

Throughout *The Ecology of Freedom*, Bookchin lays out his argument against both the industrial economy and the state. He explains that “[l]ike the market, the State knows no limits; it can easily become a self-generating and self-expanding force for its own sake, the institutional form in which domination for the sake of domination acquires palpability,” a statement not unlike Ransom’s understanding of the industrial economy in the introduction to *I’ll Take My Stand* (*The Ecology of Freedom* 127). Bookchin goes on to say that in precapitalist societies there were “countervailing forces” that “existed to restrict the market economy,” forces that Bookchin exemplifies as “guilds of medieval Europe, the yeomanry of Reformation England, and the peasantry of western Europe.” These could be positively compared to the agrarian societies of *I’ll Take My Stand*, even the closed medieval system that Tate argues for (134-135). These forces provided sanctuary from the market economy and the state, as the “relatively human scale” and “socialization process...instilled traditional verities of decency, hospitality, and service” in a “refuge” against “the atomizing forces of the market economy” (135). Unfortunately, these various refuges began to diminish as “large-scale market operations...colonized every aspect of social and personal life” in a sense as total as the “industrial regime” from *I’ll Take My Stand*, where “labor is hard, ...tempo is fierce,...and employment is insecure” (*The Ecology of Freedom* 135; “Introduction: A Statement of Principles” xliv). Basically, Bookchin is arguing that small scale home production and small communities offered a clear defense against the alienating power of the modern industrial economy

and the overreaching state, an argument very much similar to the Southern Agrarian call for small farms and home production.

Additionally, Bookchin, like Nixon, saw that this form of unfettered economic system destroyed local community and color. Echoing Nixon's lament of highways, bus lines, and consolidated schools, Bookchin asserts that "highways that lead to...parking lots and...production centers devour communities and neighborhoods" as "massive...retail trade devours the family-owned store" and "subdivisions...devour farmland" and motor vehicles...preclude all human contact" (137). These parking lots and big box stores destroy local community. For Bookchin, this is a clear argument against material consumption in favor of local community. The loss of local community is not just a loss for the land, but for the very people who live there as well, resulting in an almost total commitment to the industrial economy. Bookchin explains that with this

hollowing out of community by the market system, with its loss of structure, articulation, and form, we witness the concomitant hollowing out of personality itself. Just as the spiritual and institutional ties that linked human beings together into vibrant social relations are eroded by the mass market, so the sinews that make for subjectivity, character, and self-definition are divested of form and meaning (137).

Bookchin's lament of lost communities is not unlike Nixon's lament at the changes wrought on Possum Trot. In discussing ancient Rome, Bookchin further notes that "it was difficult to establish totalitarian states" in "regions with small farms," and while this

comparison may not completely hold true in rural America, it at least contains the spirit of the defense of the small farm prevalent throughout *I'll Take My Stand* (248).

These local communities, Bookchin felt, again like the Southern Agrarians, could be possible through a more human scale of production, or at least a form of labor more humane in scale. Bookchin explains that modernity has embraced a sense of labor as “extrinsic to human notions of genuine self-actualization.” We “‘g[o] to work’ the way a condemned person ‘goes to a place of confinement’ as ‘the workplace is little more than a penal institution in which mere existence must pay a penalty in the form of mindless labor’” (224). This type of work reduces man from an entity that creates something of lasting value or use to an economic extraction, an argument in line with the spirit of *I'll Take My Stand* and Tate’s exaltations of production for use. Bookchin’s argument does not completely compare, however, as Bookchin lauds “New England...face-to-face democracy” as the type of society he has in mind as an idealized small community, as opposed to the “slavocracy of the southern states.” Ransom, Tate, and especially Nixon would also argue against the antebellum slavocracy as just another form of totalitarianism that destroyed local communities (295-296).

Comparing the Southern Agrarians with someone like social theorist Murray Bookchin helps uncover the emancipatory power in the argument of *I'll Take My Stand*. It also reiterates a sense of solidarity possible not just in the American South, but in rural areas throughout the country. These rural areas, often forced to deal with economics that result in Dollar General, Home Depot, and McDonalds opening at the expense of local businesses that might require or teach some sort of skill or promote a sense of communal

pride, are frequently stereotyped as unfashionable hinterlands. But rather than ignore or repress the Southern Agrarians as backwards or racist, it is more fruitful and interesting to examine their argument in light of other radical views of the 1930s onward, comparing them favorably, as Wendell Berry does, to other important agricultural thinkers of agrarianism and at least engaging this duality of the South in a meaningful dialogue.

In embracing the Southern Agrarians, or at least engaging in a dialogue with the enormous impact they have had on Wendell Berry and his generation of agricultural writers, we must reckon with the idea of a duality of the South. It may be necessary to pragmatically acknowledge Berry's declaration that though *I'll Take My Stand* "can be associated with racism and contains some evidence of it," the book would "be substantially the same...if those contaminants were removed" (*The Art of Loading Brush* 8). This is not to diminish the racism that it does contain or the vast elements of racist culture emanating from the American South. But in order to fully reckon with the ideas and ideals of agrarianism, we must acknowledge that there is a baby in the bathwater as we consider the history, value, and current usage of the term as we assess what to embrace and what to discard as a footnote to literary and cultural history.

Agrarianism is here to stay, as an ideological force, a movement, and even a marketing tool for foodies and organic farmers. Acknowledging this duality of the south, then, as Patterson Hood asks us to, is necessary in understanding the philosophical, literary, and cultural forces that drove the Twelve Southerners to take their stand, rightly or wrongly, against what they "prescient[ly] and perversely" saw as a dehumanizing, destructive force, the likes of which had never been seen (Donaldson ix). And in light of

our current battle with climate change, erosion, and the general health of humanity and the planet, this dialogue with agrarianism and the Southern Agrarians may be badly needed.

CHAPTER 2. AMERICA'S BREAK WITH NATURE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR AGRARIAN RENEWAL

Section 1: "The devil fools / With the best laid plan": Project Jericho and Going Away to Stay Home

"Oh, Alabama

The devil fools with the best laid plan" – Neil Young

In the early to mid-2000s, I attended a small, fairly typical liberal arts college in Montgomery, Alabama. In addition to its status as the current state capital and former Confederate capital, Montgomery is the site of numerous landmark Civil Rights achievements and is the final resting place of Hank Williams. Not quite urban but not rural either, Montgomery is in many ways a timeless place suffering many stereotypical ills of post-war (Civil, World, Vietnam, or otherwise) Southern cities: poor public transit and public schools, populations segregated by race and class, and a struggle to integrate industry within the existing infrastructure. But Montgomery is also a beautiful place with a river, a bustling farmers market, a Slow Food bakery and pizza joint, and a revitalized downtown with fast public internet access. When I enrolled in college, the school was changing, too. Formerly a small, free-thinking liberal arts college with a strong drama department, the post-9/11 economic upheaval forced the school to seek out more funding, which, due to the proclivities of certain donors, meant a new football team, a stronger business department, and expanded reach of the local, conservative Methodist church. I mention all of this to imply that the school, like me, was at an ideological and often hypocritical crossroads; not an ideal situation in the long run but, incidentally, a

comfortable place for a slightly racist, homophobic, evangelical, conservative white male to find a more fulfilling lifestyle.

I first learned about agrarianism at this school, but not until my senior year and was surprisingly, in a Christian education course. The Christian education department had only recently been reintroduced, so the courses were a mixed bag of subjects and rigor. This particular course was an upper-level course centered around the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew, but the peacemakers we focused on were farmers. Taught by a radical academic and poet turned more radical Episcopal priest, the course mixed biblical exegesis with Wendell Berry's *A Place on Earth* and selected poetry from Berry and Mary Oliver before we progressed to more in-depth non-fiction on environmental justice and agrarian reform. I am still moved with nostalgic joy when I read "I come into the peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief" ("The Peace of Wild Things" lines 6-8) or "...And we pray, not / for new earth or heaven, but to be / quiet in heart, and in eye, / clear. What we need is here" ("What We Need is Here" lines 15-18). Pairing Berry with the Sermon on the Mount was a big paradigm shift for me, but adding Oliver's "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life" into the mix was enough to send me into a South Alabama arcadian splendor ("The Summer Day" lines 18-19). Prior to the course, the only readings even resembling agrarian or environmental values I had read in all of my English courses were Thoreau's *Walden*, William Least-Heat Moon's *Blue Highways*, and the poetry of William Blake.

Perhaps more interesting than the course readings on sustainable farming, community, and peacemakers was the hands-on farming project that fulfilled the “education” half of the course. Dubbed Project Jericho, this portion of the course involved weekly work at a farm across town growing and selling collard greens and then gleaning the fields for local food banks. Father Skipper literally blessed the rows as our “Chapel in the Fields,” and we learned practical skills from a farmer friend of Father Skipper’s named Harold, the last farmer from a rather prominent Alabama farming family. Father Skipper helped me turn the classwork at the farm into a side hustle of sorts, so each weekend leading up to Thanksgiving, I would get to the farm at dawn with Harold to sell greens to a panoply of Montgomery’s population, which led to invaluable, disparate conversations with both Harold and our customers, who varied widely by race and class, but did not vary in their appreciation of fresh, local greens and fresh air. Most important to me at the time, though, was the noon delivery of Coors Light and Camel cigarettes from the local gas station—a trade for a mess of greens they would use in the barbecue restaurant in the back of the shop.

Harold was not officially part of the class curriculum but working with him on the farm was immensely valuable in developing my understanding of the confluence of literature and sustainable agriculture. Harold’s politics leaned heavily leftward, especially for Alabama, and while he surprised me one morning with a socialist treatise on organic farming cooperatives (which I kept in my trunk for a while as a sort of dirt-stained talisman), the farm was never overtly political in the way that an organic farm, farmers market, or CSA might become. In Montgomery, aside from a small number of mostly

upper-class white liberals, politics are generally divided among racial lines. To be frank, our white customers assumed I shared their conservative values, and our black customers assumed I did not share theirs, so Harold and I kept our political conversations largely between the two of us, with the exception of a black farmer named Al, who Harold had worked with while teaching plasticulture installation to small farmers across Alabama. Al would stop by to share news from time to time, and hearing Harold and Al share stories about how farming and rural culture in Alabama had changed over the years was reaffirming of the academic work I was doing on campus. And as a black farmer in the Deep South, Al's perspective was historically overlooked and downplayed, so hearing stories from both his and Harold's childhoods in Alabama was fascinating, as they shared familial traditions relating to vegetables, food, and farming, with differences stemming from the opposite economic and cultural situations and opportunities they confronted as children.

Along with learning from Harold, I learned a lot from other visitors and customers. Repeat customers became memorable, especially as Thanksgiving neared and they shared collard recipes with me (the strangest involved adding Kool-Aid to the pot likker; the best involved lots of black pepper and substituting turkey necks for pork to season the greens). I learned from customers which greens in the field were the most tender, and the best time of day or temperature for harvesting greens. Some customers stuck around to listen to college football with us, and some tried to finagle their way into our beer cooler. Many of our customers at the farm were relatively poor, but they enjoyed the fresh greens as much if not more than our more affluent customers, and a good

number of customers shared that our greens tasted how greens “used to taste,” and described how they had lived their own agrarian lives less than a generation ago. We also took greens to an affluent Episcopal church to sell as part of Project Jericho, and this taught another important lesson in sustainable agriculture: wealthy white folks were easily persuaded by emotional narratives to pay more for vegetables. Delivering greens like a Whole Foods on wheels, we regaled the affluent church members with tales of our hard work studying and growing, and subsequently charged them several times the price for greens that we charged our regular neighborhood customers.

I became close friends with both Father Skipper and Harold and ended up working several seasons on the farm, learning practical skills that reinforced in real-time what I had learned in the course. The farm was not organic, but it was not industrial monoculture, either. Harold rotated crops, used plasticulture, and farmed on a human scale, as did Al and other local farmers who would stop by. Despite some of the traditional farming methods we used, like a tractor or nitrogen, the farm was sustainable, and our customers were appreciative of the cleanliness of the product we were selling and they lamented that their own work kept them from growing vegetables, fishing, or just spending time outside. And throughout my graduate coursework and mental machinations in developing a topic and path for my dissertation, I kept coming back to Project Jericho, Father Skipper, Harold, and our customers in the Chapel in the Fields. My physical labor and service on the farm reinforced my respect for the soil and environment that I encountered in various readings in class, and now, years later, as this thought process has expanded into a dissertation, the physical labor I remember from

those seasons on the farm continues to reinforce the academic conclusions I draw from agrarianism, expanding to include New Agrarians like Wes Jackson, Gene Logsdon, and other voices not necessarily on the margins of culture, but certainly on the margins of mainstream academia.

The more I dug into New Agrarian literature, the more Project Jericho seemed a prime example of the burgeoning agrarian call, since World War II, for a more “local” pairing of physical work with academic study. After reading Berry and the other course readings, I began to understand the importance of the work not only on the farm, but also our visits to local food banks to drop off the extra greens we had gleaned from the field. The food that we sold and donated was local, nutritious, and affordable, and I interacted with a lot of people from the city who I normally would have never known existed, which broke a lot of my own prejudice and stereotypes for both the rural and urban poor.

There were academic projects and papers we had to complete for the course, but the overarching goal was to “dig in” to our local community in the spirit of Wes Jackson’s “‘homecoming’ major.” Jackson, a Kansas farmer who has spent his career advocating for perennial grain production that cohesively fits with local, native ecosystems, explores other ways agriculture can fit local economies rather than serving a global, industrial economy. Jackson left a promising academic career to return to his home state of Kansas to start The Land Institute, a research organization and sort of agrarian thinktank focused on sustainability through perennial grains. The organization has been wildly successful, attracting its own cosmopolitan mix of peripatetic scientists, researchers, and farmers and working with Patagonia on large-scale, synergistic

environmental projects. Despite the allure of a promising career in more mainstream academic research, Jackson dedicated his best-known agrarian work, *Becoming Native to This Place*, to the academic frustration he himself experienced in trying to return to his native Kansas rather than finding success by constantly moving to bigger (and, as implied, better, more urban) places. Jackson wrote to “challenge...the universities to stop and think what they are doing with the young men and women they are supposed to be preparing for the future” by “only offer[ing] one serious major: upward mobility” (3). Essentially, Jackson was arguing that if increased sustainability is the overarching goal of environmentalists of any academic field or even mainstream culture, then we must pay more attention to *all* local places, no matter how unfashionable or seemingly uninteresting. What I took from my time in the classroom and in the field was a roadmap for becoming native to a place in a more holistic sense with an increased understanding that sustainability was reliant not just on my own consumption, but also on the production and affordable distribution of local goods made obtainable for more than just a privileged sliver of the population.

As I will explore throughout this chapter, addressing this issue of agrarian homecoming in order to build long-lasting, sustainable communities remains an enormous, incomplete project that is, in many ways, fighting against the tide of mainstream and academic progress since World War II. Asking people to stay put and dig in requires asking some uncomfortable questions and partaking in uncomfortable situations. The New Agrarians, pushing against the tide of progress, laud rural cultures rather than stereotyping rural America as backwards and irredeemable, and as Jackson,

Berry, Gene Logsdon, and others have written, we may find environmental redemption in rural cultures otherwise left behind by twentieth and twenty-first century industrialization. I will explore this redemption, which will hopefully be made possible by Wes Jackson's "new pioneers" and "homecomers" intent on completing "the most important work for the next century" what Jackson calls "a massive salvage operation to save the vulnerable but necessary pieces of nature and culture" (103).

The American default idea of progress, to leave one's home for college and bigger and better things in a larger city or situation, is anathema to the project of New Agrarianism. For most of my life, academic and otherwise, I absorbed and agreed with this default idea and could not wait to leave my hometown of Enterprise, Alabama—ironically dubbed "The City of Progress"—for bigger and better opportunities and possibilities. But as rural America faces environmental degradation, soil erosion, drug addiction, and other problems too numerous to list, the New Agrarian literati advocate a paradigm-shifting model of lauding rural cultures, even optimistically placing rural areas not as brakes on the march towards progress and success but radical sites of cultural potential and renewal. The consensus of leaving a small town for progressively larger and more successful cosmopolitan situations is, on the surface, an aspirational goal, but the New Agrarians flip the narrative, writing against cultural and environmental chaos caused by this proclivity for urban life while sharing their own stories of rural "progress" and possibility. As most Americans now live in urban areas—and have for some time—this assessment of rural cultures and agrarian renewal must account for and find solidarity with urbanites.

Section 2: Rural America's Break with Nature and the Potential for Renewal

"We talk real funny down here

We drink too much and we laugh too loud

We're too dumb to make it in no Northern town" – Randy Newman

Part of this project of homecoming and rural renewal is combating the pervasive and stereotypical optics of rural areas as backwards, sick, and irredeemable. Rural societies are acceptably stereotyped as backwards and less than, yet agrarians argue against these stereotypes. Gene Logsdon, known as the Contrary Farmer and called "the best agricultural writer we have" by Wendell Berry, built a writing career advocating for the necessity and importance of rural areas and rural work. Logsdon, in a nod to Wendell Berry's work on race relations, *The Hidden Wound*, writes of the pervasive hidden wound of "country children" that Logsdon himself experienced firsthand. Though his comparison of Berry's work on race relations to his own plight as a white child in Ohio seems a bit problematic on the surface, Logsdon describes how he and his fellow "redneck country kids" were stereotyped and put down, despite "possessing intricate and valuable knowledge about manual arts, food production skills, and the ways of nature—all of which [his] urban counterparts desperately lacked." Logsdon cites sustainable agriculture professor Kamyar Enshayan in calling this dismissal of rural skill "'paradigm negation,'" as the technical know-how or traditional knowledge that children gleaned from growing up on farms is dismissed as unimportant at best and embarrassing, pointless, and fodder for ridicule at worst. Further, this paradigm negation is, according to Enshayan, "'the way colonial powers always treat their colonies as a way of stripping

them of their identity and destroying their independence,” as “rural areas have become no more than colonies from which cities are sucking the wealth” (*Living at Nature’s Pace* 49-50). Logsdon also observes the strange duality of American culture, explaining that “[w]hat is curious about the inanity of prejudice against farmers is that it exists right alongside the opposite prejudice: that farmers are the moral backbone of society” (53). Wendell Berry, whose literary career is largely fueled by a defense of rural America, was again at the bully pulpit in his analysis of the 2016 American presidential election, describing “the venom, the contempt, and the stereotyping rhetoric” against rural Americans for their perceived (or real) support of Donald Trump (*The Art of Loading Brush* 17). The point of Logsdon, Enshayan, Berry, and other agrarians make is not that rural culture is pure arcadian splendor, but rather that rural Americans bear the brunt of unjust stereotyping, and rural America is the potential site of cultural and environmental renewal.

The big players of the New Agrarian movement also put their respective money where their respective mouths are, eschewing a life of “bigger and better” for the comforts of rural America. Logsdon, like Wes Jackson, altered his career plans to stay home in rural Ohio, first leaving a Catholic seminary and then relocating from his career as a successful agricultural journalist to move home and farm on family land in the Upper Sandusky region of Ohio, until his death in 2016. Again like Jackson, Logsdon echoed his call for homecoming throughout his nonfiction (*Living at Nature’s Pace* vi). As an advocate for his region of rural Ohio, Logsdon wrote “to protest and reject the cultural image of farmers and rural people.” Logsdon felt that “[t]he joys of rural life, though they

bear little resemblance to the overblown fantasies of Rousseauist romantics, are still very real, and very much realizable, an antidote to the restlessness and chaos that infect modern life.” The problem, for Logsdon, is that “[r]ural life has been a victim of terribly inaccurate media-imaging in our cultural history,” and in combating these stereotypes, Logsdon shared experiences from his own joyful, fulfilling life on a rural farm in a rural community in order to describe the power and potential of rural America in addressing the problems of industrial production and consumption.

Wendell Berry also famously moved back to his native rural Kentucky after a promising academic career took him to California, New York, and Italy, and has spent a career, both academic and otherwise, farming on hilly ground in Henry County, Kentucky, and arguing against the demise of rural America in solidarity with Logsdon and Jackson. Berry’s career has been a defense of his own rural lifestyle and small community, and as we have seen, his most recent nonfiction starkly continues this defense. Writing in 2017, Berry rails against the “prejudice, equally conservative and liberal, against rural America.” Berry’s main frustration, like Logsdon’s, is Berry’s assertion “that ‘rural’ and ‘country’ and ‘farmer’ were still current in terms of insult” (*The Art of Loading Brush* 17). These insults from mainstream culture, not without agenda, have, according to Berry, seeped into the collective culture and represent clear evidence that Berry lives in “‘rural America,’ the great domestic colony” (27). Berry’s lifelong defense of rural America, set out most famously in *The Unsettling of America*, compares the health of people with the health of the soil, and Berry claims that a healthy rural community is “the surest safeguard of democratic liberty” as well as a “dependable,

long-term food supply” (14). And by stereotyping these rural communities, he argues, we endanger a lot more than just a single town or community in flyover country.

But is this defense of rural communities all a façade? Berry made a living as a writer, not a farmer, as did Logsdon, and Jackson was and is supported by his cavalcade of scientists at the Land Institute, most of whom are not native Kansans. So the types of rural lifestyles advocated by these writers are, as I discussed in Chapter 1 with the Southern Agrarians, a touch elitist and unrealistic. And what, then, is the goal of this defense of rural communities? As Berry has pointed out, we have “never yet...developed stable, sustainable, locally adapted land-based economies,” as any move back to an agrarian golden age is fraught with problematic social, racial, sexual, and economic issues (*Citizenship Papers* 119). Neither Berry nor Logsdon sugarcoat the realities and plight of rural people, especially from their own community, but as we will see, these arguments in favor of rural America, made *from* rural America, are a powerful plea for the future potential of a healthier, more stable society. A clear example of why a defense of rural culture from an agrarian perspective is needed is religious scholar Norman Wirzba’s recognition that

[w]hat makes agrarianism the ideal candidate for cultural renewal is that it, unlike some environmental approaches that sequester wilderness and portray the human presence as invariably destructive or evil, grows out of the sustained, practical, intimate engagement between the power and creativity of both nature and humans (“Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters—Even to Urbanites” 5).

This sustained, practical, intimate engagement is, according to the literature of the New Agrarians, a distinct possibility for rural Americans because of their sheer proximity to nature, as a life closer to nature, such as one that subsistence farming, gardening, or hunting provides, is healthier for the planet and healthier psychologically and physically for people—ultimately a bulwark against the chaos of modern life.

In their defense of rural America, the New Agrarians suggest that something is amiss, especially since World War II, in how changing human activity relates to farming and consuming. Maria Rodale, heiress to the Rodale publishing empire started by her father, early organic farming advocate J.I. Rodale, traces our cultural downfall to the widespread adoption of pesticides and neonicotinoids that has resulted in an artificially cheap food supply and a myriad of new health problems. In addition to extensive use of chemical implements, the impressive technological power created by our World War II military mobilization also hastened this development. In addition to weapons of war, our arsenal of democracy also meant larger, more powerful tractors and farm implements, and subsequently, larger farms (*Organic Manifesto* 81). In many ways, this transfer of military might to agricultural might foregrounds what is amiss for the New Agrarians, as it certainly changed farming practices. Indeed, for Logsdon, the “amiss” is the general decline in farming and gardening the “correct” way, not as a “plow jockey on his 200-horsepower tractor,” but rather “[a] farmer of deep ecological sensitivity” filled with “artistic, scientific, and spiritual satisfactions” (*The Contrary Farmer* 4). For Berry, the problem is the decline of rural communities relating to President Richard Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz’s “get big or get out” farming policy. But there are

other issues of which rural America has borne the brunt of the pain, ranging from joblessness to soil erosion and drug addiction. Wirzba suggests that postmodernism in tandem with post-war industrial production has added to our “disillusionment and disenchantment with the world,” leading to our current milieu where “we are now all ultimately shoppers” (*The Essential Agrarian Reader* 84).

From the agrarian perspective, all of these problems since World War II boil down to one thing: our move further away from nature, both literally and spiritually. In leaving small rural communities for a twentieth and twenty-first century American metropolis, our understanding of production and consumption is skewed, as Wirzba suggests, and our very relationship to life itself is amiss. The new agrarian argument is that a life closer to nature that farming, gardening, or even hunting provides is not only healthier for the planet, but also healthier psychologically and physically, as a bulwark against the chaos of modern life. Nature is a contested term if there ever was one, and it is not my intention to argue for nature as, say, as “purely cultural,” as Richard White suggests in “‘Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature” (183). I mean *nature* in the most straightforward sense of the term: the outdoors where things are grown—where people can demonstrably, practically, *literally* be closer to or more distant from a specific place.

Full time farmer and part time writer Joel Salatin of Virginia-based Polyface Farms, one of the stars of Michael Pollan’s landmark bestseller *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, is unabashed in his criticism of modern mainstream culture and its distinct lack of nature. Salatin, who holds such unconventional views that they appeal to both the right

and far left on the political spectrum, sometimes problematically, takes to task the modern development of both teenagers and increased leisure time. Salatin dismisses modern teenaged freedom not as emancipatory but rather something that “denies young people the very activities that build their self-worth and incorporate them as valuable members of society,” such as chopping and loading firewood (Salatin 11). Salatin notes that as the average American moved from the farm to the city, activities like chopping wood, which provide “communing experiences with the forest” and “a visceral, healthy understanding of the forest’s bounty, the diversity of its species, the different properties of each, the reality that some specimens died and some live until another day,” are no longer readily available to young people. In defending his own rural lifestyle, Salatin indicates that chores like woodcutting, along with countless other activities that come with animal husbandry, gardening, or hunting, take us outside ourselves and implicate us in an ecological community. Salatin especially defends gardening, insisting that gardens are “place[s] of wonder and awe, ultimately impressing on the gardener a palpable humility toward this divine ecological umbilical” (15). Salatin’s divine ecological umbilical, a strangely ethereal term for a priggish, no-nonsense farmer to use, signals a spiritual attachment and also a nurturing, motherly relationship while also indicating that a sort of innate reverence and comfort is lost when we no longer garden. As fewer and fewer people rely on gardens, fields, woods, and lakes for sustenance and exercise, and instead shop for their provisions or leisure, this connection is broken, leaving “[o]ur visceral relationship with life’s fundamentals...severed, and the result is an arrogance, a cavalier attitude toward the foundations of life” (172). This cavalier attitude, the default attitude of modern-day America, can be remedied through a holistic reckoning with our

relationship and understanding of both rural and urban cultures and our relationships with production, consumption, labor, and leisure.

But, on the other hand, there is a reason that chopping wood is no longer a daily chore. There are easier and much more environmentally friendly ways to heat a house or stove, and the average American undoubtedly has little interest in taking part in the drudgery of farm work. But that is Salatin's point. A large part of the agrarian project is the acknowledgement that physical labor, spiritual practice, and mental and psychological development are connected, and while it would be difficult and complicated to "return" to the drudgery of the past, part of the agrarian project is also recognizing that there is a reason why that drudgery has gone by the wayside. That is why the agrarians are clear in their argument that their "return" to agrarian splendor is not even a return at all. For Berry, Logsdon, Salatin, and others, there is and has never been an agrarian golden age. And as environmentalist Brian Donohue has noted, "[w]e agrarians can't be taken seriously unless we begin with the premise that life has been brutally hard for most farm people" ("The Resettling of America" 38). The drudgery part is overblown anyway, as Logsdon and others have pointed out. Drawing from a lifetime of farm experience, Logsdon remarks that "farming at its worst is no more physically punishing than operating a restaurant, brokering commodities on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, or training for the Olympics. Yet our culture...clings to its image of farming as drudgery despite all evidence to the contrary" (*The Contrary Farmer* 3-4). Logsdon's evidence? His own joy-filled life on a farm in Ohio. Logsdon shares plenty of anecdotal evidence of fulfilling moments spent on a farm, and asks simply, "if our lives were as

drab and endlessly toilsome as the sociologists would have a modern world believe of farm life, why were my parents always singing?” (*Living at Nature’s Pace* 5). Yet the argument about drudgery remains, and Logsdon’s use of singing, while a compelling, good example, may also conjure an image of sharecroppers or slaves singing during long days in the sun, working fields that belong to others.

So farm work, then, can be cast as both spiritually fulfilling or mere drudgery, depending on a number of circumstances. Obviously, farming as a slave or sharecropper easily falls into the drudgery category, but in the modern sense of the term, clearer distinctions are needed. For Logsdon and Salatin, the difference between drudgery and more fulfilling versions of physical labor is directly related to whether or not farming embraces technology that leads to otherworldly increases in scale: increases that, while impressive in terms of sheer production, strip away from the spiritual and cultural ties we have made with farming since the dawn of agriculture. There is a sense that this argument is a bit too simple or that it misses the obvious point that picking weeds by hand is anything other than drudgery. But the point of scale is well taken. Hand weeding row after row of massive acreage would not be satisfying, spiritually or otherwise. And similarly, driving a combine harvester across acres and acres of grain, while physically less taxing than pulling weeds, would induce a numbing sense of boredom. In *The Idea of Agrarianism*, philosopher James Montmarquet devotes an entire chapter to the dignity of agricultural work, and in it, he makes a similar argument as he traces this dignity back to sixth-century Saint Bernard, the patron Saint of Europe and the first great monastic leader in Western civilization. Montmarquet paints Saint Bernard as a defender of farm labor,

regarding work with the soil as dignifying and good for the soul. Farming for Bernard, as for Salatin, teaches patience, care, and respect while providing sustenance and life, and should in no way be considered drudgery or punishment (106-107). From Saint Bernard, Montmarquet showcases a number of Western thinkers who push back against the idea of farming as drudgery, agreeing with Salatin, Logsdon, Berry, et al. He ultimately argues that the main difference in farm work as spiritually satisfying rather than drudgery is the scale—a scale of work influenced by technological advances resulting in a spiritual and physical malaise. Montmarquet notes that while “[t]he celebration of technology has always been essentially future directed,” “the literature of agrarianism...tends to look backwards with fondness—and to the future with anxiety” (124). This nostalgia, while not always accurate, brings with it a sense of dread and unease with technology and new practices—such as the new farming practices and larger scale brought by post-World War II chemical, industrial farming and monoculture.

These arguments from rural America are also not dissimilar from what ecologist Paul Shepard addresses in *Nature and Madness*. The obvious, awkward difference is that Shepard essentially blames the development of agriculture on the separation of humans from nature, which causes irreparable harm to humanity mentally, psychologically, and physically. Shepard’s work explores the basic question “why do men persist in destroying their habitat?” to explain why, despite our burgeoning environmental and ecological movements, the project of human civilization has been to largely destroy the planet (1). In his inspiring, groundbreaking analysis, Shepard, like Gene Logsdon, laments civilization’s abandonment of “the ceremonies of adolescent initiation that affirm the

metaphoric, mysterious, and poetic quality of nature,” events that have stunted the growth of humanity, leading us to our current situation of ecological devastation (11). According to Shepard, the development of agriculture increased “the contrast between the ease of childhood and the burdens of maturity,” which in turn “increased the separation between the individual and the natural world,” causing irreparable deformity in the psyche of humanity as we are further displaced from wild nature and the accompanying myths and poetic formations of hunter/gatherer bands and tribes (26, 31). In other words, Shepard asserts that the development of agriculture—not the industrial revolution (as the agrarians claim)—was where we as humans took our first missteps.

While Shepard may be on to something in his assertion that humanity went awry in breaking our relationship with the natural world and, thus wrecking our collective psyches, it seems as though his problem, much like the agrarians’, is actually with *scale*, and not with agriculture. As Shepard traces his argument back to prehistory, he also argues against “village specialists” who entered the picture as farming moved from “subsistence to monoculture” (36). Specialization is a persistent bugbear in Wendell Berry’s work as well, as he argues against the “hazard[s] of the specialist system”—the chief of which is that it “produces...people who are elaborately and expensively trained to *do one* thing.” This specialist culture creates “probably the most unhappy average citizen in the history of the world” (*The Unsettling of America* 19-20). It seems as though the agrarians, champions of shortened supply chains, local goods and services, and sustainable agriculture, are also hellbent on avoiding the drudgery of life and respecting the cyclical mythology of an ecologically sound mind through the enjoyment of and

respect for traditional practices and wisdom that respects nature and follows the seasons. As C.L. Rawlins writes in the preface to *Nature and Madness*, “wisdom may consist not so much of learning bright new tricks as of keeping our old ones intact,” and this is reflected throughout the depth and breadth of the literature of the agrarian movement (xiv). This keeping our old tricks intact, while not a return to some sort of golden age, recognizes that looking to the future without an unfettered concern for the past is at best shortsighted and at worst asking for disaster, ecological and otherwise.

Section 3: “True love and homegrown tomatoes”: Seed Savers in Fact and Fiction

“Get you a ripe one don't get a hard one

Plant 'em in the spring eat 'em in the summer

All winter without 'em's a culinary bummer

I forget all about the sweatin' & diggin'

Everytime I go out and pick me a big one” – Guy Clark

One form of ancient wisdom or a traditional practice that, following a cyclical pattern of behavior, captures the spirit of agrarianism and substantiates humanity's connection to nature is seed saving. Seed saving is both tangible and attainable, an important facet exemplifying the pragmatism of agrarianism. Though no longer in widespread practice since World War II and the subsequent chemical and industrial takeover of American farming, it is an activity that can help rebuild the “divine ecological umbilical” that Joel Salatin argues is missing from the average American's life experience, providing a tangible, malleable way to connect with nature and provide healthy sustenance. Seed saving, the practice of using perennial seeds and saving them for next year's harvest, is both a proud gardening and farming tradition from rural America and a radical act of environmental preservation, though it does not garner the press of trendier or more contested environmental measures like carbon trading, nuclear power, or even hybrid cars. To borrow Gene Logsdon's phrase, seed saving is a small-scale activity practiced by the “ramparts people,” often from marginal places, doing

unglamorous yet politically radical work, knowingly—or unwittingly—helping preserve the planet’s biodiversity for the next generation.

By preserving cultural memory, seed saving not only preserves a personal and cultural heritage associated with a particular type of tomato, bean, or corn, but also preserves our taste for good food. Celebrated author and ethnobiologist Gary Paul Nabhan has written extensively about both the successes and failures of seed saving and the preservation of traditional foodways throughout his career. In *Food From the Radical Center*, Nabhan sets out to see past the political and cultural divisions rampant in twenty-first century America, instead looking for common solutions through grassroots local food production and consumption. Nabhan is optimistic, noting that “[w]hile diets are narrowing and biodiversity is declining in much of the world, a powerful countertrend is moving the US toward healthier eating and diversified farmlands.” These trends were accomplished not by large national coalitions or organizations, but rather by “individuals like you and your neighbor: teachers, cider makers, home cooks, farmworkers, backyard orchardists, small-scale ranchers, chefs of independently owned restaurants, master gardeners, naturalists, and food historians” (3). *Food From the Radical Center* shares stories of these individual producers.

One such countertrend that Nabhan mentions is small scale heritage grain production. Nabhan argues that when the production of these grains is scaled up and commoditized, “their taste, texture, nutritional value, and backstory suffer.” He shares examples of wild rice in California and blue corn from New Mexico, with the issue here being not agriculture, as Paul Shephard suggests, but scale of production. As individuals

and even small regional or community producers give way to corporate, industrial production methods, Nabhan explains, our “cultural ties...begin to unravel” even if the food value remains the same. These foods “remind us where *we and* the [food] came from, what has nourished us, and that such connections are worth caring for.” The ultimate value of these heritage grains, for Nabhan, and the essential point of his book, is to “bring diverse peoples together around a common table for healing and celebration” (120-121). Importantly, the healing takes place with a shared meal and a shared conversation.

For Nabhan, and the New Agrarian movement at large, the cultural narrative surrounding the food is just as important as the production method; in a sense, they are holistically tied together. Without one, it is impossible to have the other, a point Nabhan laid out starkly in *Renewing America's Food Traditions*, a collaborative collection he edited to “develop the first-ever comprehensive list of food species and varieties unique to the North American continent.” Throughout the collection, Nabhan and his colleagues shares stories of endangered foods and trace the American “culinary cornucopia” that they believe can be renewed if, and only if, “Americans are once again exposed to the rich stories and recipes associated with these foods” (9, 2). Once exposed to these stories, they claim, we will give up our Bud Light, Big Macs, and Oreos, seduced by narratives of traditional food that will encourage our participation in “*place-based food traditions*” (4). But is it really that easy? All we have to do to recover these place-based, sustainable traditions is share stories? Are these stories just marketing ploys to entice readers or eaters to share and consume certain foods? Maybe so, but without the story, the food,

say—for example, a bean or a tomato—is merely a bean or tomato. With a compelling narrative, there is added reason to consume the food. That bean or tomato has been something meaningful to something or someone, and if enough someones find cultural value in its story, the bean is added to a collective cultural memory that in some cases keeps a culture fed or builds important celebratory traditions. True, a survey of farm-to-table restaurants across the country may take advantage of this type of thinking, enticing diners with nutritional and historical truths and, at times, half-truths, but this only reiterates the importance of highlighting the work of Nabhan and others, who are separating the chaff from the wheat, sometimes literally, and preserving the integrity of traditional foods of deep cultural importance.

It may sound hokey or oversimplified, but seed saving is one such tradition where the story *is* the key to preserving the tradition, and one area where this is true—and possible—is Appalachia, a region that Nabhan reports has “the greatest diversity of heirloom and heritage fruits, nuts, and berries, with more than 630 distinct varieties in cultivation” (*Food From the Radical Center* 125). In addition to Nabhan, one man who has essentially made it his life’s mission to save seeds—and their stories—is Berea, Kentucky, native Bill Best.

Teacher, author, and heirloom tomato and bean farmer Bill Best has preserved a number of stories of traditional seed savers throughout Appalachia, including his own. Profiled by the Southern Foodways Alliance and relatively well-known for the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center (now run by his son, Michael, in Livingston, Tennessee), Best is the preeminent seed saver in the country. His mission at the

Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center and in his book *Kentucky Heirloom Seeds* is to save and recover seeds lost from when “multinational food, feed, chemical, and fertilizer companies started buying up seed companies and producing seeds primarily suited for mechanical harvest, long-distance transportation, and a long shelf life in large grocery stores” at which time “[t]housands of varieties of excellent-quality fruits and vegetables were discarded like so much junk” (xxviii). Best is recovering these seeds and their stories in Kentucky and Appalachia, and with his seed recovery, he is recovering a lost culture.

Throughout *Kentucky Heirloom Seeds*, Best shares stories of seed savers all over the country and explains how these seeds preserve the memory of a community or culture. Sharing from his own upbringing as well as stories from friends, family, and acquaintances, Best explains that in Appalachia, “extended families saved enough seeds to get them through another year” instead of relying on store-bought seeds for their harvest. It was not just families and extended families who were participating in the communal seed storage, either; “community leaders such as preachers and politicians contributed to the dispersal of seeds to people outside the extended family.” As was common after church, community members would invite a preacher over for a Sunday meal, and the preacher would share beans “received the previous Sunday” from another parishioner’s house—with many of these beans becoming known as “Preacher Beans” (10). These stories gave the community literal sustenance while also providing a source of entertainment and fellowship.

Best explains that the problem when we lose our cultural memory of seed saving is twofold. As we have lost our emotional and historical connection to heirloom fruits and vegetables, corporations have eased in, turning local, small-scale production into mass production, wiping out both the nutrient value and taste of heirloom fruits and vegetables. Best goes on to say that a few short generations ago, gardening and seed saving knowledge was known to everyone, but this common knowledge, reliant on both narrative and gardening knowhow, left us when “large companies took over seed saving and distribution,” which made us lose not only “much of our cultural memory and wisdom,” but many vegetable varieties as well (48). What was once common knowledge was wiped away in a generation. The recovery and reemergence of seed saving and traditional farming knowledge is remarkable, under the circumstances.

Writer and environmental activist Janisse Ray, who has chronicled the life and culture of her people in the Wiregrass region of south Georgia, underscores the fact that what we are saving is not just farming or gardening technique but culture as well. Ray is best known for her memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, where she shares from her childhood growing up next to her father’s junkyard and defends the poor “Crackers” of her homeland. Ray explains that despite rampant stereotypes against poor, rural folks, the people of her community are “fiercely rooted in the land and willing to defend it to death” (164). Her friends, family, and neighbors willingly defend their native land, despite “a daily erosion of unique folkways as our native ecosystems and all their inhabitants disappear” as longleaf pine forests are cut down in the name of economic progress (271). *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, though not explicitly about seed saving

or even sustainable agricultural practices, reiterates a belief that rural, marginal parts of the country are an often-overlooked source of answers for cultural and environmental renewal. This is a constant refrain of Ray's work, something that she explores more unambiguously throughout *The Seed Underground*, which is, unsurprisingly, explicitly about seed saving.

Throughout her reportage in *The Seed Underground*, Ray shares stories of people across the country who are engaging in the act of saving seeds—the quiet revolution of farmers, gardeners, hobbyists, and regular folk that both Nabhan and Best describe. Ray also shares how she herself learned to save seeds and to garden, noting that her gardening mentor “was not saving seed because she understood genetic erosion” but because “she had learned how to do it when she was young, because she had always done it, and because it was the natural thing to do.” This is certainly not to dissuade the teaching of genetic erosion or to downplay its importance, but merely to suggest that Ray's mentor, another example of Logsdon's “ramparts people,” though not educated in a traditional sense, is not ignorant or incapable of doing the right thing or knowing what is right despite a lack of a detailed, more nuanced scientific understanding. Her seed saving and agrarian practices keep her grounded, informing her morals and values in a way that science might not be able to. Ray's strongest memory of learning to save seeds involved her friend “mov[ing] about her kitchen with her graying hair clipped short... filling her pantry with pear chutney”—the obvious hook for cultural rehabilitation being the story of baking and making pear chutney rather than the actual genetics, science, or technique of seed saving (21). And when we hold on to this cultural memory, Ray explains that

it's not a circle. We are not returning to where we were. With some of the old knowledge intact and armed with fresh knowledge, we are looping forward to a new place. And we're coming there different. We are coming better prepared. We're coming educated. Girls as well as boys are coming. We're coming as greenhorns, but we're coming together (xiv).

When we are saving these seeds and sharing these stories, we are not just preserving an anachronistic, Luddite, menial tradition of the past; rather we are using wisdom passed down to find connections to our past in a positive, tangible way. Ray echoes Nabhan's call that these backstories serve as protection for certain seeds or foods and ensure that they will be around for the next generation: "Gardeners, especially seed savers, are preserving names, stories, heritage, place, [and] cuisine. Their aim is to retain the 'culture' in 'agriculture,' rather than stripping it away, scientifically reducing it to mere germplasm" (164). And while this science is by no means something to be avoided, the narrative or cultural memory surrounding the food or seed is just as important.

Often, these connections to the past are worked out in real-time. In *Coming Home to Eat*, Nabhan set out to "initiate an extended communion with [his] plant and animal neighbors, the native flora and fauna found within 250 miles of [his] home," in an attempt to "reduce the distance that [his] food travels before it reaches [his] mouth and mind." Starting his quest, he first connected with his Syrian relatives to, in a sense, preserve some sort of cultural memory of his own (33-34). Born in Indiana, Nabhan describes a trip to see his relatives in Lebanon, salivating over the local Lebanese zahtar and squash while talking to his cousin Nicholas about saving seeds. Nicholas is proud to

have his cousin Gary over to visit from the U.S. but is astounded that Nabhan was *paid* to save seeds for both the United Nations and the United States Department of Agriculture. For Nicholas and the family back in Lebanon, saving seeds was just something you did to put food on the table, but to many in the United States and the Western world, the turn to monoculture and industrial farming had reduced seed saving to the fringes of society, or, in Nabhan's case, to a special project sanctioned by government bureaucracy. Nicholas asks, in broken English, "'Gary Paul, how come they pay people to be seed saver? Everyone in America, don't they make garden, save seeds?'" (26). Throughout *Coming Home to Eat*, Nabhan—living in Arizona, exploring the state's native and traditional foodways—essentially tries to answer his cousin's question.

Nabhan's search brings him a variety of answers, and he comes to a few different conclusions about *why* everyone in America does not partake of traditional, communal food production like saving seeds or, say, making homemade mesquite tortillas. The various answers all result in some sort of negative communal loss. The communities Nabhan explores are moving towards the future, yes, but in abdicating their knowledge from the past, they lose a lot more than just a simple recipe or skill. For the O'odham families living near Nabhan's home, the post-War War II move from traditional native foods to "homogenized, fiber-poor foods from the federal surplus commodity program" was disastrous. When the Native American tribe transitioned from their traditional "feast and famine" that followed a cyclical year of hunting, gathering, and harvesting, to "stabilized food supplies" provided by the government and industrial production

methods, Type 2 diabetes also set in, as reliance on traditional ways of eating and living faded into memory (247).

Other people Nabhan talked to, such as his parents, did not depend on government programs for food, but their food habits nonetheless changed. Nabhan's parents, like so many of the post-World War II generation, found themselves with much more purchasing power when it came to food. No longer reliant on home gardens, canning, or pickling, his parents' generation began going to restaurants more and eating more processed foods, saying "[t]o hell with fermenting vinegars, curdling milk, and cutting noodles." They shook off the old ways of food production as mere drudgery and "romantic impulse[s] of those who have never experienced the tedium and the pain of having no option except to eke out a living out of what is available locally" (258-59). During his exploration of this loss of food culture, Nabhan is very clear that it will take more than just "political fervor" and "intellectual curiosity" on his part as he admits the self-congratulatory aspects of his quest. And despite his parents' and friends' insistence that they do not want to take part in Nabhan's experiment to zealously eat only hyper-local food, Nabhan's, Best's, and Ray's insistence remains: the narrative behind the seed, the organic produce, the pastured meat, and so on, remains a key to preserving a healthier society.

Perhaps the most significant way that saving seeds is such a vital example of "ancient wisdom" preserving the environment and reconnecting humanity with nature is the underlying environmental radicalism implicit in the activity. Seed saving, at its core, is a radical twenty-first century environmental act. With so much of our production and consumption decisions and behaviors taken over by multinational companies, and so

many behaviors deemed “environmentally friendly” either politically polarizing or insular and privileged, saving seeds remains a vital, radical act available to anyone and practiced by people of all ages, races, and political persuasions.

Published in 2002, Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* works out in fiction what Ray, Nabhan, and Best describe in their reportage and personal memoirs. The novel follows two seemingly opposite groups concerned with seed saving: the progressive, peripatetic Seeds of Resistance and the conservative, religious, homebound Lloyd and Momoko Fuller—owners of the seed company *Fullers’ Seeds*. The Seeds of Resistance travel across the country in a van converted to run on cast-off fast food French fry vegetable oil (called the *Spudnik*), protesting genetically modified organisms at grocery stores—financing their travels with a website of vegetable pornography they shoot in the *Spudnik*. Lloyd and Momoko, older and in failing health, live at home on their farm in rural Idaho—a former monoculture potato farm turned, partially at least, into a perennial, organic seed saving paradise.

The issue of homecoming plays a large role in the novel. The plot centers around Yumi, Lloyd and Momoko’s daughter, who left Idaho first for Berkeley and then Hawaii, coming back to the farm to grapple with her hometown, her parents, and the repercussions of an abortion and illicit affair she had as a young teenager. Following the Berry, Logsdon, and Salatin line of progression, she should have inherited the Fuller farm and stayed in Idaho to practice and better an intentional community, but everything is amiss because of what Janisse Ray calls “the dream of ease and plenty.” The nightmare of post-war industrial agriculture is being reckoned with, and everything is at play: “a

shift from the local to the global; from the small to the large; from the nutritious to the filling; from the storied to the acultural; from purity to toxification; from independence to victimization” (*The Seed Underground* 10). Lloyd acquired more and more land to farm the Burbank potato, and only the Burbank potato (the potato that, of course, powers the French fry-fueled Spudnik), and his career follows the story of American industrialization: his farm expands and he gets richer, but Yumi sleeps with her English teacher and runs away, and Lloyd is ultimately left to discover that monoculture is damaging to his land, his health, his community, and his family. A large portion of the novel also delves into why Yumi left, why she came back, and what it means for her relationship to her community.

Though from different backgrounds, the Seeds of Resistance also experience a homecoming of sorts. Frankie, the newest and youngest of the Seeds, literally finds a new home with them. Early in the novel, Frankie, a bored suburban fast-food employee living with an unkind foster parent, helps the Seeds fill up the Spudnik with pilfered oil from his fast-food employer and joins their quest to educate suburbia on the dangers of genetically modified crops. Though Frankie is a little slow on the uptake with some of the Seeds’ more radical beliefs, he finds a community, even fathering a daughter with Charmey, a Seed from Quebec, by the novel’s end. While he was initially lured along by adventure and steady sex, Frankie also finds a purpose and a clearer understanding of what it is he and the Seeds are protesting as he comes a long way from his upbringing as a “suburban kid” where he had “grown up in malls” and “would have dropped out of school except he couldn’t think of anything more interesting to do” (55). The Seeds, in providing an

education, a home, and a purpose for his life, provide that interesting thing to do and help him to metaphorically dig-in with a growing interest in protesting genetically modified crops and monoculture farming. Though the community they establish through the Seeds of Resistance in the Spudnik is mobile and they are without land of their own to create a lasting, agrarian community where they can garden or farm, their pilgrimage to Lloyd and Momoko's farm in Idaho provides them a temporary home and a deeper, more lasting purpose for their lives as eventually they assist the Fullers in their seed saving endeavor.

In addition to issues of and around agrarian homecoming, *All Over Creation* demonstrates the cultural and political power of seed saving. Through Fullers' Seeds, Lloyd and Momoko are able to foster a community not only in rural Idaho where they live, but all over the country thanks to a newsletter they send to like-minded gardeners and hobbyists in an almost global community of action. Lloyd, a former monoculturist who "used to farm potatoes" before he "witnessed firsthand the demise of the American family farm" through "large Corporations hold[ing] the American farmer in thrall, prisoners to their chemical tyranny and their buy-outs of politicians and judges," as he writes in one newsletter, became a reformed seed saver thanks to the trials and tribulations of his own life while he witnessed Momoko's years of dedication to her seed saving side hustle (67). Lloyd and Momoko devote themselves to Fullers' Seeds, encouraging their community of savers to use only "open-pollinated seeds," which Lloyd and Momoko have deemed "in accordance with God's Plan" (104).

Lloyd's newsletters and Momoko's steady dedication to cultivation and mailing seeds results in an abundant community of like-minded, willing seed savers throughout the country. Many of the seed savers write to Momoko, thanking her for her seeds and dedication to preserving something of value. One couple praises Momoko, thanking her for her "heroic efforts to preserve the rich diversity of heirloom tomatoes," noting that is a "thrill to...gro[w] everything from Cherokee Purples to Thai Pinks to Green Zebras" and that "[w]ithout people like her, the human race would simply forget what tomatoes ought to taste like" (113). Momoko and Lloyd do not just save and ship out their own seeds, though, as they are also dedicated to preserving the cultural memory of other peoples' seeds. In another letter, a fellow seed-saver thanks Momoko for "agreeing to take on [her] grandfather's seeds," important to her because "[h]e gave them to [her] on his deathbed and told [her] that his father had brought them over from Bavaria sometime in the mid-1800s, sewed into his headband," in what the letter writer calls her "family's only legacy from the old country" (114). Like Gary Nabhan and Bill Best's efforts to preserve seeds and their cultural heritage in the American Southwest and Appalachia, respectively, Ozaki's novel, through the story of Lloyd, Momoko, and the Seeds, dramatizes the importance of collecting and preserving these seeds while also explaining the emotional depth and intentional community provided by the act of saving seeds and gardening heritage, non-GMO plants and vegetables.

Lloyd's religious fervor, demonstrated through his Fullers' Seeds newsletters, is notable for a number of reasons. On the surface, his religiosity brings a distinctly conservative worldview, as his intense judgment and straightlaced sense of right and

wrong helps drive a wedge between he and Yumi. But his iconoclastic conversion from monoculture plow jockey to seed saving icon allows him to better understand the radical fervor of the Seeds, better understand their mission, and eventually better understand Yumi. Lloyd, who “converted” to seed saving after a series of heart attacks, adapts his biblical fervor to seed saving, advocating for his newfound ideals while quoting from 1 Corinthians (“God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to ever seed his own body”) and Psalms (“O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches”) in his and Momoko’s newsletter. Lloyd uses biblical knowledge to advocate for “Exotic” plants, arguing against a false, conservative nativist ideal supporting industrial monoculture. Lloyd encourages cultivation of exotic, open pollinating plants, exclaiming “[o]ur plants are as immigrant as we are!” (67).

The Seeds of Resistance, in joining Lloyd and Momoko, find a lasting community through seed saving, regardless of their personal or political differences. The Fullers do not agree with the political agitating and monkeywrenching that the Seeds involve themselves in as they protest the World Trade Organization and stage wacky protests at suburban grocery stores, not to mention the softcore vegetal pornography, and the Seeds have little use for Lloyd’s conservative religion or disposition, but seed saving is a common table they can all sit around. Without seed saving, Lloyd and Momoko would simply be aging rural oddities known only to their small community, and the Seeds of Resistance would only be pornographers, provocateurs, or anarchists, drifting aimlessly from one protest to the next, largely ignored by people like Lloyd and Momoko. Instead, they interact with and respect one another, and agree about what is amiss with society.

The Seeds, as their “pilgrimage” to hook up with Lloyd and Momoko finally leads them to Idaho, explain to Yumi and her childhood best friend Cass and her farmer-husband Will that Lloyd and Momoko are indeed not conservative oddities but are “[t]otally radical” provocateurs of ecological sanity in a world gone insane, and, as a Seed named Y exclaims further, “prophets of the *Revolution*” (140).

The two groups, along with Yumi, Cass, and, begrudgingly, Will, find commonality in the cultural memory of seed saving, further exemplifying why the work of Best, Ray, Nabhan, and others is so important. Yumi comes to acknowledge, thanks to Geek, another Seed, that “[e]very seed has a story,” one that is “encrypted in a narrative line that stretches back for thousands of years.” In that story, echoing the letter from the seed saver to Momoko,

you might find yourself tucked into an immigrant’s hatband or sewn into the hem of a young wife’s dress as she smuggles you from the old country into the New World. Or you might be clinging to the belly wool of a yak as you travel across the steppes of Mongolia. Or perhaps you are eaten by an albatross and pooped out on some rocky outcropping, where you and your offspring will put down roots to colonize that foreign shore. Seeds tell the story of migrations and drifts, so if you learn to read them, they are very much like books—with one big difference.

The difference, according to Yumi, is one that she, as an adjunct English instructor, is hesitant to admit: “Book information is relevant only to human beings” while “the information contained in a seed is a different story, entirely vital, pertaining to life itself”

for many reasons, chief among them that seeds can “perform the most essential of all alchemies,” that of “transforming sunlight into food and oxygen so the rest of us can survive” (171). In saving seeds and preserving these stories, Yumi, Lloyd, Momoko, and the Seeds of Resistance are, through a simple, mostly free act of gardening, contributing positively, as a community, combining their radical protesting and conservative gardening into an appropriately scaled act of positive ecological sanity—getting their hands dirty and farming on a scale that Berry and Logsdon would approve of and partaking of a *leisure* activity that Salatin would smugly agree is worthwhile.

Seed saving is indeed what brings the entire community together as the book reaches its climax. As the novel closes, the Seeds plan a sort of festival cum protest against seeds patented by biotechnology corporations, but the protest and monkeywrenching is, in a sense, just a foil, a performative spectacle that brings a large, diverse group of seed savers and protestors to Lloyd and Momoko’s farm. As Elliot, the novel’s main antagonist (who, as a high school English teacher slept with Yumi, his student at the time, and, perhaps more unforgivingly, later becomes a public relations technocrat intent on absolving seed patenting corporations of any negative press), notes of the diversity of the group: “At first glance all you noticed were the kids, the usual collection of activists and hippies who showed up to any protest, but there were others here, too, a few farmers by the looks of it, local businesspeople, and a large number of just plain folks,” all coalescing around the gravitas and curiosity of Fullers’ Seeds (292). The protest, where Lloyd gives an impassioned speech in which he proclaims that “*God holds the only patent,*” is overshadowed by a mysterious, menacing explosion sadly

resulting in Charmey's death, but the ecumenical nature of the gathering is an interesting representation of the larger potential for seed saving as a cultural balm.

Lloyd's death at the end of the novel fulfills the Seeds' insistence of Lloyd's status as a prophet. Lloyd's funeral, beginning as a straightforward yet standing-room-only ceremony for an unconventional pillar of the community, was a satisfying coda to the festival that had ended in tragedy. Like the festival, in attendance to pay their respects were "the local folks and out-of-towners, the gardeners and hippies, the pornographers and members of the Tri-County Interfaith League of Family Values," all listening attentively as Reverend Glass read from Corinthians. Following the eulogy, though, the ecumenical group of Christians and non-Christians found solidarity in their common mission of seed-saving, solidifying Lloyd and Momoko's desire to propagate open pollinating seeds. The service concluded with a sort of seed-saving meeting, with spontaneous tributes to Lloyd doubling as seed-saving confessions, questions, or pleas for help. Ellen Anderson, "a customer of Fullers' Seeds for about twenty-two years," who had been growing melons, including "Hearts of Gold" and "Mr. Ugly," paid tribute to Lloyd but also took time to ask the Seeds (and other congregants) for help in keeping the melon seeds from extinction. In addition to Ellen, Joe Delaney from "over in Idaho Falls," paid tribute to Lloyd and shared that he, his son, and his daughter-in-law had "signed on to keep a couple of [Lloyd and Momoko's] beans going." Edith McCann shared that she has been "cultivating three of Momoko's squashes," and warned the rest in attendance to watch for "strange crosses from [her] seeds." The attendees, in paying tribute to Lloyd, focused not only on Lloyd's life, but also on the enormous impact of

Fullers' Seeds. This strange convergence of "variegated" yet common minded congregants, came together to memorialize Lloyd Fuller by ensuring his seed passions continued through their own gardening (372-373).

The various groups represented, from Lloyd and Momoko to Will and Cass to the Seeds of Resistance and the various middle America attendees—a sort of version of Logsdon's ramparts people—protect their land, their story, and their vision of America in similar ways despite some vast differences in personal and political beliefs and actions. While the novel is framed by the Seeds' protests and political activism, Ozeki suggests that seed saving and gardening are radical acts in their own right, acts in which anyone can partake, a combination of physical labor with mental stimulation, resulting in the preservation of cultural memory and, for lack of a better term, both literal and metaphorical nourishment, as these heirloom vegetables provide sustenance in a seemingly innocent yet important act.

But is this true? Is it that simple? People should just save seeds and write letters to strangers in order to make a better, saner world? As access to farmland diminishes and people are encouraged to move in order to find better (or any) work, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 3, the idea of seed saving is a small way to participate in homecoming, whether literally or metaphorically, to contribute positively, at little to no cost, in a radical agrarian act. Saving seeds, an act done in both cities and the countryside, knows no cultural stereotypes against rural people, and is done by the most sophisticated plant scientists in the world as well as high school and middle school dropouts in and around the margins of the country. It is an act that is, in some ways, disappearing as seed savers

and gardeners are dying without passing their knowledge on to the next generation. But these ramparts people, in cities, towns, and the country, are digging in like Jackson, Berry, and Logsdon, and Ozeki's motley confederation, but mostly anonymously, in their quiet revolution, creating agrarian community and preserving memories, cultivating the potential for cultural renewal should the unlikely opportunity reveal itself.

CHAPTER 3. “OUT HERE IN THE MIDDLE”: FOOD, FARMING, AND RE-SETTLING POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICA

Well out here in the middle
You can park it on the street
Step up to the counter;
You nearly always get a seat
Nobody steals. Nobody cheats
Wish you were here my love
Wish you here my love – James McMurtry

Section 1: “Birmingham, Birmingham / The greatest city in Alabam”

After college, Project Jericho, and my first round of graduate school where I earned a masters in language arts education, I wanted to continue my exploration of work that combined literature or academics with food and tangible, physical labor. Working as an English teacher, first at a middle school, then a high school, and finally full time at a community college, I did not find that labor that had made Project Jericho resonate so deeply and holistically within me. Thanks to a heavily nontraditional, blue collar student population, my community college job only had me teach and work four days a week (in support and understanding that our students would most likely work full time or close to full time), so I took advantage of my permanent three-day weekends to pursue more of these moments like Project Jericho that combined food, farming, and literature (or, at the very least, a sort of cultural narrative that strengthened the community’s relationship to the land). I wanted to know who was doing this type of work, why they were doing it, and what impact it was having on the surrounding community.

One of the first of these types of connections I explored came through my girlfriend (now wife) Claire. Claire was managing the Market at Pepper Place, in Birmingham, Alabama, which was, and still is, probably the best producer-only farmers market in the state. It was also, in true gentrifying fashion, in a historic building adjacent to downtown Birmingham, following the vivid revitalization of many urban districts across the United States. I would ride with Claire early every Saturday morning to sit with her volunteers, a group of mostly older divorced women, and we would share drinking stories while Claire and I killed our hangovers with coffee and breakfast burritos with hot sauce as the farmers and other vendors set up. As Claire ran logistics and oversaw the market production, I chatted with the vendors, learning a little about their process while I bought local eggs, meat, and produce.

Pepper Place was a fascinating place for people watching, as hipsters and wealthy, mostly white young professionals mingled with liberal boomers (and their designer-breed dogs) and a growing crowd of suburban voyeurs, following food trends back to downtown Birmingham after years of white flight and avoidance of anything close to the actual “Bombingham” city limits. While I enjoyed the artisanal burritos and appreciated the organic produce, I quickly realized that the market was not the egalitarian antidote to food deserts dotting the poorer areas of downtown but was rather a vehicle for the middle class and well-to-do to see, be seen, and purchase quality produce and meat—not the worst development in the world, but not a total victory for food and environmental justice, either.

Through these conversations at Pepper Place, I learned about the Jones Valley Teaching Farm, an urban farm on three acres in downtown Birmingham. Through Claire, I became friends with one of the farmers at Jones Valley and began volunteering there every Friday morning. At Jones Valley, I worked beside organic farmers and elementary school students from the city school district, planting and harvesting vegetables and completing other farm chores. Local students who had barely left their own neighborhoods mingled with Americorps volunteers from all over the country. The farm, which started as Jones Valley *Urban Farm*, had seen its mission evolve from a community-supported agriculture model to a “hands-on food education model that connects students to food, farming, and the culinary arts through standards-based, cross-curricular lessons during the school day” as they “make learning come alive,” not unlike Alice Waters’ Edible Schoolyard Project in Oakland, California (<https://jvtf.org/what-we-do>).

As a volunteer, I saw firsthand how the students would deeply connect farming to food. These local elementary school students who otherwise lived in food deserts would plant and harvest food, and then, surprising to me, joyfully consume purple carrots, shishito peppers, radishes, and other produce that was otherwise foreign to them. They took produce back to their schools (or from their school gardens they started through Jones Valley) and sold fresh goods to teachers, staff, parents, and the local community. Like Pepper Place, however, Jones Valley was not perfect. Seeing the mostly white farmers and employees oversee the mostly black students work the fields and harvest vegetables in the Deep South was visually a little disconcerting and brought up, like

Pepper Place, similar questions of privilege and affordability with a tinge of perhaps unwarranted racism. Despite this, my time volunteering at Jones Valley was a valuable look at a thriving teaching farm that was making real, tangible connections to community through food and farming.

When I moved to Lexington, Kentucky to pursue a doctorate, I lost my access and free time to farm volunteer work, trading my weekends volunteering for weekends reading in the library stacks. Given that my dissertation topic followed this line of thought involving physical labor, farming, and relationship to place through farming and food, I jumped when an opportunity adjacent to my research presented itself. Dr. Mark Williams, a horticulture professor and the outside reader on my dissertation committee, offered me the opportunity to complete a soft audit of his organic apprenticeship program at the 25-acre Organic Farming Unit of the Horticulture Research Farm at the University of Kentucky. The course runs from the beginning of summer to the end of the fall semester with weekly lectures and hands-on farm work across the summer and fall growing seasons. Students manage the weekly harvest while preparing and delivering organic produce to CSA members. Thanks to Dr. Williams, I was able to observe weekly lectures and volunteer a number of hours helping the students, working beside undergraduates from cities and towns in and around Kentucky and the Midwest, with a few outliers from Southeast Asia and the western United States. Through the course readings and discussion, I gleaned knowledge in horticulture, seeding, planting, beekeeping, tractor driving and more, and in the fields, I gained firsthand knowledge in organic farming techniques while sharing valuable conversations with the students and

farm employees. Given that we were farming edible, local, sustainable produce, the conversations generally led themselves back to local, organic sustainable produce and the consumption of such goods.

All of these conversations, starting back at Project Jericho through the market and volunteering at Jones Valley and UK, provided invaluable, practical guidance that reinforced and challenged my own beliefs on local, sustainable agriculture and agrarian literature. I saw firsthand how these local movements are providing tangible benefit to people both rich and poor, but this benefit is laden with both privilege and an inordinate amount of hard work. These students and farmers were trying to fix what Wendell Berry called “cultural amnesia” as they battled against Berry’s portent that “[w]hen food, in the minds of eaters, is no longer associated with farming and the land, then the eaters are suffering a kind of cultural amnesia that is misleading and dangerous” (“The Pleasure of Eating” 228-229). Anecdotally, observing these farms and markets reiterated my interest in eating and growing as well as reading about eating and growing. My observations and peripheral participation in the burgeoning organic and local farming movement set the course of my academic research, and I fully believe that without one I would not have the other. Paired with my observations and experience working with and around farmers, the reportage and literature of the organic farming movement reiterated what my work and observations at the farm anecdotally showed me.

Section 2: “Jesus was a Capricorn / He ate organic food / He believed in love and peace / And never wore no shoes”

While I found my time around foodies and farmers to be both interesting, delicious, and exhausting, it was, as I noted in my observances of the Pepper Place Market, not without some uncomfortable circumstances. In “Contemporary Agrarianism: A Reality Check,” historian Melissa Walker also explores the problematic side of the local food movement, noting that while the rhetoric of the agrarian movement was compelling, it needed, as her title suggests, a reality check. Walker discusses agrarian writers including Wendell Berry, Michael Pollan, and Barbara Kingsolver, and explains that what was lacking in their writing was a realistic understanding of what the agrarian movement could actually do for society. Walker asked if agrarianism and local food could actually feed the world, as she wondered if we as an affluent society of eaters would give up our Haas avocados, Italian extra virgin olive oil, Colombian coffee, or Argentinian malbec in order to eat more ecologically acceptable local fruits, fats, uppers, and downers (6-9, 18). Is Walker unnecessarily undermining a movement simply because upper-class consumers were among the first to enjoy, literally and figuratively, the spoils and bounty of the harvest? And while globalization is here to stay, does the local food movement have to be a holier-than-thou collection of avocado eschewing, local hooch-only drinking Puritans, or is there room for pragmatic decisions and global variety in our ecological discussions of local, authentic, and organic?

While my experiences at farms and markets were enjoyable, they were, admittedly, peripheral and laden with privilege. I never moved to find work and did not fully participate in the agrarian, local food economy other than as a consumer. So paired

with my firsthand observations as a parttime volunteer and fulltime consumer, I wanted to better understand the various agrarian movements throughout the country. Who was farming full time (and writing about it) in and around urban and rural America, and how was it being received by high and low brow, upper, middle, and lower-class consumers? Beyond the typical figures of agrarianism, whether literary, like Barbara Kingsolver or Michael Pollan, or scientific, like Wes Jackson, or a combination of the two, like Wendell Berry, I wanted to know who the makers, producers, reporters, and writers were who are seeing progress and combating privilege in the agrarian movement.

In the books about the local food movement, I found several common threads that reflected my own experience both as a producer and consumer of local food. As I did volunteering and working around agriculture and food, the reporters, farmers, and local food provocateurs found commonality through nuanced conversation around a shared table. Then made pragmatic, practical decisions (often at odds with the conventional ethics of local food and organic agriculture), and they all attempted to build an egalitarian community directly through their own productive and consumptive habits. And at the heart of these conversations, decisions, and shared meals was money—both how to afford to farm “locally,” and how communities could afford to eat local produce.

One of the main issues of contemporary agrarianism and the local food movement is affordability, both for the producers and consumers. In *The Unsettlers*, journalist Mark Sundeen reports on a group of young people (including himself) attempting to make a twenty-first century agrarian life a reality. In the first section of the book, Sundeen profiles Ethan and Sarah, a young couple who want to go back to the land. The first

lesson that Ethan and Sarah learn, however, is that the only place they can afford is in “the par[t] of America without national parks and bike paths and natural food stores.” That is, they could not afford land in stereotypical “back-to-the-land havens such as Oregon and California and Vermont,” so they looked to the rural Midwest (4). Sundeen reports that Ethan and Sarah’s movement is simply “a new twist on the back-to-the-land movement of the previous generation” as “local food and farms, bike co-ops and time banks and tool libraries, permaculture and guerrilla gardening, homebirthing and homeschooling and homecooking” were increasing in popularity” (8). And this popularity, incidentally, pushes Ethan and Sarah away from the more stereotypical enclaves of the local food movement.

Making local food and the agrarian lifestyle affordable and accessible for themselves and their community is one of the main points of Ethan and Sarah’s move to rural Missouri. The people Sundeen writes about in *The Unsettlers*—perhaps titled as a wink and a nod to Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America*—are really re-settlers, especially in Ethan and Sarah’s case. As Ethan and Sarah set up their homestead in rural Missouri, Sundeen describes Ethan’s efforts to “reverse the damage done by global capitalism.” Ethan realizes that “globalization’s victims were not in the places he loved: the Massachusetts beaches and California islands, the Vermont mountains and Oregon forests,” then “were becoming as exclusive as New York and San Francisco;” “[p]eople who worked in the old industries like farming and manufacturing could not afford to live in these scenic, vibrant places” (75). To make their lifestyle work, Ethan and Sarah moved to where land was affordable—not where an existing infrastructure of local,

affordable food existed. Like my time volunteering with the Jones Valley Teaching Farm, this move away from, say, the Burlington, Vermonts and the Berkeley, Californias of the world into the places and people that need local food is not just a financial necessity for Ethan and Sarah but also a real-time experiment into the feasibility of small-scale agriculture and the newest back-to-the-land movement.

For retired professional basketball player Will Allen, famous in sustainable agriculture circles for his Growing Power urban farming project in Milwaukee, affordability was a constant bugbear for his organization until the day the project closed its doors in 2017, mired in debt. Throughout *The Good Food Revolution*, Allen is honest about the money problems that small-scale agriculture often faces, especially on a scale that can feed a low-income urban community. Allen acknowledges that he likes and appreciates the CSA model, but admits that it is “not for poor people” because “[t]hey did not have the money to pay \$500 or \$600 at the beginning of the planting season for food they would only receive later in the summer” (115). To meet his community where they were, he modified the traditional CSA approach, making a deal with local farmers to buy their excess produce at a discounted price so that Allen could then offer it to poor members of his community as a sort of discounted CSA. Allen was constantly looking for outside-the-box ways to feed his community nutritious local produce, even controversially accepting funding from Wal-Mart. To his credit, Allen does not shy away from discussing his decision to accept the offer, acknowledging that “the more troubling question that the...donation to Growing Power raised was whether the urban agriculture movement could be economically sustainable without outside funding” (226). Ultimately,

Allen admits that organizations like Growing Power “can’t feed the world right now.” Still, there is enormous value in the work he is doing to “feed neighborhoods” and “nurture[e] communities” (249). In attempting to offer affordable, nutritious food grown locally to communities otherwise lacking in access to healthy foods, Allen is forced to confront financial decisions in a stark way that more affluent purveyors and consumers of organic food have little experience dealing with. More important than the beauty and even taste of the food, for Allen, is getting people to the table, both literally and metaphorically.

Former journalist Kristin Kimball and her husband Mark similarly foreground the contentious affordability of local food systems in Kristin’s two memoirs of their project at Essex Farm in upstate New York. Her first book, *The Dirty Life*, largely describes the trials, tribulations, and utter joy of her transition from single, Ivy League-educated New York City writer to married, small-town organic farmer, while her second book, *Good Husbandry*, chronicles the Kimballs continuing to navigate farm life with their two children and Essex Farm dealing with both hiring and firing farm employees along with parenthood. Early in *The Dirty Life*, Kristin and Mark, like Will Allen, share their own plan for adapting the Community Supported Agriculture model: instead of simply offering a weekly tote bag of vegetables, Kristin and Mark’s goal at Essex Farm is to provide their CSA members, for a yearly fee, with “everything they need to have a healthy and satisfying diet, year-round,” including “beef, chicken, pork, eggs, milk, maple syrup, grains, flours, dried beans, herbs, fruits, and forty different vegetables.” Members are not limited by quantity, either, as they are allowed to “take as much food

each week as they can eat, plus extra produce, during the growing season, to freeze or can for winter” (4). While the arrangement, as Allen also points out in his own discussion of CSAs, requires a large upfront cost, the Kimballs are transparent about their intentions to truly transform a local food system. They are offering their members the ability to opt out of the industrial food system entirely, or at least almost entirely, by building a robust yet imperfect farm “that was so diversified it could supplant the supermarket” (*The Dirty Life* 58).

In addition to these discussions and deliberations about financing and affordability, these similar but disparate local foodies all made decisions that led directly to nuanced, convivial conversation—often around a shared table. Food brought these people together with people they otherwise would never have come in contact with, leading to conversations that were often complicated, uncomfortable, and fruitful. What Ethan and Sarah eventually come to realize is that the agrarian “revolution” that they are taking part in is not only more affordable in rural Missouri, but it will also do the most good in rural Missouri. While Sundeen describes the lesson that Ethan and Sarah learned in free trade and globalization that caused the hollowing out of many Midwestern towns and cities, they also learn just how much in common they have with their much more conservative neighbors—and how the more laissez faire local laws often worked to Ethan and Sarah’s advantage. Through shared labor and food, Ethan learns that many of his neighbors “shared so many of his values: a commitment to physical labor, frugality, and doing things yourself rather than paying someone else to do it or make it” (77). Despite differing political opinions and voting records, Ethan and Sarah found that their

neighbors, especially those involved in small-scale agriculture, shared a respect for local production and consumption. Don and Dana Miller, two of these conservative neighbors who also farmed, became some of Ethan and Sarah's closest friends. Sundeen reports that prior to Ethan and Sarah's move to Missouri, Don and Dana Miller were thinking of leaving their farm for a move to town, but Ethan and Sarah's enthusiasm and help kept them on their land, despite a cancer diagnosis for Don. In return, the Millers vouched for Ethan and Sarah, as they assured the skeptical small town of their "exceptional integrity" they learned about through their "long conversations about values, parenting, God, and the never-ending effort to live according to one's values" (124). Despite vast differences on certain subjects like "abortion, war, gay marriage, [and] global warming," the two couples found commonality in their respect for land, consumption, and living what each would describe as an ethical life. This is not to say that the issues they would not discuss were not of vast importance to a great number of people, but rather, that by focusing on the things they could freely discuss and the respect they gained for one another, the potential for later substantive discussions remained. Without these discussions, the two couples would remain Other to one another, living on separate islands in flyover country.

The Kimballs at Essex Farm and Will Allen at Growing Power had similarly transformative experiences and conversations through shared meals. In *Good Husbandry*, Kimball writes that "[e]ven when a farm is struggling, even when there is no money, there is always plenty of good food"—the Team Dinners that she and Mark would prepare for their growing staff every Friday night, a group that Mark jokingly described as "the most diverse set of white people ever assembled." The Kimballs, along with staff,

family, friends, neighbors, and assorted passers-by, often including their Amish neighbors, always shared a meal “built around whatever food was perfect at that moment in the season.” During these dinners, “[a]gricultural theories, riotous jokes, lifelong friendships, and romances took root,” while their convivial, exhausted group closed out another week of work on the farm (188-189).

Allen, the Kimballs, and Ethan and Sarah also built community through pragmatic, practical decision-making made possible by their lives working in and around agriculture. While Ethan and Sarah’s entire move to Missouri was a pragmatic, thought-out decision intended to create and foster a certain type of community, Allen was recognizing that Milwaukee’s needs would not be met in just “traditional farming families in rural areas” since these farms were being edged out. Allen sought outside-the-box solutions to address “the lack of access among low-income communities and people of color to healthy affordable food” by pushing for “farmers who can produce \$200,000 intensively on a single urban acre as well as those who can grow \$500 on an acre in the countryside” (187). In short, all were welcomed to join Allen’s quest, but *all* also invited controversy when Allen accepted funding from Walmart. To his credit, after accepting the funding, Allen faced the question head-on, reframing it as “whether the urban agriculture movement could be economically sustainable without outside funding” (226). Surveying his own community’s needs, Allen pragmatically decided to accept the funding and subsequent controversy for the greater good of his community.

Mark and Kristen Kimball faced a similar controversy, but with different stakes. Kristin explains that their work on the farm forced her and Mark “into traditional gender

roles” and it made her uneasy as “the cultural product of third-wave feminism.” Yet she also admits that she “married someone who was enlightened enough to take [her] last name,” and ultimately, the sacrifices she and Mark made to create a drastically different life than what they would experience in a city working nine-to-five jobs, “choices that added beauty and value and satisfaction to [their lives],” ultimately won out over whatever circumstantial yet warranted frustration she felt at fulfilling certain household duties (*Good Husbandry* 176, 142). In doing so, she and Mark, “poised between nostalgia for a past that never existed and hope for an idyllic future that never comes,” could “build something beautiful” that their children could inherit, leaving the possibility for a multigenerational community much like their grandparents experienced (197).

And therein lies the ultimate goal of each of these people: to build a lasting community with like-minded (or even distinctly *not* like-minded) people, with access to good food and systems of agriculture that reduce the harm that years of industrial development have done to the planet. In addition to affordability and sustainability, each of the “re-settlers” seeks out a sort of conviviality they deem lacking in mainstream American society for various reasons. But the fact remains that all of them had to move, either to find somewhere to live in Ethan and Sarah’s case, for the Kimballs to find sizeable land to start a farm, or, in Allen’s case, to encounter another culture more attuned to sustainable farming.

Section 3: “Pretty soon the dirt road turned into blacktop, Detroit City bound / Down that hillbilly highway”

All of these movements and food developments are a welcome change to the downturn in quality of food since World War II. But how did this happen, and why is this movement so needed? What happened to our diets and consumption habits that has made this, in some cases drastic, type of agrarian lifestyle such a developing trend in urban food culture? What are these people rebelling against, and why does someone like Will Allen need to fix urban farming and urban diets? One of the chief reasons is the way our diets have changed since World War II.

Food and environmental writers both posit that our diets have changed for two main reasons: changes in agriculture and the rise of convenience foods. While a great many changes in agriculture have occurred, including the average size of farms, general equipment used, production methods, and distribution methods, perhaps the strongest change to farming relating to Western diets involved the increased use of pesticides. Investigative journalist Eric Schlosser, author of 2001’s hugely influential *Fast Food Nation* (and a number of forewords to books on agriculture and eating, as I found out in my research), in a foreword to Maria Rodale’s *Organic Manifesto*, explains that organophosphates, (haunted by the specter of Nazi Germany transferred to Dow Chemical and Monsanto) are the root of many current health problems, including childhood “behavioral and developmental problems,” due not only to childhood consumption of pesticides but also the passing on of pesticide residue in amniotic fluid (ix-x).

Maria Rodale similarly argues that this transfer of military pride and power after World War II is largely to blame for the negative changes to our diets in the twenty and twenty-first centuries. Rodale, the granddaughter of influential organic farmer and publisher J.I. Rodale, explains that after World War II, “[Americans] transferred their pride in our military might to chemical agriculture” and made this new reliance on chemicals “seem ‘normal,’ safe, and conventional” in subsequent decades a line of thought that “remains unchanged today (81). Rodale traces the use of pesticides to increased rates in ADHD, asthma, diabetes, and childhood obesity while also wondering if the significant growth in cancer rates is likewise due to “the chemicals that we believe are necessary to grow food” (18). While the science linking cancer to pesticides is tenuous, Rodale does also note that our reliance on chemicals has allowed just “a few major corporations, in collusion with our government, to poison us along with the bugs, the fungi, the weeds, and the increasingly common crop diseases” which makes us “more out of control and vulnerable than ever” (37). Even if links to cancer are fleeting and hard to substantiate, what is clear is that we allow just a few powerful companies to control our production and consumption with products that carpet bomb our flora and fauna into submission and extermination.

Paired with this intense uptick in chemical use is an increase in availability of food, seasonality be damned. British food writer Bee Wilson, like agrarian historian Melissa Wilson, discusses this new availability of food but deliberates more negatively on the hidden costs and downsides. In the introduction of her critique of current food trends, appropriately titled, *The Way We Eat Now*, Wilson argues against personal

willpower being the root cause of alarming health trends related to diet, instead accusing corporations and advertising of doing near irreparable harm to the planet and the populace by increasing the availability of certain foods while decreasing caloric costs and removing nutrients, thus hiding the true value of food (xx). Wilson describes how we have gone from half the world being “chronically underfed” in 1947, to 2006 when “the number of overweight and obese people in the world overtook the number who were underfed” (2, 5). What changed, exactly? The answer seems so simple: we started eating food grown further and further away from our homes. Not all of these “alien commodities” are bad, certainly, as the sheer number of different (and often delicious) foods has increased exponentially, but as the number of foods increased, our caloric intake increased by around 500 calories a day since the 1960s (20-22).

This increase in caloric intake and varietal availability did a few things to our consumption habits. Wilson notes that while this “nutrition transition” was “largely drive by prosperity,” the newfound prosperity had strange results: we started buying more food but bought essentially lower quality food, especially staples. Wilson writes that “[I]ike our great-grandmothers, we value celebration foods such as meat and fruit and sugar more highly than boring staples such as bread and rice.” Post-World War II prosperity meant that “we can afford so many feasting foods that we start to neglect the basics,” such as high-quality, naturally leavened breads or whole grain rice (90). What was a common yet time-consuming practice a few generations ago, such as sourdough bread making, becomes a purchase from an expensive, artisanal baker or a fringy, affluent

hobby (91). Basically, nutritious yet caloric whole grain staples gave way to much more sugar and much more meat: more calories and more protein at a lower quality.

Culturally, this decline in quality of staples resulted in negative change. Especially, we stopped eating together, losing daily and weekly moments of conviviality: what Wilson, through food anthropologist Claude Fischler, calls “commensality,” or “eating at the same table” (124). This loss of commensality, a “basic human need” according to Wilson, has confused our traditional sense of community and consumption, disrupting traditional foodways and exacerbating health problems in communities and individuals. This change has not only changed the way traditional foods are sold but has also harmed traditional cultures throughout the world.

Another negative effect from this disregard of traditional, quality staples is the chasing of food trends. Among the food trends Wilson cites, in addition to sourdough bread, are yogurt and quinoa. Yogurt, says Wilson, used to be “part of the health-food counterculture” and “was something sour and wholesome,” until advertisers took over and made it “something sweet, heavily marketed, and ultra-processed” (169). Thankfully, though, staples like yogurt and sourdough bread are experiencing an artisanal renaissance, as foodies seek handmade or small batch products created “the old way”—with naturally fermented leaven, in bread’s case, and an abundance of gut-healthy bacteria and much less sugar than, say, the average can of soda, in yogurt’s case. It remains to be seen if this sort of revival of peasant staples can enter the mainstream or will remain, like many other artisanal food trends, privy to those with time and/or expendable income alone.

Another food trend with negative consequences is, incidentally, another staple: quinoa. As Wilson notes, “[o]ne person’s trend is another person’s long-held culinary tradition,” and in the case of quinoa, the addition of quinoa to Western diets has had severe consequences for peasant diets across the Andes. Wilson explains that “[f]rom 1961 to 2014 quinoa production in Peru increased from 22,500 tons to 114,300 tons” as quinoa went from traditional peasant staple to heavily marketed mega-food consumed by more and more Westerners seeking a healthy diet. Unbeknownst to these consumers was the fact that the very Bolivian farmers who grew the quinoa and had, until recent history, been the primary consumers of the seed, could no longer afford to consume their own product, wrecking their diets as it “became cheaper and easier for Bolivians to eat instant wheat noodles than to buy the staple carbohydrate of their own land” (171). While Westerners were distracted by their own consumption and the sloganeering of food companies selling the health benefits and taste of quinoa, traditional diets in another hemisphere were being Westernized in a negative, bizarre twentieth and twenty-first century triangular trade.

Other food and agriculture writers have addressed this untethered, unfettered case of chasing food trends. Wendell Berry has made a career as an advocate of producing and consuming as locally as possible, eschewing popular trends for established, traditional foodways and agricultural practices. Perhaps his most famous quote on food, “Eating is an Agricultural Act,” from “The Pleasures of Eating,” is painted on the wall of the dining room in the food co-op near my house and served as an impetus and inspiration for much of Michael Pollan’s writing on food and culture (Berry 227; Fassler). Despite Pollan’s

inspiration, and the heavy use of the phrase as an inspiring slogan in various settings, Berry, incidentally, regrets the quote. Rather than inspire nuance and a deeper understanding of food systems and culture, Berry seems to think, his phrase has simply become another engineered slogan of the puritanical food elite rather than a nuanced call for better community. In a sense, Berry seems to think that this phrase, rather than inspire conversation and change in consumption, only reinforces trend-chasing so prevalent in foodie culture.

Another reason for this change in our eating habits is the Great Migration. As thousands of people, mostly African American, moved North and West in search of jobs, economic opportunity, and lives less full of prejudice and harassment, we lost a great deal of traditional foodways as many people chose or were forced to move off the land, losing their connection to place as well as a passed-down knowledge of production and consumption in regard to food. It is tough to argue that the Great Migration was not a net positive in terms of economic prosperity and social equality, but it is clear that there were many hidden costs as entire families and generations uprooted themselves from a more agrarian, agricultural lifestyle to factories and industrial work throughout the North, Midwest, and West Coast. There is no sane argument to be made to justify the degrading, prejudiced life that African Americans experienced throughout the American South prior to the Great Migration, but this social progress did have negative ramifications for all Americans. Eric Schlosser, he of the many book forewords, explains in the foreword to *The Good Food Revolution* that “in losing touch with the land with traditions handed down for generations,” the men, women, and children of the Great Migration also lost an

important set of skills—“how to grow and prepare healthy food”—as they “frequently traded one set of problems for another” (xi-xii).

Along with the loss of skills to grow and prepare fresh, local food, additional cultural problems surfaced. Will Allen explains that because only part of his family left the agrarian South for economic prosperity, he never lost the ability to garden—or appreciate the taste of fresh produce. However, whenever he tried to improve upon these skills or discuss them in certain settings, people in his community asked why he wanted to continue on with “that slave’s work” when other attractive, viable options for food and employment were emerging (37). Allen explains that while the Great Migration created a great deal of social progress for African Americans, one way it hurt most everyone was “directly in the wake of the departure of black farmers from their land” (7). Simply put, Allen felt stigmatized for “swimming against a current that had carried [his] family and millions of other black people out of South Carolina and into Northern cities” (37).

Isabella Wilkerson, in her Great Migration opus *The Warmth of Other Suns*, explains that the Great Migration was not the positive boon that it is often cast as, and, in many cases, material conditions—including food—for those who moved got worse despite higher wages and more purchasing power. John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi, reiterates Wilkerson’s re-imagining of the Great Migration. Throughout his study of the food and foodways of the American South, *The Potlikker Papers*, Edge argues that the Great Migration was more of a white pull than a black push, as white factory owners in the North needed cheap labor.

Two dissimilar literary works capture the foodways lost in the Great Migration in vivid, compelling detail: Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, and Edna Lewis's iconic but often overlooked cookbook, *The Taste of Country Cooking*. Despite drastically different upbringings and lives, both Arnow, white, and Lewis, Black, wrote of seasonal food waylaid by the Great Migration: Arnow fictionalized in a move, mirroring her own life, from a Kentucky farm to urban Detroit, and Lewis of her hometown in Freetown, Virginia. Both Arnow and Lewis describe the way that our exchange of rural foodways for economic prosperity in urban cities negatively impacted us culturally. We lost a sense of seasonality that changed our sense of pleasure and conviviality, our food quality declined greatly, and our sense of community declined.

The Dollmaker, published in 1954, is largely concerned with the production or procurement of food, and then the subsequent consumption (or non-consumption) of it. Protagonist Gertie Nevels, a farmer from the Kentucky mountains, follows her husband Clovis from their farm—materially poor but abundant with quality food—to a factory job in Detroit. Clovis, a mechanic and tinkerer, is out of place in rural Kentucky, and Gertie, a strong, resourceful woman adept at growing crops, raising livestock, and putting delicious meals on the table, is shocked at the loss of her nutrient-rich staples from the farm. Indeed, as the family travels from Kentucky to Cincinnati and then Detroit, Arnow's descriptions of food change from bucolic Kentucky meals that could rival any twenty-first century farm-to-table offerings to weak eggs, stale white bread, and watery milk in Detroit that sound like offerings from a moderately comfortable gulag.

From the onset of the novel, Gertie shows a skepticism to food that she has not procured herself—food with origins outside her seasonal understanding of freshness and taste. During a trip to the town doctor to save their youngest son, Amos, Clovis shows up, suggesting he buy some food from a diner. Gertie, not wanting to spend any money, tells Clovis not to be “a waster good money on fancy grub for me,” yet he goes out for two “grease-stained” hamburgers and a cup of coffee (29). This dispute, from the perspective of Gertie and Clovis’s marriage, sets the tone for the rest of the novel: Gertie happy to eschew the market economy for her agrarian beliefs and Clovis more comfortable fulfilling his burgeoning material desires to support his family.

Back at the farm, though, the bounty of Gertie’s larder would be the envy of any twenty-first century foodie. Arnow describes the Nevels’s “hominy making, the gathering of walnuts” along with the farm fresh “sweet milk,” “buttermilk,” “hot smoking cornbread,” “shuck beans, baked sweet potatoes, cucumber pickles, and green tomato ketchup”—all “served up with pride, for everything, even the meal in the bread, was a product of her farming” (78). Gertie is also adept at breakfast, “punch[ing] out flat rounds of dough and [laying] them in the bake skillet” before cooking eggs she gathered with her own hands with grease from an animal she had also butchered. The morning meal is completed with homemade gravy and “a quart jar of her precious sugar-sweetened preserves”—as Arnow is careful to note Gertie’s rationing of a store-bought product like sugar (71). Gertie takes immense pride in her labor, even though it means many early mornings and late evenings. Though the food is lavishly described, the preparation is simple, and Arnow does not diminish the fact that the Nevels family is poor. Even before

their move to Detroit, Gertie and Clovis discuss money (and their lack of money), though Gertie is secretly saving to purchase their own land from a local farmer—plans that go awry when the move to Detroit is made permanent. Gertie does not feel the drudgery of farm life, despite the hardship of carrying her youngest son to the doctor and performing a tedious, rudimentary tracheostomy on him. Arnow describes the farm with an arcadian splendor keen on nostalgia, and though the farm admittedly does not appeal to mechanically minded Clovis, Gertie is an artisan, farmer, and cook of the highest order.

In addition to eating abundantly with the seasons, Gertie orders her life through reliable seasonal happenings. *The Dollmaker* is set during World War II, and Gertie remembers the times when family and friends received “yellow envelopes” explaining a soldier serving overseas was dead or missing not by their actual dates on the calendar, but by “dogwood-blooming time” or “molasses-making time” (102). Additionally, her children, more than holidays, look forward to times when blackberries are ripe or hogs are fattened as highlights and benchmarks of their year (46). Even when they move to Detroit, Gertie continues to daydream about her Kentucky seasonal routine, daydreaming about “the red ball of the winter’s sun” back at the farm along with the “good fall” that provided “late turnip greens” and “her big fattened hog.” She even imagined “where the new moon showed first” (237). However much she daydreams during their time in Detroit, however, her sense of taste does not match her sense of time as the natural rhythms she was used to are gone.

Things are amiss for Gertie and her family as they travel to Detroit and only get worse when they get there. While they are in transit, Gertie looks out the window and

claims that the soil “looks like good dirt for grown sweet taters” before wondering “what th ground around Detroit is like” and if it will “grow sweet taters” (132). It is not long before she finds out that she cannot grow much of anything and that “[t]h water stinks,” the “milk tasted funny,” and the bread is “dry and hard and lifeless” because it was “badly baked” (152, 161, 166). As Gertie, Clovis, and their children settle into their new lives, daughter Cassie begins rejecting the subpar food that Gertie prepares, refusing the “flat-yolked, gray, rubbery white” eggs, “the biscuit burned on the bottom, too pale on top, smeared with margarine instead of butter” since butter was too expensive to purchase. While Cassie rejects the food almost completely, Gertie notes that “[n]one of [her children] ate the way they had back home” as they recognize the much lower quality of food that is their new reality (188).

The entire family is out of sync as their habits at the kitchen table are out of sorts, and Gertie is unable to reliably cope with their new reality in Detroit. Gertie and Clovis constantly bicker about money as Gertie, not used to spending money on foodstuffs—especially foodstuffs she used to provide on the farm—is at odds with Clovis, whose steady employment at the factory provides them disposable income for the first time. Clovis tries to convince Gertie to purchase more food, arguing that “millions an millions a people never tast[e] nothen but what they git outa stores” before he admits that these people have “never tasted real good cornbread with butter an fresh eggs” (189). Gertie’s purchases groceries both from the store with “strange-talking clerks” and from the morally cloudy man “in the alley” who, of course, sold cheaper, flimsier produce. So often Gertie is flustered when spending money, forgetting to purchase potatoes, and when

she goes back, she notices “[s]o much foolishness” in the store, like “grapes in December” and other nonessential products (189). Her neighbor, Mrs. Anderson, adds to Gertie’s lament of the foolishness surrounding her, as Mrs. Anderson repeats the 1950s plea for mothers to switch from breast milk to store bought formula, parroting a pediatrician who insists that breast milk is “very detrimental to a child’s emotional and social development” (212). These strange new norms, aimed at increasing access to food calories, however lacking in quality, and adopted by a majority of Americans in the postwar years, are a stark reminder to Gertie that she is far from Kentucky, and her agrarian life is inaccessible.

Despite Gertie’s lack of access to quality food, she continues to push against the new reality disrupting her adherence to a common family table and seasonal consumption. As Easter approaches, Gertie’s laments the seasonal bounty she and her family could be enjoying at their farm in Kentucky:

She sat again and tried to whittle, but thought instead of hens clucking over eggs, sage grass burning at twilight, the good taste of the first mess of wild greens, and early potatoes going into the ground. Potatoes? Good Friday was late enough for the first beans, and in this week was Good Friday. Hands, knife, and doll dropped into her lap together. She had known. She had watched the days on the calendar: time for the rent, the car payments, the curtain man, the Icy Heart; but she’d shut her eyes to spring, the real spring back home (342).

Gertie's recognition that her life no longer revolves around the seasonal production and consumption of food and livestock is a warning about the future of Detroit and what Wendell Berry called "the industrial mind," the idea that in the industrial economy, separated from seasonal bounty of the agrarian life, the mind "accepts that people, ultimately, will be treated as things and that things, ultimately, will be treated as garbage" since the mind is "indifferent to the connections...between people and land" ("A Defense of the Family Farm" 37). Gertie's slow acceptance of material progress at the expense of her higher quality, delicious farm food is an acceptance that she no longer has control of her life—she and Clovis are exchanging the mercy of weather and crop and animal health for the mercy of hourly wages and factory jobs. By the end of the novel, Gertie has accepted her new reality, but not before one son has run away back to Kentucky and one daughter, in an intensely gruesome, heartbreaking scene, is run over by a train. Despite piecing together a community of sorts through shared hardship with some of her tenement neighbors, Gertie's focus towards the end of the novel remains on the low quality food she feeds her children, as Gertie is "ashamed" to be feeding her family "food...worse than [what] they'd ever had back home, even late in the winter after a poor crop year: boiled beans scantily seasoned with a little bacon grease, sliced overripe tomatoes, and peaches, raw, because cooked ones needed sugar." Beaten down by their new circumstances, Clovis and the children "ate...with no comment" (501).

Whether or not the social commentary of *The Dollmaker*, fixated on food and the bucolic beauty of rural America that was lost during the Great Migration, is an accurate portrayal of the material conditions of midcentury America is an interesting question.

While there seems to be enough truth in the common understanding of the Great Migration as an egalitarian boon for America's growing middle class, Arnow's clapback against the clean narrative of progress is a compelling counternarrative, especially as it also flips the general narrative that farm-to-table food is commonly under the purview of the upper class. It is important that Gertie and her family are poor, white, and rural as a counter to the common, often correct narrative that good food is only a haven of the liberal, educated upper class. John T. Edge's *The Potlikker Papers* does much the same thing, exploring the poor white, brown, and black underbelly of the sustainable eating practices throughout the history of the United States—mostly the American South.

One chef who plays a fairly prominent role in one of Edge's chapters in *The Potlikker Papers* is Edna Lewis. Lewis, born in Freetown, Virginia, followed the great migration from Virginia slightly north to Washington, D.C., and then to New York City where she cooked, sewed, and worked as an occasional leftwing political provocateur. Edge writes that “[b]efore Americans bandied the term *farm-to-table*, [Lewis] lived by that credo. In the process she honed a black pastoral, a rural idyll, which resonated for generations to come.” Edge places Lewis firmly in the place-based, agrarian canon alongside Southern luminaries like William Faulkner or Randall Kenan claiming that “Lewis’s rural life became her greatest asset” as a “counternarrative” against the “virtues of California-raised peas, frozen and bagged and available in any season,” or “Florida tomatoes, picked hard and green and ready to transport” (148-149). That is, Lewis, like those other writers—and like Wendell Berry—created a world based not on an industrializing present and future, but on an agrarian, seasonal past—a past that could,

and would, be recreated by chefs like, say, Alice Waters, whose Bay Area Chez Panisse owes a great deal of its terroir-based menu not just to France but also to Edna Lewis. Edge explains that Lewis's "rhapsodies of rural Virginia were harbingers of the Slow Food movement that Waters would champion, previews of the broader Southern renaissance that would gain momentum in the 2000s" (152). Waters, who wrote the foreword to the 2017 edition of *A Taste of Country Cooking*, Lewis's most popular cookbook, writes that prior to the book's publication in 1976,

most of us were more or less resigned to the industrialization of our food, the mechanization of our work, the trivialization of our play, and the atomization of our communities. But with her recipes and reminiscences, Miss Lewis was able to gently suggest another way of being, one on a human scale, in harmony with the seasons and with our fellow man (xi).

Lewis, like Arnow, also describes an accessible, farm-to-table based way of eating specifically not for the upper crust. Lewis, as Arnow does for Appalachian poor white trash, extols the virtues of a lower- or middle-class Black farm-to-table experience, pushing back against the common narrative that poor Blacks and whites are incapable or too poor to eat or afford seasonal, fresh, healthy food.

Throughout *A Taste of Country Cooking*, Lewis laments what was lost, both literally and metaphorically, in the move from the farm to the city. One of the chief losses Lewis describes is the joyful and celebratory activities tied to the harvest of food. Lewis writes that "[t]he spirit of pride and community and cooperation in the work of farming is

what made Freetown a very wonderful place to grow up.” Lewis explains that while “[t]he farm was demanding,” “everyone shared in the work” and the result was “delicious foods that seemed to celebrate the good things of each season” (xx). Lewis writes that even beef had proper seasonal flavor and was “more available in the spring and summer.” Additionally, other “high points of the summer...made...work rewarding” like “the day you picked the first ripe tomato,” which resulted in a tomato-filled splendor “until the first frost” (43, 85). “Hot summer days” also meant “feast[ing] on homemade ice cream or a bowl of crushed peaches” in-between chores. Despite the hard, physical labor, “there was always something delicious to reward us at the end of any hectic work” as the farm was diversified and not an industrial monoculture (102).

In addition to these farm tasks that Lewis’s family completed each season, there was also work that tied the entire community together. The first communal affair Lewis describes is corn shucking:

Once the corn was all cut and stacked in shocks, a group of high school students who loved my mother would come on the first moonlit night and help us with the corn shucking. They thought it was great fun, boys and girls with their favorite friends. After the shucking they would return to the house and be given a festive meal that my mother had had in preparation all afternoon: one of fried chicken, baked ham, roasted, newly dug sweet potatoes, baked tomatoes, green beans, cake, and apple pie (144).

I do not know anyone itching to shuck corn, but, as Gene Logsdon describes in *Living at Nature's Pace*, sharing drudgery with the community while tying tedious, repetitive work to a celebratory feast elicits a number of positive benefits for the community. In Logsdon's case, shucking corn was a communal event that led to conviviality and even, if one found a red ear of corn, a little romance (97). Lewis's memory of this event is certainly dabbling in an arcadian nostalgia of sorts, but the corn shucking party at the very least creates a healthier relationship to food than, say, buying a frozen plastic sack of corn from a grocery store. Hog killing, like corn shucking, served a similar community function in Lewis's Freetown, as she describes "a series of necessary activities...that kept the whole community busy for at least a week," which had to be completed "[a]s soon as the hogs were butchered." Notably, though, for hog killing as well as corn shucking, the journey is just as important as the destination, as Lewis remarks that "the highly festive feeling of everyone working together" was what made hog killing one of Lewis's "favorite times in the year" (183). These two large communal events, similar to smaller happenings like the first ripe tomato after the last frost or "fresh black-eyed peas," were lost in the mad dash north and west for higher wages and better treatment (174).

Another running theme throughout *A Taste of Country Cooking*, like *The Dollmaker*, is the strong assertion that food used to taste much better. While Arnow's Gertie Nevels describes in real-time the downgrade from farm fresh eggs to store-bought, refrigerated and trucked-in cartons of eggs, Lewis has years of observations to draw upon in her laments describing food the way it "used to be." Beef, based on seasonality, was much better when it was "locally grown" and "locally butchered;" it now

lack[s]...flavor” because local production has scaled up and out, making beef, refrigerated and trucked in from national and regional distribution centers, a more everyday food accessible to most everyone (43). Lewis’s also complains about modernity’s mistreatment of water, as “water without chemicals helps...bread to rise quickly and will also give it a delicious flavor.” Lewis mentions that “[n]o one in Freetown knew about BHT or fluoridated water” as she argues for the merits of unblemished well water (46). High quality water also influenced the taste of iced tea, another beverage that modern life has, according to Lewis, destroyed the flavor of. Lewis describes how her family “used only the whole leaves of a good-quality orange pekoe or a blend of green tea” as they made tea “over a piece of ice made from pure spring or well water.” Lewis laments that iced tea now, made from tea bags that “give an off-flavor” because of “dust contents” leads to a “lack of authentic flavor [that] has caused iced tea to become just another fruit punch” (131). Lewis’s complaints of beef, water, tea and other goods run the gamut from scale of production to chemicals to technique, encompassing a number of the same complaints that Gertie Nevels shares as her family moves from rural Kentucky to industrial Detroit. Both *The Dollmaker* and *A Taste of Country Cooking* sharing a passion for accessible, high quality ingredients, and Arnow, white, and Edna Lewis, Black, are important as egalitarian purveyors of food for everyone.

The two texts, paired together, unite to unearth a forgotten way of living that is in one sense gone forever, but at the same time increasingly accessible to a new generation, thanks to the work of a growing number of food growers, cooks, and chefs in mostly urban America. For Edna Lewis, *A Taste of Country Cooking* uncovered a forgotten

South as she argued against the harmful narratives of soul food and white-only haute cuisine, combining the two into something that was accessible to everyone. In the introduction to *Edna Lewis: At the Table with an American Original*, a series of essays edited by Sara B. Franklin, Franklin writes that Lewis was providing “both an alternative history and a new, authoritative perspective on southern food” (6). In one of the essays in the collection, food journalist Francis Lam describes the way Lewis uncovered a “nearly forgotten ethos of eating farm to table” that went “beyond grease, greens, and grits” (63). Lam goes on to explain the way Lewis tells “the story of rural black people, formerly enslaved black people, and owned it as a story of confidence and beauty” as she extols the beauty and accessibility of eating seasonally, especially for ex-slaves, as she has “no truck with the belittling mainstream idea of soul food—cheap and greasy—as the totality of black cooking” (63, 65, 68). Essentially, Lewis is pushing back against the mainstream narrative that soul food is the only Black food. Soul food, a greasy facsimile of the African American food experience in the United States, became a default expression of subservient blackness and a source of black communal pride. Lewis’s cookbook positions African American cooking at the table with the most elegant white cooking while “carefully construct[ing] a nuanced southern cuisine with aspects of both the haute and the provincial,” according to Scott Alves Barton (101). In short, Lewis champions the everyday staples of provincial food while aspiring to the quality and pride of haute cuisine, arguing that high quality food has been and should be again accessible to everyone. The pastoral elegy of the first half of *The Dollmaker* does much the same, as Gertie and her family enjoy lowbrow biscuits next to high-quality seasonal vegetables and fowl fit for a table at any modern day, high-end farm-to-table restaurant. It is

important and noteworthy that the Nevels, poor sharecropping Appalachian Southerners, living on the land but technically landless, can also access not only enough food, but enough *good* food, especially compared to the foodstuffs after their sojourn to Detroit.

In uncovering and describing these forgotten areas, whether Lewis's Virginia or the Appalachian Kentucky of *The Dollmaker*, both works were ahead of their time regarding food trends—and even pushing against these trends with their respective perspectives from Black and poor white America. In another essay from *Edna Lewis: At the Table with an American Original*, food writer Joe Yonan explains that Lewis's cookbook “both preceded and foreshadowed not just the future hipness of southern food but also the locavore and back-to-the-land movements, trends in bread baking, [and] even coffee snobbery,” as Lewis also devoted a section of her cookbook to proper coffee roasting and brewing techniques (32). The aforementioned food and larder of Arnow's Gertie Nevels, like Edna Lewis, in many ways an idyllic, prelapsarian critique of industrial America, would be similarly at home on the table in many of the hippest houses and farm-to-table restaurants across America.

Conclusion: “This used to be real estate / Now it’s only fields and trees / Where, where is the town / Now, it’s nothing but flowers”

How are we doing in terms of realizing the agrarian dreams of *The Dollmaker* or *A Taste of Country Cooking*? It is true that Edna Lewis, who died in 2006, is beginning to find her rightful place as the queen of farm-to-table eating, thanks to lavish admiration from foodie luminaries like John T. Edge, Alice Waters, and James Beard award-winning food writer and pastry chef Lisa Donovan, whose lauded memoir from 2020, *Our Lady of Perpetual Hunger*, is strewn with effusive praise for Lewis. But what about the Kimballs of Essex Farm, Ethan and Sarah from *The Unsettlers*, or Will Allen? And what about the Detroit of *The Dollmaker*? Do these figures and works answer my questions about how to build a more equitable, sustainable local food movement, or do they just reinforce my original observations that most farmers markets across the country are simply places for the well-to-do to buy expensive produce and mingle? The answer is not cut and dry. It seems as though the local food movement *is* making good, quality food more affordable for everyone while at the same time, farmers markets are reinforcing the economic unsustainability, or elitism, at least, of some organic food systems.

By all accounts, Essex Farm and the Kimballs are thriving, feeding themselves, their children, and a portion of their community through an expensive but thorough and very fair CSA in and around upstate New York, even reaching into Manhattan. According to their website, they are continuing to offer “grass-fed beef, pastured pork, chicken, eggs, fifty different kinds of vegetables, milk, grains and flour, fruit, herbs, maple syrup and soap” with animals “fed certified organic food” and produce grown without “conventional pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers.” The farm offers all who sign

up for the CSA “[e]nough food for the entire family to enjoy 3 meals a day, 7 days a week” (<https://essexfarmcsa.com/shares/about-shares/>). What Essex Farm offers to customers but does not grow itself is obtained locally in a sort of cooperative agreement with other like-minded, small-scale producers. Essex Farm seems an unmitigated success, though for Kristin Kimball, like Wendell Berry, the added literary royalties and advances cannot hurt the farm’s bottom line.

After 11 years in northeast Missouri, Ethan and Sarah Hughes left their one hundred acres in the rural Midwest for New England, settling in Belfast, Maine, an even more lilywhite but more progressive town that sits directly on Penobscot Bay on the Atlantic Ocean. A 2019 profile in *The Boston Globe* traces the end of their Missouri experiment that Sundeen wrote about in *The Unsettlers*. Journalist Billy Baker catches up with Ethan and Sarah about a year into their Maine sojourn, and post-move, their attitude towards Missouri seems a slight rebuttal to Sundeen’s proclamations. Baker notes that Ethan and Sarah “never felt totally welcome in conservative Macon County” because “they were known derisively as ‘the bike people.’” Despite receiving numerous visitors, they never felt comfortable, so they sold their land in Missouri, in the spirit of the Possibility Alliance, “well below market value” and “donated the \$120,000 they earned in the sale to Native American communities” before they moved north to Maine, “where living close to the land is more the norm than an oddity.” Their experiment with simple, intentional living is still going strong in their new, more copacetic 10-acre environs, with their two daughters, chickens, and goats, but still no petroleum or electricity and very little money (“They quit petroleum, electricity, and money—and found happiness”).

While the rural Midwest might still be more a more affordable place for their experiment in deliberate, back-to-the-land simplicity, Ethan and Sarah needed, through no fault of their own, to live their lives somewhere more accepting of their eccentricities—an important lesson of sorts in terms of building community and finding solidarity in sustainable farming and living. Ethan and Sarah did not end up in back-to-the-land meccas such as the Pacific Northwest or California coast, or even a larger town in Maine like Portland, but their compromise of small town, rural Maine instead of the rural Midwest seems an appropriate concession.

Will Allen and *Growing Power* leaves a much more complicated legacy. Despite its enormous impact on the sustainable food movement in and around Milwaukee and the greater Midwest, in 2017, mired in debt, the board of directors disbanded the organization. *Growing Power* closed for a number of reasons, but it seems as though the main problem was money. Allen chronicled his organization's challenge with finances throughout *The Good Food Revolution*, and his reticence and then acceptance of corporate and philanthropic financial backing and benevolence can be seen as both a point of contention and a pragmatic necessity in his organization's fight to create a more equitable and sustainable food system. In "Behind the Rise and Fall of Growing Power," Stephen Satterfield of the website *Good Eats* discusses the financial power that *Growing Power* attracted over the years, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation— "one of the largest philanthropic foundations in the United States"—along with the Walmart Foundation and Allen's MacArthur "Genius Grant." Despite the robust success, Satterfield contents that Allen "suffered from a bit of founder's syndrome," and was

unable to adapt and give up day-to-day operations of the organization as the organization, and the consequential debt it accrued, grew larger and more influential than anyone could have predicted. Despite untenable growth that eventually led to its downfall, what cannot be overstated is the influence that Allen and *Growing Power* hold in the world of urban sustainable farming and eating. Satterfield concludes that in addition to Allen's impressive legacy, his impact literally "radically transformed...lives and neighborhoods" ("Behind the Rise and Fall of Growing Power"). While Allen's legacy remains mostly intact, the closure of *Growing Power* does bring to bear questions of funding, size, and scale in regard to building a lasting, sustainable food system.

Perhaps more interesting than the Kimballs, Ethan and Sarah, or Will Allen, though, are recent developments in Detroit. Detroit, site of so much pain and loss for Gertie Nevels and her family in *The Dollmaker*, and the site of so much decline in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is, in many ways, the most interesting site of the contemporary local food movement. The city, a shell of itself in terms of population and economic output, is a far cry from being the arsenal of democracy it once was, but a number of writers are recognizing Detroit's hopeful yet contested possibilities as a positive harbinger of sustainable urban agriculture. In 2007, Bay Area journalist Rebecca Solnit published an article in *Harper's Magazine* entitled "Detroit Arcadia," where she explored the original growth of Detroit, its subsequent downfall, and the latest rise from the ashes she dubs as "post-apocalyptic" as she sees block after block of abandoned and burned out houses and factories in a city "done in by deindustrialization, decentralization, [and] the post-World War II spread of highways and freeways" (66, 67). Thanks to the

sheer sprawl of the city, however, along with acres of abandoned blocks and razed buildings, a curious thing happened: many Detroiters, left without jobs or access to fresh food, began re-settling their abandoned metropolis, squatting and growing food, in some cases wherever they pleased, reclaiming abandoned spaces in the name of anarchy and vegetables. Solnit describes this growth as “strangely” and “beautifully...post-American” in the sense that “[h]aving a city grow up around you is not an uncommon American experience, but having the countryside return is an eerier one” (66, 72).

Indeed, there are a good number of positive developments in sustainable urban agriculture throughout Detroit. Among the examples Solnit mentions include the “lush three-acre Earth Works Garden, launched by Capuchin monks in 1999 and now growing organic produce for a local soup kitchen” as well as a “4-H garden in a fairly ravaged east-side neighborhood.” In addition to the urban gardens, Solnit also mentions the Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women, “a school for teenage mothers that opens on to a working farm, complete with apple orchard, horses, ducks, long rows of cauliflower and broccoli, and a red barn that girls built themselves” (72). The Catherine Ferguson Academy, in particular, was such a “remarkable success story” that “students had actually been caught lying to gain admission, borrowing infants to pass off as their own or swapping out their urine with a pregnant friend’s so as to produce a positive test,” according to Detroit native Mark Binelli (Binelli 118-119). Binelli, who, like Solnit, chronicled the fall and rise of Detroit in his 2012 book *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, lauds the school and praises the curriculum which required each girl to maintain their own individual patch of vegetables while learning how to milk goats, keep bees, and

slaughter and process livestock, among other things, all while completing a traditional curriculum and balancing the added responsibilities and pressures of parenthood. The nontraditional school and nontraditional setting, imparting semi-antiquated, semi-archaic knowledge and skills, “boasted a 90 percent graduation rate,” while the principal required every student “to obtain at least one college acceptance letter to obtain a diploma” (119). Unfortunately, the Catherine Ferguson Academy closed in 2014, lost in a shuffle of financial trouble and a shift from traditional public school to charter, despite national attention from not just Solnit and Binelli but also Rachel Maddow and Oprah (“Academy for teenage parents to close”). While it is unfortunate that the school closed, the track record of success remains, with it perhaps a model that could be replicated under different financial circumstances. In addition to the school, Binelli, like Solnit, finds a lot to like about the urban agriculture scene in Detroit, exclaiming that there is “something unassailably wonderful” about what was happening in Detroit, especially given the extra dig at Henry Ford “whose absolute detestation of farm work had driven him from then-rural Dearborn to [Detroit] and played no small role in motivating his wholesale reinvention of the American way of life” (59). Binelli optimistically notes a 2009 study counting “875 farms and urban gardens” in Detroit and another study arguing that Detroit could come very close to being a self-sustainable city in regard to produce and non-tropical fruit production for its population (56, 59). But is all this optimism warranted, or are these examples just heartwarming anecdotes and cherry-picked data without a realistic chance at long-term success?

Despite the closure of the Catherine Ferguson Academy, it is easy to be pulled in by the narrative that Detroit is becoming a replicable model of sweat equity, beautiful, bountiful vegetables, and egalitarian food justice. Binelli, though optimistic about some developments, pushes back against what he calls Solnit's "mawkish celebration of the city as an antidote to privileged liberals with their 'free-range chickens and Priuses'" (62). Solnit, to her credit, recognizes the sheer circumstances that have made urban farming in Detroit not a woke hobby, but a necessity for so many struggling people:

Nobody wants to live through a depression, and it is unfair, or at least deeply ironic, that black people in Detroit are being forced to undertake an experiment in utopian post-urbanism that appears to be uncomfortably similar to the sharecropping past their parents and grandparents sought to escape. There is no moral reason why they should do and be better than the rest of us—but there is a practical one. They have to. Detroit is where change is most urgent and therefore most viable. The rest of us will get there later, when necessity drives us too, and by that time Detroit may be the shining example we can look to, the post-industrial green city that was once the steel-gray capital of Fordist manufacturing (73).

But is it fair to hold Detroit to such an impractical standard? Why do the citizens of Detroit have to rebuild their own city AND be held as a sort of voyeuristic image of selfless green living? It seems as though this sort of untampered noble sentiment, while not necessarily untrue, could attract the wrong sort of attention.

A number of the players in the Detroit sustainable food movement feel frustration at the attention Detroit has garnered for both its success in sustainable farming and its status as a site of apocalyptic ruin porn—attracting the wrong kinds of tourists and new residents. Mark Sundeen dedicated the entire middle section of *The Unsettlers* to Olivia Hubert, who, along with her husband, Greg Willerer, runs Brother Produce, an urban farm in Detroit’s historic Corktown district, and Hubert and Willerer (especially Willerer) are not enthusiastic about all of the attention that Detroit gets. Famously without a national grocery store chain for a number of years, Detroit was all of a sudden attracting attention from Whole Foods, and Willerer was skeptical about what Whole Foods would do to undercut the significant progress that producers like Brother Produce had made in supplying their communities with fresh, local food. Willerer and Hubert disagreed that Detroit was a food desert, preferring the term “food labyrinth,” and Willerer pushed back against the idea that Whole Foods would ultimately help the local food movement, explaining that “[f]ood justice isn’t helping a corporation increase its bottom line,” but rather is about keeping his food—and his money—in Detroit (187). Willerer’s fervor developed into a top ten list of reasons why he would not welcome Whole Foods to Detroit, with number nine being “Detroit is on the verge of developing a unique local food economy that uses local farms and artisan food businesses”—and Whole Foods, rather than recirculating their profits from the Detroit store back into the local community, would answer to shareholders and a board of directors in Austin, Texas, where the company is based (186-187). In addition to Willerer and Hubert’s frustration with Whole Foods, Mark Binelli explains that Malik Yakini, director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, was similarly frustrated by the rise of Hantz Farm,

whose goal was to create “the world’s largest urban farm in the city limits.” Hantz Farm was bankrolled by wealthy white men and was derisively called “the plantation” by activist and writer Des Cooper (60-61). Yakini, frustrated with the influence Hantz and his crew were gaining in certain sectors, was also frustrated by the sheer size and scale of the farm along with its lack of authentic bona fides, subverting the work of Yakini and his grassroots network of smaller urban farms throughout the city.

In addition to the new corporate residents of Detroit, another hurdle for folks like Yakini, Willerer, and Hubert to navigate was the new Detroiters attracted to the city for various reasons, whether idealism, urban development, ruin porn, or simply the cool factor that Detroit had earned through its decadent decline. Binelli explains how Detroit had “suddenly become trendy” and asked if Detroit had become “the next Williamsburg” as it attracted “Brooklyn artists,” “actors like George Clooney and Richard Gere,” “[a] glossy French fashion magazine...produc[ing] a special ‘Detroit issue’ featuring shots of models in ruined industrial backdrops” along with an exhaustive, tongue in cheek (but not without enormous truth) list of transplants including “Scandinavian academics, the neopastoral agriculturalists, the deep-pocketed philanthropical organizations and the free-market ideologues and the fringe-left utopianists” who came to Detroit “to see the place as a blank slate, so debased and forgotten it could be remade” (14-16). These new residents brought money, educations, ideas, and energy, but could they create a cohesive community, or would they force Detroit to make the same mistakes as before? For Malik Yakini, the new residents of Detroit were not as much of a harmful annoyance or caricature as Binelli made them out to be, but they still needed to understand the history

and development of Detroit. Yakini told Sundeen that the “vast majority” of the new residents in Detroit were “good people” with “great intentions,” but the problem was the lack of recognition, from the white folks in particular, of the “history and culture” of Detroit, which often caused community-minded white people to act like “a bull in a china shop,” making a lot of proverbial noise but not contributing to lasting, equitable community. For Yakini, allyship was possible through learning, but Olivia Hubert, on the other hand, begrudged her new transplants in the neighborhood, frustrated by their “flaky self-congratulations at ‘discovering’ Detroit after Brooklyn or Oakland or Portland was played out,” but figured they would move on after finding something newer (Sundeen 221). Either way, the tension between haves and have-nots and these questions of authentic community or the right community are important to recognize and important to bring to the surface as a parallel to the rise, forced or not, of the Detroit sustainable food community.

Ultimately, these issues are multifaceted and tough to navigate, but what is clear is that there are a number of people in and around Detroit committed to building community and feeding the populace with food that is healthy for all of Detroit—both the landscape and the people, and committed to keep pushing forward in order to build a more equitable system that works for everyone, not just the hipster transplants or corporate investors buying up buildings with out of town or out of state money. Greg Willerer, in particular, is optimistic about the changes food and urban farming could bring to the city—and society at large. He explains that as a teacher, he “used to think education was the way to change society,” but after teaching and then experiencing

firsthand the tangible benefits of farming, he now favors the local food movement as the way to transform the world. Echoing Wendell Berry, Sundeen recognizes the immediacy of Willerer's draw to the tangibility of farming, writing

[a]s for the activism of [Willerer's] youth, slogans about clean air, saving the whales, and protecting 'the environment' seemed frankly irrelevant. Growing food inspired people with more tangible rewards—like being outside, earning money, eating delicious carrots—and just happened to improve the planet. While protests felt to him like a string of losing battles, of begging the government to change its ways, local food had the potential to actually win (203).

This type of tangible, positive change, also seen at the now shuttered Catherine Ferguson Academy, seems prevalent throughout Detroit.

Willerer, Hubert, and Yakini's commitment to building community through urban farming is inspiring, and while Detroit may not be the environmental paradise Solnit hopes for, and it may not be the ethically pure, egalitarian land of organic farm collectives, there is a lot of good work going on, and a lot of farms and businesses working to build Detroit from the bottom up. One business in particular is Sister Pie, a local pie shop started by Lisa Ludwinski in 2012. Ludwinski, a Detroit native who returned after a stint acting and making pies in New York City—maybe as one of Binelli's neopastoral agriculturists or fringe-left utopianists—embodies Malik Yakini's call for understanding the history and culture of Detroit as she serves pie to “showcase Michigan's abundance of farms and local produce” while also “fulfill[ing] her

burgeoning desire to foster family-style community in the workplace,” since pie, naturally, is “meant to be shared” (Ludwinski 2). According to Ludwinski’s cookbook, appropriately titled *Sister Pie*, “Sister Pie celebrates the seasons of Michigan” while she “works with farmers who grow food and flowers within 500 miles of Detroit” with offerings that “change in sync with the harvest.” She also recycles, composts, and donates time and food to local projects while providing a living wage and solid benefits to her employees (5). Answering Yakini’s call to check her privilege, she acknowledges that “[a]s a young, white woman running a business in Detroit, there’s no denying [her] privilege,” but she is committed to “resist the patriarchal and capitalist norms that often define our work, our culture, and our world.” Ludwinski, pushing back against the trendiness of Detroit, explains that she opened her business in Detroit because of all of the “kind, resilient people who collectively care” for the city, and as an antidote to the stereotype of Detroit as a “blank slate” or “wonderland where creative types can roam freely” (239). Ludwinski, thanks to urban farmers across the city and state, is able to sell pie that embodies the seasonality of Edna Lewis’s *A Taste of Country Cooking*, and it is not a stretch to imagine another world where Gertie Nevels is behind the counter or in the back at Sister Pie, rolling out pie dough to nourish the neighborhood.

In many ways, the answers I found to questions merely reiterated what I was asking and seeing in my own observances of farmers markets, urban agriculture, and local food markets. What was going on in Detroit was not necessarily much different from what I observed in Birmingham, or even Lexington for that matter. Birmingham, the Pittsburgh of the South, is the closest thing the South has to a Detroit or a Milwaukee:

Rust Belt cities that boomed because of the Great Migration but fell on harder times in the latter half of the twentieth century, thanks to recession, white flight, and further industrialization. These cities, once left for dead, are experiencing booms again as people—mostly white—are moving back downtown, seeking the perks of city living with high expectations. What is happening in Detroit is happening elsewhere, certainly in Birmingham from my own observances. Detroit and Birmingham are experiencing agrarian revival—championing the flavors and seasonality of Edna Lewis—in a way that was unthinkable in *The Dollmaker*. No longer are city dwellers forced to eat meager canned fare or freezer burnt out of season fruits and vegetables. Urban folks are being fed with an abundance not unlike the agrarian splendor of Gertie Nevels’s farm larder, celebrating the seasons like Edna Lewis. Problems remain: gentrification, exclusivity, access, and so on. But while our newfound agrarian trends have not quite put us in paradise, the right questions are being asked, and good work is being done.

CONCLUSION: AGRARIAN COMMUNITY DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Section 1: “And Daddy, won’t you take me back to Muhlenberg County / Down by the Green River where paradise lay?”

Farm-to-table foods, organic gardens, and local crafts are experiencing a real renaissance as communities across the country are connecting to share expertise and interest in artisanal trades, seed saving, and other ecologically sound, agrarian practices. Despite the encouraging progress, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many problematic issues relating to agrarian community. As cities and towns across the United States and world face a global health crisis, the divide between rural and urban communities has grown even larger, and scientific expertise has been questioned to an alarming degree. As the world’s population lost predictable, daily face-to-face interaction, corporations at the top of the economic food chain have thrived while individuals reliant on the wage economy or service industry struggle to put food on the table. Farmers markets and traditional restaurants were put on hold while fast food and grocery delivery have flourished as multinational companies quickly pivoted to meet the new reality. Alongside this embrace of food convenience and technology, though, has been a re-emergence of sourdough baking and more, as many people seek some sort of agency and connection to traditional practices. With these emerging, contradictory trends, questions emerge. How do we “save the world” and the environment, both urban and rural, with agrarianism if a global pandemic upends our reality and increases political, religious, and scientific divides to seemingly unprecedented levels?

My own reality has faced similar contradictions, or, to re-engage a question from my first chapter, dualities. In the midst of the pandemic, my wife and I moved back to her

hometown of Birmingham to be closer to family. This “homecoming” was a good thing: our children see their grandparents on a daily basis, and we immediately sought out and reconnected with many of the farms and farmers as we try to commit ourselves to supporting sustainable, local community. We know the farmer who raises our chicken and beef, and we habitually purchase fruit, vegetables, and other goods from local farms who engage in sustainable practices. We compost, recycle, and have purchased a house in a neighborhood where we can walk to restaurants, grocery stores, and other establishments. I even bake my own sourdough bread, having gotten a head start on the pandemic trend just a few months early.

Our hyperlocal proclivities, however, have some distinctly national and global caveats. The stoneground, organic flour I buy is sourced from sustainable farms, sure, but they are not local—one is in Illinois and the other in North Carolina. When my wife and I walk to our neighborhood shopping center, we know our wine store owner by his first name, but we are certainly not buying wine that evokes the industrial terroir of the Steel City. We may purchase wine made from grapes that were sustainably harvested or biodynamically grown, but drinking good wine is an expressly global practice for much of the world. Even the craft beer movement appears at a crossroads: breweries large and small seem to be chasing national trends like hazy IPAs and fruited sour beers instead of much attempting to develop regional variants and specialties. We supplement our farmers market purchases with food deliveries from grocery stores, including alternative milks made from almonds and coconuts grown thousands of miles away. At the beginning of the pandemic, as grocery stores and restaurants were rightfully understood as hotbeds for

the coronavirus, national corporations like Door Dash or Shipt—based in Birmingham—were happy to offer grocery and food delivery, a solution that is safe and convenient but alienates consumers even further from agricultural processes in a sort of industrial shopping simulacrum.

My current job, focused on fostering and building online communities, connection, and health content, is a similar duality. I work from home, meeting remotely with coworkers who live and work hundreds of miles away in an industry, health care, ultimately strengthened by the pandemic. I was able to keep both of my children at home thanks to their grandparents, and we have all navigated the pandemic with plenty of stress, definitely, but without the added stress of job uncertainty or loss. In short, because of our technological and vocational privilege, as well as our proximity to certain goods and services, we, like a lot of people with our age and education levels, have been able to navigate COVID-19 without a great deal of personal danger. We also trust science, wear masks, and follow recommended guidelines, and thanks to the aforementioned corporations, groceries magically appear on our front porch at the touch of a button.

Just a few miles outside my city, however, this is not the case. In many rural communities, farmers markets and access to fresh, local produce is nonexistent. Food deserts are rampant in both poor urban communities and rural areas historically rich in agricultural practice. As companies leave rural communities, the jobs that remain are often low wage jobs without good benefits, and production and factory jobs during the pandemic have been especially precarious. Scientific skepticism seems to loom large over much of rural America, even as COVID-19 hit rural areas with the same vehemence it hit

urban areas in the pandemic's early days. This willful ignorance in the face of overwhelming evidence underscores larger issues relating to the urban and rural divide that agrarianism attempts to solve. Finding a solution in the confusing morass of public health during a crisis such as this is especially layered in privilege, technological savvy, and sheer access to information.

Agrarian practices like sustainable agriculture, sourdough bread baking, or seed saving are great, but do they move the needle in the face of scientific skepticism that willingly ignores a global health crisis? As vaccines have emerged as a potential solution over the last few months, this skepticism has resulted in a logistical nightmare fixed not by local communities, for the most part, but by large-scale government initiatives and corporate supply chain know-how. What solutions can agrarianism provide when these differences in urban and rural communities are so stark that they seem to be completely different realities? What happens when local communities are disrupted by a global pandemic? The measures needed, it seems, are a mix between local and global solutions.

Section 2: “Then the coal company came with the world’s largest shovel / And they tortured the timber and stripped all the land / Well, they dug for their coal ‘til the land was forsaken / Then they wrote it all down as the progress of man”

Arlie Russell Hochschild attempts to explain this rural and urban divide in *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. Hochschild, an educated urbanite from San Francisco, examines the divide between liberals and conservatives as well as between rural and urban America. Though her book was published prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, she offers explanations that seem to require agrarian-style local solutions paired with more national, federally-mandated solutions. Hochschild explores the contradiction that rural areas want to be more self-reliant, but that this self-reliance results in red states having “more teen mothers, more divorce, worse health, more obesity, more trauma-related deaths, more low-birth-weight babies, and lower school enrollment” all while “people in red states die five years earlier than people in blue states” (8). This willful ignorance in the face of death and ill health has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Two of Hochschild’s main points center around narrative. As she attempts to understand the rural mentality of perceived self-reliance, she expounds on the idea of a “‘deep story’” understood by many rural Americans. As she began unpacks this “‘narrative as *felt*” (her italics) that precludes many people from trusting scientific evidence and economic statistics, the need for both agrarian community and top-down governmental solutions becomes clearer (xi). This deep story is a narrative of perceived self-reliance that relies on an appealing but misleading sense of autonomy and agency. Essentially, Hochschild argues that corporations have so distorted truths about wages and

pollution, among other things, that rural communities do not blame corporations for low wages or unsafe working conditions, instead blaming any job loss, health malady, or subpar material condition on the government for unnecessary oversight or regulations—and this notion of deep story easily extends to the scientific mistrust of the pandemic. Hochschild’s notion of deep story and narrative as felt have entrenched a stereotypical bootstraps mentality to rural areas, one that both privileges a dogged work ethic and ignores corporate malpractice and mistreatment. That is, these rural Americans ignore the environmental pollution and accept the low wages offered by corporations because corporations actually provide jobs (as opposed to say, fair taxes, a clean environment, and equitable government benefits), even if it is tenuous, low wage labor that causes chronic, debilitating injuries, offers little to no benefits or vacation, and pays minimum wage or not much more.

This deep story mentality leads to Hochschild’s second main point. The people in the Louisiana communities Hochschild embedded herself in claimed to prefer a dead end job over a “hand out” from the government, in the face of overwhelming evidence that these jobs were not sustainable and eventually would destroy and displace local communities—what Hochschild calls “the Great Paradox—the need for help and a principled refusal of it” (35). Hochschild attempts to explain this contradiction, gracefully placing the blame not necessarily on rural conservatives, but rather on corporate malfeasance. Rather than fully blaming the ignorance of individuals, she explains that corporations genuinely and repeatedly target rural communities more likely to accept corporate pollution because of religion, education (or lack thereof), malaise, industrial

displacement, and a number of other reasons. These citizens lack a communal history of resistance and have a number of traits that ensure their compliance in the face of such obvious mistreatment (81).

Despite this mistreatment, the men and women who Hochschild interviewed did not see themselves as victims. They instead saw their jobs as providing a lower- or occasional middle-class wage earner to, as they perceived it, earn a living and not act like a “poor m[e] asking for government handouts” (190). Hochschild found them to be “warm, intelligent, [and] generous,” and their lives were filled with “community, and church, and goodwill toward those they know” (57). To them, these jobs brought “school, home, health, [and] a piece of the American Dream,” in spite of higher rates of health problems like cancer, a lower life expectancy, and much lower earning potential than a majority of the country (72).

However, they were, and are victims. Hochschild goes on to explain that in Louisiana, many of the petrochemical plants providing these jobs are simply continuations of industrial, cancerous monocultures that were, in some cases, literally “built on former cotton and sugarcane plantations” (63). These historic forces of monoculture and industrialism, as Bookchin, the New Agrarians, and even the Southern Agrarians have noted, have displaced rural knowledge and community for the sake of economic growth, and, as Hochschild explains, these citizens in rural Louisiana are “braving the worst of an industrial system” (190).

Adding to Hochschild's paradox is the one between proximity to and worry about pollution. Hochschild cites a 2012 study that shows that "residents of red states suffer higher rates of industrial pollution" than blue state residents, which is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the fact that red state citizens "li[ving] in a county with a higher exposure to toxic pollution" were "*more* likely to believe that Americans 'worry too much' about the environment and to believe that the United States is doing 'more than enough' about it" (79). While it is laudable that these rural residents find pride in the community and work they are able to eke out, it is also infuriating, disheartening, and confusing that those who live closest to environmental pollution are least likely to be worried about it. Common sense would lead one to believe that the opposite would be true. So what, if anything, is to be done?

The lessons Hochschild shares throughout *Strangers in Their Own Land* transfer well to both the COVID-19 pandemic and to the possibility of building real agrarian community. Hochschild reiterates the idea that to trigger real, lasting, and positive change in a local community requires both an understanding of personal narrative as well as global markets and governments that ascribe and allow certain corporate behaviors. In addition to Deep Story, narrative as felt, and the Great Paradox, Hochschild makes a simple comparison between early twentieth century Louisiana Governor Huey Long and more recent Governor Bobby Jindal. Long, though definitely a demagogue who engaged in controversial political practices, used an oil boom to "cur[b] homelessness and poverty" with "literacy courses...roads, bridges, hospitals, and schools" built on money raised by taxing oil companies. This is a stark contrast to Jindal, who sold a more recent

oil and fracking boom to Louisiana citizens by reallocating “\$1.6 billion *from* schools and hospitals to give *to* companies as ‘incentives’” (92). This underscores the need for more “global” solutions for building sustainable local communities, while also acknowledging the importance of personal pride and sacrifice in the face of this rural deception.

In *For-Profit Democracy*, Loka Ashwood makes similar claims. Like Hochschild, Ashwood acknowledges that “rural places are labeled externalities and write-offs for dangerous and risky industrial projects” (x). Also like Hochschild, she explains that these areas are “poverty pockets sought by industries,” exploiting and coercing small town citizens into underpaid, exploitative labor that is not sustainable for the individual or the community. What both Hochschild’s and Ashwood’s arguments show is that in order for real agrarian communities to exist, small-scale agrarian practices must be paired with large-scale solutions offered by the government—whether it is Huey Long-style populist reform or 1920s tax codes that made “the United States one of the most economically egalitarian countries” (Ashwood 102).

Small-scale agrarian practices, like seed-saving practiced by Bill Best, Janisse Ray, or Ruth Ozeki’s characters in *All Over Creation*, for example, are all good and well, but without larger reforms that allow pockets of “rural resistance” to exist, widespread positive change cannot grow. As Hochschild and Ashwood have pointed out, rural resistance is predicated much more on state and federal tax policy than agrarian narratives may wish to acknowledge, and enacting real, positive change in these rural areas—change that could insulate communities from the sort of misinformation and

scientific mistrust resulting in a rural “brain-drain” and a pandemic that has raged much worse than it could and should have.

Section 3: “Blow up your TV / Throw away your paper / Go to the country / Build you a home / Plant a little garden / Eat a lot of peaches / Try an’ find Jesus on your own”

Much of the agrarian work that I have engaged with throughout this dissertation is about addressing this deep story or narrative as felt that Hochschild discusses, and about tackling this mistreatment and the dire straits that many communities—both rural and urban—find themselves in as a result of years of cancerous industrial growth. These issues are not new: people have always shared stories about themselves as a sort of cultural and communal pride, and resistance to centralized industrial power is what drove the Southern Agrarians to take their stand, what helps Bill Best grow and share tomatoes and seeds, and what inspires other agrarian farmers, writers, bakers, and citizens throughout the country and world. But what is somewhat missing in some of this agrarian work is an understanding or acknowledgment that our world is global and multifaceted, and true agrarian resistance must take into account global and technological systems of power. Agrarianism should not be timid about wielding the considerable large-scale power it has amassed over the years in order to influence and direct governmental policy that, when paired with smaller-scale agrarian practices, can work together to create widescale, positive change.

For example, Wendell Berry is, in his own life, a distinctly *local* figure. To my knowledge, he rarely leaves Henry County, Kentucky, where he has farmed and written for decades. His local legacy is intact, as his immediate family members and friends are doing good, sustainable work in Henry County to keep The Berry Center, the Wendell Berry Farming Program, and the Agrarian Literary League going strong. They work with

local farmers, butchers, writers, and everyday citizens to make Henry County a more equitable, educated place. But Wendell Berry is also a truly global figure, venerated by farmers and foodies all over the planet. The Wendell Berry Farming Program is centered in Henry County, Kentucky, but after an economic downturn, the scholastic partnership the program had was moved from St. Catharine College in Washington County, Kentucky, to Sterling College all the way up in Craftsbury, Vermont, making the project both hyperlocal and somewhat national.

Wes Jackson is another figure who, in focusing on local agrarian issues, ended up scaling up and addressing agricultural issues on a national level. It is rare that I receive a marketing email from Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard's wildly successful outdoor clothing company, without mention of Wes Jackson or the Land Institute. Patagonia and the Land Institute have partnered to sell food made from perennial grain grown in Kansas by the Land Institute—shipped all over the country. Jackson, as discussed previously, moved home to Kansas in an attempt to make a positive impact on his local community, instead makes decisions that impact sustainable agriculture across the planet in terms of scientific research and regenerative practices. An argument could also be made that dirtbag climber-cum-billionaire Chouinard is the most important environmentalist alive, and despite sustainable practices and an increased focus on organic, regenerative supply chains, Patagonia is selling mass-produced, albeit well-made clothes and outdoor gear with enormous supply chains—not exactly artisanal, local, or small batch, but nonetheless important and helpful in terms of influencing sustainable practices.

The practice of seed saving is perhaps the ultimate example of a practice that is both local and global in scale. Individual seed savers are undoubtedly doing great work all over the country and world, but the work of each individual seed saver pales in comparison to something like the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Spitsbergen, a Norwegian island in the Arctic Ocean. The seed bank stores hundreds of thousands of seeds to protect vegetable varieties against blight or, as a topical example, global pandemic. These are numbers that individual seed savers or even local seed savers cannot compete with. Taking into consideration Hochschild's idea of Deep Story, though, we need both: large-scale efforts to preserve and protect sustainable ways of life next to small-scale individuals working hard to create and preserve powerful cultural narratives that elicit joy and human connection—and that is perhaps the strongest point of agrarianism. In order to create sustainable community with lasting, joyful connections to other people, we need both.

To combat the sheer scale of corporations or governments whose primary intent is profit, it may finally be time for agrarians to amend draft horseman Maurice Telleen's advice that agrarianism "is too important to be a mere movement." Telleen, in "The Mind-Set of Agrarianism...New and Old," explains that agrarianism is meant "to work in a specific time and place" and that most "of today's success stories in agrarianism are about niches and making it in the margins" (53, 57). A better strategy may be to push beyond the margins and understand that larger-scale defenses are needed to combat these global forces that have caused numerous ecological and cultural ills. Filling niches and plugging marginal gaps is great: small-scale agriculture and community is vastly

important, but agrarianism's ability to build coalition and find commonality could help these sound ecological practices scale up in a mindful, meaningful way in order to be a larger force for good. As problems run the gamut from local to truly global in scale, agrarianism should acknowledge its ability to scale up and down with appropriate integrity.

Most of all, we must remember that seeds should be planted. Large-scale measures like seed banks are incredibly important as we face a future of near-certain climate change, potential pandemics, and the like, but seeds are never really seeds if they do not go to ground. Moving us forward right now requires boots-on-the-ground immediacy and direct action that small-scale agrarianism can provide. And it does not have to seem radical. We don't literally have to blow up our televisions, as the late John Prine suggested—though it may help—but we can all plant a garden, no matter how small, and eat a lot of peaches as we find our proverbial Jesus.

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