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Putting Us In Our Place: An Ecological Literary Reading of Barbara Kingsolver

It is midnight. A young pregnant woman sits in a closet, quietly scribbling notes to herself. She is writing a novel. Nine months of hard mental work every night end as she gives birth to her first child, a daughter. Also born that day is a book, which is accepted by a major publishing house. The woman is Barbara Kingsolver and the book, *The Bean Trees*. Since the 1988 publication of that first novel, Kingsolver has written many books: a collection of short stories (*Homeland and Other Stories*), a collection of poems in both Spanish and English (*Another America/Otra America*), and four more novels, (*Animal Dreams, Pigs in Heaven, The Poisonwood Bible, and Prodigal Summer*). Kingsolver has also published journalistic and nonfiction books. In 1989, she published a nonfiction account of the Phelps Dodge mine strike (*Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*). Her first collection of essays, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now and Never*, became a bestseller. In response to the September 11th tragedy, Kingsolver penned another collection of essays, this one entitled *Small Wonder*. Her most recent publication is also nonfiction. Kingsolver collaborated with the famous photographer, Annie Griffiths Belt, to create *Last Stand: America’s Virgin Lands*.

Though she enjoys writing and has kept a journal since the age of eight, Kingsolver never envisioned herself becoming a professional writer. At DePauw University, Kingsolver chose a “practical” major and pursued her B.S. in Biology. She later earned her M.S. from the
University of Arizona in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. Obviously, this does not follow the typical education of someone planning to write novels. Without the requisite MFA, how did Kingsolver come to the forefront of contemporary American writing, with book awards, speaking engagements, bestsellers, and a recognition on Oprah’s Book Club List? In Kingsolver’s own words from a televised interview in July 1998, “I don’t understand it at all. This is what I do when I write: I take these sacred myths, and I unravel them, and I look at them and try to see how true or false they are, and reconstruct them in a more humane way. And for some reason, I get away with it” (“Sacred” 320).

One of the primary myths which Kingsolver unravels regards a human-centered, or anthropocentric, view of the world. She challenges the prevalent opinion that humans are more valuable than other forms of life and that our place in the ecological system is one of dominion. Kingsolver’s fascination with ecology has continued since earning her science degrees, and this subject permeates many of her texts, including The Poisonwood Bible, Prodigal Summer, and her two essay collections, High Tide In Tucson and Small Wonder. While there are many ways to discuss the varied themes Kingsolver explores in her writing, the focus of this paper is to provide an ecological literary analysis of some of Kingsolver’s major works, both fiction and nonfiction.¹

Ecologically-Oriented Literature

While popularly thought of as pertaining to recycling and saving the earth, the study and practice of ecology encompasses many aspects of life, conservation, and stewardship. Charles W. Southwick defines ecology as a multidisciplinary field involving “many areas of the physical, biological, and social sciences” (3). While science plays a major role in ecology, the “behavioral
and social dimensions” of “human activities” impact the balances and networks of life on this planet. Ecology, first and foremost, is the study and practice involving the relationships between organisms and their environments, and the relationships between human groups and their physical and social environments. The term “ecology” is derived from the Greek “oikos,” meaning “house” (Odum 1). “Ecology” literally means “house study,” implying that the ecologist studies and cares for the world—the house—in which he or she lives. Thus, the very concept of ecology hinges upon relationships: environments, cause and effect occurrences, and interdependencies. An ecological perspective considers multiple influences on a species or environment. For example, rather than simply determining that a company has illegally disposed of chemical wastes, an ecologist considers the ways in which the perpetrator thinks about relationships with other life forms. Ecological thinkers recognize that the ways people think about their place in the world have a great impact on other species and non-living objects.

While authors have proclaimed the glories of nature from the beginnings of civilization, ecological thinkers admonish that not all such writing actually grants the natural world inherent worth. Writers like Virgil, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth praised the physical world and its nonhuman inhabitants. However, contemporary ecological critics perceive in these writers a strong tendency to elevate nature because of the value it holds in relation to humans. For example, a poem might praise nature for its ability to inspire great thought or as a panacea for culture’s illnesses. Ecological criticism negatively labels this perception of nature as anthropocentric, a pervasive viewpoint throughout literatures of both the East and West.

One common way in which writers have perceived and captured nature in language is through its alignment with the female body. In response, the emerging critical theory known as ecofeminism has elucidated the twin oppressions of nature and women. Simultaneously,
poststructuralist discourse has drawn our attention to the language we use and how it shapes our perceptions of the world. Leo Marx’s influential *The Machine in the Garden* opened a whole new discussion of the ways Americans think about wilderness and how the discourse influences our literary canon. Such an exploration of the ways in which we talk and write about the natural world can prove useful in assessing ecologically-oriented texts.

Ecocritics do not focus solely upon discourse, however. Though the scope of ecology has broadened into many disciplines, including anthropology, social theory, epistemology, history, philosophy, and various other fields, it is foundationally a hard science in the company of “molecular biology, genetics, developmental biology, and evolution” (Odum 4). Contemporary ecological literary critics seek to examine the scientific and environmental implications in a given literary text. A responsible ecological interpretation of literature avoids romanticizing nature by basing itself on solid scientific understanding; therefore, Kingsolver’s texts lend themselves especially well to an ecological interpretation because of her extensive background in science. According to Karl Kroeber in *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of the Mind*, “a genuine ecological understanding is founded on an intricate interplay of sophisticated specialized theorizing with knowledge of detailed scientific facts” which have been expanded and revised since the middle of the 19th century. “Unless we recognize the complexity of scientific ecology, we fall into cheap sentimentalism that may, in fact, be destructive of our natural environment” (Kroeber 27). This viewpoint encourages ecological literary critics to look at *and* beyond language to consider the broader implications for the world of the text and the world outside the text.

Kroeber has suggested some challenging goals for the expanding field of ecological literary criticism, believing that it can draw upon interdisciplinary links to strengthen both the
humanities and the sciences. He advocates this burgeoning field of criticism as something which will help us “develop mutually enriching interconnections between humanistic and scientific modes of understanding humankind, the earth we inhabit, and their reciprocal interdependencies” (140). Kroeber believes that literary critics have too long ignored scientific concepts in favor of pursuing narrowly ideological themes, most of which are completely anthropocentric. Like the ecofeminists, Kroeber questions the diametrical oppositions innate in language, such as man/woman, culture/nature, white/black. He argues that we cannot simply reverse the binary opposition by elevating woman over man, nature over culture, etc. Instead of using a traditional form of criticism which discusses “works of literature in self-defensively exclusivist terms, nationalistic, ethnic, or ideological,” he suggests the alternative of ecological criticism which “seeks to discover each work’s contribution to comprehensive possibilities of interactivity.” This mode of interpretation will result in the reestablishment of the “significance of diversity” (Kroeber 140-41). Ecological literary criticism draws upon many diverse disciplines and fields to address questions which affect us all.

Ecocritics ask a startling range of questions: How is nature represented in this novel? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis informing contemporary literature and popular culture? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics? It should become apparent in this list of questions that the growing field of ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary.
Until recently, the interdisciplinary nature of ecological criticism has marginalized it from mainstream criticism. The broadening of literary theory and criticism to consider the world outside the text has granted ecological literary critique a place in discourse. “One of the indubitable advances of literary criticism in recent years has been its breaking down of artificially rigid distinctions between texts and contexts,” and between and among seemingly different fields of study (Kroeber 142). Theoretical discourse arising from poststructuralism and cultural criticism has paved the way for a reassessment of what has long been deemed appropriate fare for literature. In an essay published in Beyond Nature Writing, Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer ask a provocative question: “Are the standards for ‘great literature’ biased toward representations of the disembodied mind and of various cultural and aesthetic issues and away from representations that clearly speak to human relationships with nature?” (8). The answer in the past was yes, but ecological literary criticism has widened acceptable discourse to ask larger questions about language, canonicity, and the proposed opposition of culture versus nature.

Since the advent of the environmental movement of the 1970s, many university English departments have offered American nature writing. Critics and the reading public alike have given increasing attention to major environmental writers like Annie Dillard, Leslie Marmon Silko, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez. Many scholars consider Henry David Thoreau’s Walden to be the seminal ecological text, now including it as required reading in ecology courses. Though the fields of environmentalism and ecology have developed to such a degree that some environmental activists today look back at Thoreau with mild contempt for what they view as weaknesses or inconsistencies in his work, Walden remains a influential text. Its exploration of a local environment through systematic, scientific observation provides inspiration
for many American writers today. Kingsolver praises Thoreau’s dismissal of the notion “that poetry and science are incompatible,” (Tide 238) offering a contemporary approach of reading Thoreau as a prototypical ecological writer.

A growing trend in ecological criticism is to take a text not traditionally falling within the bounds of “nature writing,” such as a fictitious narrative, and to read it through the lens of ecology. Lawrence Buell’s book, The Environmental Imagination, provides concrete requirements for an environmentally oriented work:

1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; 2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; 3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation; and 4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)

The standardization of what comprises an ecologically oriented work supports the assertion that this form of criticism is gaining acceptance in academic circles. Recent years have seen a growing recognition that a widening of scope is necessary to keep literary criticism relevant to today’s culture and world. Because of this trend, writers who might otherwise be considered outside of the realm of the literary are receiving well-deserved recognition.

Kingsolver’s texts attract increasing attention in literary communities as readers learn to distinguish the difference between ecological themes and propagandistic moralizing. In light of today’s environmental awareness, readers see that the themes which Kingsolver weaves through her writing affect us all. When she looks at much of what is published today, Kingsolver says she sees “a lot of beautifully written work that’s about—it seems to me—nothing” (qtd. Ryan 78). In contrast to this writing in a void, Kingsolver writes that she begins with a theme: “I
devise a big question whose answer I believe will be amazing, and maybe shift the world a bit on its axis” (FAQ 16). This author’s understanding of the world pivots upon the overarching concept of ecology.

Barbara Kingsolver’s texts are motivated by her personal ecological ethics. Prodigal Summer, The Poisonwood Bible, and various essays provide an arena in which the author may pose a question and search for potential answers. A major question which pervades Kingsolver’s work is, “What is the nature of our relationship with other forms of life and the organic world, and how do we live in that place responsibly?” She also asks how the treatment of nature often mirrors oppression of the Other, or marginalized people. Her preoccupation with the question of ecology places Kingsolver in dialogue with Wendell Berry, another writer who addresses this theme. Through her language and plots in the fiction and artfully didactic nonfiction, Kingsolver offers her readers a thoughtful body of texts which welcomes an ecocritical interpretation.

**Humanity as Nature in Prodigal Summer**

As a scientist, Kingsolver has a scholarly relationship with the natural world which goes beyond appreciation. Countless writers, including many who are writing today, have praised nature as a wild place to which humans may turn for renewal and aesthetic appreciation. While Kingsolver revels in the beauty of nature, appreciation does not suffice: we must realize that we are a part of nature. And as part of the world, not an entity above all else, we must recognize the inherent value of nonhuman life. Nature, as Lawrence Buell writes, is not a “theatre for human events,” but rather, nature is “a presence for its own sake” (52). In her most recent novel, Prodigal Summer, Kingsolver creates her most extravagant character: nature itself.
Of Kingsolver’s novels, *Prodigal Summer* most deeply explores the issues related to the question of humans’ place on this planet. Kingsolver creates a world in which she can seek viable answers to that question. Set in contemporary Appalachia, the author weaves three separate stories together. Kingsolver writes the book entirely in the third person omniscient voice, which enables the reader to follow the lives of three inhabitants of Zebulon County: Deanna, a middle-aged recluse who lives alone on Zebulon mountain under the pay of the Forest Service; Lusa, a young widow trying to find her way in a difficult family of in-laws; and Garnett, an old man trying to develop a blight-resistant chestnut tree before he dies. Three chapter titles alternate: Predators, Moth Love, and Old Chestnuts, about Deanna, Lusa, and Garnett, respectively. But Nature, with all of its passion and abundance, stands as the main character of the novel. Throughout the course of *Prodigal Summer*, the human characters are confronted again and again with the realization that they are not ever really alone. Instead, they live in a vast and thriving ecosystem of which they comprise only a small part.

Kingsolver opens and closes the novel with the sentence “solitude is only a human presumption” (1, 444). Using this literary technique aligns Kingsolver with Henry David Thoreau, who begins *Walden* with the famous line “I went to the woods to live deliberately...” and concludes with a similar one (Thoreau 3). In Lawrence Buell’s view, Thoreau turns the end of *Walden* into a new beginning, and “latter-day Thoreauvians like to repeat this gesture” by concluding with a return to the opening meditation (Buell 151). By beginning and ending *Prodigal Summer* with this concept, Kingsolver frames the narrative with an unusual assertion: nature is an actor and character. In a literal sense, Kingsolver’s choice to define solitude as a human presumption establishes nature as a character in its own right. Even when Deanna walks on a trail miles away from other human beings, she only *presumes* her solitude. Kingsolver does
not use nature as merely a setting for human action. Like thinkers from many schools of ecological thought, Kingsolver recognizes that nature has intrinsic worth separate from any relationship which we have with it.

Prodigal Summer's main male character, Garnett Walker, does not respect nature for its own sake. A traditional farmer, he illustrates the stance of dominion, not interdependence, with the natural world. As Kingsolver's comic invention in Prodigal Summer, Garnett taught agriculture at the local high school for over 30 years and now spends much of his time arguing with Nannie Rawley, the sprightly old woman who lives next door, over her refusal to use pesticides and weed killers. An interesting mix of paradoxes, Garnett earnestly reveres some forms of life while devising ways to destroy others. He obsesses about reviving the American Chestnut, a species which used to live in forests from Maine to Georgia, but which died out in the early part of the twentieth century because of a blight. On his own land, he pollinates remnants of the American chestnut species with the blight-resistant Chinese chestnut, hoping with each generation to be one tree closer to bringing back the giant, beautiful species. Like a loving researcher, Garnett patiently crosses and recrosses the specimens. In their book, Farming in Nature's Image, Judith Soule and Jon Piper explain the primary ways in which botanists preserve endangered species: "breeders searching for disease and pest resistance, as well as adaptation to climatic extremes and poor soils, turn to landraces [non-cultivated specimens] first. When that fails, they turn to varieties and related species" (20). Garnett attempts to develop a healthy American chestnut through such a hybrid program. Unfortunately, Garnett's passion for the chestnut does not overflow into admiration for other forms of life, and this discrepancy creates the primary point of contention—and humor—between Garnett and Nannie.
As in most small towns, rivalries start early and last for decades. For many years, Garnett had talked to Nannie. “He’d had the patience of Job, informing her it was her duty to keep her NO SPRAY ZONE, if she insisted on having such a thing, inside her own legal property boundaries” (86). Nannie protests that the weed-spray will blow into her organic orchard and refuses to take down the sign. Garnett goes out early in the morning to remove her “No Spray” sign from his property so that the truck will spray his roadside property with weed-killer. In the high grass, Garnett encounters a large snapping turtle who bites his left boot and refuses to let go. Garnett cannot see the turtle. He can only feel a “sensation of heaviness in his left leg,” and surmises that he is having a stroke (87). Much to his chagrin, he must ask Nannie, his nemesis, for help. He notices Nannie “staring down at his left leg, in apparent horror.” Then she announces, “You haven’t gotten a stroke. You’ve gotten a turtle” (89).

Even while poking fun at Garnett’s old-fashioned and close-minded perspective, Kingsolver treats him with a great deal of warmth. Garnett earnestly takes a superiority ethic which both Nannie and Kingsolver see as untenable, but the reader gradually watches Garnett change from his early viewpoint that “success without chemicals was impossible” (87) to a more responsible worldview at the conclusion of Prodigal Summer. Changes in perspective occur in Garnett because of encounters with Nannie, an organic farmer. Nannie maintains an ethic which regards all life as sacred and worthy of living. According to Nannie, all living things have legitimate interests. She sets out a manifesto of life in response to Garnett’s piously pompous letter about “God’s word” and what it “did and did not mean to suggest” about humans’ relationships with animals and plants (139). In his letter, he sarcastically asks Nannie a question often heard in debates about environmental protection: “Are we humans to think of ourselves merely as one species among many? [...] Do you believe a human holds no more special
authority in this world than, say, a Japanese beetle or a salamander?” (186). Garnett quotes Genesis 1 to support his deeply held belief that “we must view God’s creatures as gifts to his favored children and use them for our own purposes, even if this occasionally causes this one or that one to go extinct after a while” (186-87).

To this, Nannie replies,

I do believe humankind holds a special place in the world. It’s the same place held by a mockingbird, in his opinion, and a salamander in whatever he has that resembles a mind of his own. Every creature alive believes this: the center of everything is me. Every life has its own kind of worship, I think. (215)

Deanna, the forest ranger living up on Zebulon Mountain, listens to the dawn’s symphony and thinks to herself that “a bird never doubts its place at the center of the universe” (53). Nannie and Deanna both articulate the perspective Kingsolver takes regarding the sometimes conflicting goals of humans and other forms of life. Kingsolver writes elsewhere that stewardship is easy when it “coincides with [our] own needs, but it’s not so much fun when these programs collide” (Wonder 63). The ethical orientation of Prodigal Summer’s acknowledges that humans’ purpose or goal in living does not automatically trump the claims of life which cannot speak for itself.

Lusa, another main character, also advocates this ethical orientation. Lusa expresses arguments similar to those Deanna employs with a coyote hunter and Nannie uses with Garnett when she says, “I’m sorry my education didn’t prepare me to live here where the two classes of animals are food and target practice” (Summer 35). She meets Cole, a tobacco farmer, at the University of Kentucky, where she is a postdoctoral fellow studying moths. They get married and move to Cole’s tobacco farm in Zebulon County, and Lusa struggles to adjust to the rural attitudes of dominion over the land and its nonhuman inhabitants. She mocks the way her
country neighbors seem “determined to exterminate every living thing in sight. Grubbing out wild roses, shooting blue jays out of cherry trees, knocking phoebe nests out of the porch eves to keep the fledglings from messing on the stairs” (32-33). Lusa’s frustration stems from her ethical understanding that all life, including honeysuckle vines, luna moths, and chestnut trees, strives to live, just as humans do. And though some forms of life may help us, frighten us, or even thwart our designs, those effects which they have upon humans do not negate their intrinsic value as living things.

To examine interspecies conflicts and interdependency, Kingsolver avoids soft, comfortable metaphors or simplistic moralizing. She draws upon her extensive scientific knowledge to accurately portray the ecological balance. Some of the more scientifically oriented portions of Prodigal Summer include biological and ecological theories, such as the Volterra Principle. This biological law states that when a species faces endangerment, the reproduction rate of that species skyrocket (216). The average reader of popular contemporary fiction may balk at first when the narrative shifts from plot to address biological principles. After all, authors do not usually challenge their readers with Latin names, information about the gaps left when a species goes extinct, or a plot which Kingsolver herself says is “not exclusively—or even mainly—about humans” (FAQ 1). One disgruntled critic reviewing the novel for US Weekly writes that some passages “read like overzealous lectures on ecology” (Tyrell 49). Most critics, however, praise Kingsolver’s beautiful integration of scientific data with lyrical prose as a new standard for American environmental writers (Cracroft 190).

Kingsolver treats her animal and plant subjects with respect and compassion, as life forms with their own purposes. Deanna adopts a similar view as a wildlife ranger on Zebulon Mountain. She frequently runs off intruders who climb the mountain in search of “sang,” a slang
word for ginseng. Deanna takes responsibility for ginseng, which people illegally harvest and export for sale in China. She “pluck[s] off the gaudy leaves” of the plant to “save it from being discovered by hunters.” Deanna does not do this to protect the ginseng for her own benefit:

If no person ever sees it again, herself included, that would be fine; she just loved the idea of those little man-shaped roots dancing in their world beneath the soil. She wanted them to persist forever, not just for the sake of impotent men in China or anywhere else, just for the sake of ginseng. *(Summer 194)*

This reinforces the prevailing concept of *Prodigal Summer*: each member of an ecological network deserves life regardless of its relationship to humans.

Kingsolver uses the lives of her characters to explore the rights of the nonhuman environment. When a human life and another kind of life intersect, which existence takes precedence? Instead of answering that question in an authorial voice, Kingsolver uses multiple character perspectives to respond. Raglon and Scholtmeijer correctly identify this general technique of alternating character viewpoint as a way to ensure that “no one human story [. . .] determines the meaning” (258). According to Nannie, the human story alone does not resolve a conflict because both creatures think that his or her need should triumph.

One such confrontation which takes central focus in *Prodigal Summer* occurs between humans and coyotes. As a Midwestern sheep rancher, Eddie Bondo comes to the Appalachians for the Mountain Empire Bounty Hunt. In Deanna’s view, he plans a “willful extermination” of coyotes *(Summer 29)*. From Eddie’s perspective, any large predator threatens his livelihood, and he envisions the hunt of the endangered coyote as an honorable one. Deanna tries to ignore his reason for being on the mountain, but jealously guards the location of a coyote family’s den. She
Deanna, living in the mountains and not distracted (until Eddie’s arrival) by human relationships, understands her body and accepts its coordination with the rhythms of the natural world. In contrast, Lusa focuses so intently upon coordinating her life with the family of her deceased husband that she does not recognize her body’s connection with the moon. Lusa learns about her own cycle’s connection to the earth at the Independence Day family gathering for fireworks and ice cream. Her brothers-in-law flirt with her, though she buried her husband only six weeks before. As she walks away from the men, she puzzles about their actions and the way her body feels that day: “a fullness, not really unpleasant but distracting, and a constant small twinge on the left side of her belly. And then it came to her, just as she spied the bald pate of an enormous whole moon rising above the roof of the barn. Of course” (230). She laughs at “life’s ridiculous persistence. She must be trailing pheromones” (230). Just like moths fluttering around a porch light, the male family members respond to a natural animal instinct which draws them to flirt with Lusa.

The fact that humans are part of the animal kingdom, Kingsolver argues, should not shame us. Kingsolver employs metaphors from nature to describe humans. Because fiction often values human life too highly to compare people to animals except in the pejorative sense, Kingsolver’s reversal of this norm provides a fascinating ecological interpretation. By repeatedly comparing her characters with members of the nonhuman world, Kingsolver asserts that humans are undeniably a part of nature. A major way in which Kingsolver achieves this is by reminding her readers that, fundamentally, sex is a means of biological reproduction, even though modern culture would have us believe otherwise.

Sex in our culture is both an utter taboo and the currency of jaded commerce. It’s a very tricky terrain to write about copulation, when the language seems to be held in the joint
asks him about hunting. You feel like “there’s just the two of you left, alone in the world?”

When Eddie replies in the affirmative, Deanna replies,

But that’s wrong. *There’s no such thing as alone.* That animal was going to do something important in its time—eat a lot of things, or be eaten. There’s all these connected things you’re about to blow a hole in. They can’t all be your enemy, because *one of those connected things is you.* (320, emphasis added)

Though this argument does not end in Eddie deciding to love the predatory role coyotes play, he ultimately chooses to leave the coyote family alone. Interestingly, the threat Eddie is to the coyotes only slightly overshadows the threat he poses for Deanna. Kingsolver, who carefully selects names for her characters, gives Deanna “Wolf” as a surname. Eddie’s dangerous relationship with Deanna Wolf parallels his menacing relationship with the coyote family.

Part of the responsible answer to the question of species priority includes the recognition that humans are an integral part of the network of lives around us, just as they affect and influence us in the web of ecology. We cannot extract our lives, needs, or survival from the natural world. As Deanna says, “one of those connected things is you” (320). In spite of our technological advances, we are directly affected by natural disasters, ecological imbalances, and the earth’s cycles. Kingsolver illustrates this in the narrative by the shared realization made by Deanna and Lusa: both women ovulate with the full moon. Deanna tries to explain her fertility to Eddie:

“I’m fertile, that’s what got to you,” she said frankly, testing him out, but he didn’t flinch.

“Just so you know, this is the day. […] Any woman will ovulate with the full moon if she’s exposed to enough moonlight. It’s the pituitary gland that does it, I guess. It takes a while to get there, but then you stay.” (92-93)
custody of pornography and the medical profession. But Prodigal Summer is about life and
fecundity, and it could not be an honest book without sex at its very center. For this book to
be taken seriously as literature, I realized that I would have to invent a new poetry of
copulation. (FAQ 2)

The author invents a “new poetry” of sex and fills Prodigal Summer with erotic metaphors she
draws from nature. Over the course of an “oversexed, muggy summer” (223), the human lives of
Zebulon County parallel nature’s fecundity. Deanna gets distracted by Eddie, a hiker, and in the
two nights following their meeting, she awakes “in a sweat, disturbed by the fierce, muffled
sounds of bats mating in the shadows under her porch eaves, aggressive copulations that seemed
to be the collisions of strangers” (6).

When the two meet again, Deanna remembers seeing a pair of hawks “coupling on the wing” (17). Only a few moments later, Deanna forgets her inhibitions with Eddie; they fall
“together like a pair of hawks, not plummeting through thin air but rolling gradually downhill
over adder’s tongues” (22). Spring’s drive for reproduction should not embarrass us.

Kingsolver’s descriptions of animal, plant, and human procreation elevates sex from its
contemporary commercial status to a miraculous event worth celebrating. As Lusa says to her
husband, Cole, “You’re nature, I’m nature. We shit, we piss, we have babies, we make messes.”
(45). Throughout Prodigal Summer, Kingsolver associates the sexiness of spring and summer
with the physical love between a man and woman.

Kingsolver employs an unusual image to describe the lovemaking of Lusa and Cole:

moths. Early in the novel, Lusa reflects that Cole
could only love sex more if he had antennae the shape of feathers, like a moth, for combing
the air around her, and elaborately branched coremata he could evert from his abdomen for
the purpose of calling back to her with his own scent. (37)

In her description of Cole’s face, Lusa again compares him to an insect when she recalls that “his beard made her think of the nectar guides on the throats of flowers that show bees the path to the sweet place where nectar resides” (38). Kingsolver takes this image of Cole as a moth or insect even further in Lusa’s dream in which a luna moth makes love to her. The average reader may feel skeptical disgust at this scene. When considered in light of Kingsolver’s ecological ethics, however, the scene uncovers a symbolic, not grotesque, meaning. The association Kingsolver makes between Lusa’s love for moths and Cole’s moth-like attributes makes this figurative embrace an artistic moment of similarity between animal and human life.

Through Kingsolver’s description of human relationships in parallel with the animal kingdom, she reinforces the concept that nature is not merely a framing device in Prodigal Summer. By using personification and nature metaphors, Kingsolver seeks humans’ place in the ecological balance while she also endows inherent worth upon nonhuman life. The reader closes the book with a renewed sense of wonder at the complexity of the relationships all life has with all other life, including a refreshing equilibrium which comes from understanding our lives as inextricably entwined with the world around us.

**Oppressed Nature in The Poisonwood Bible**

Kingsolver invents a complex web of relationships in The Poisonwood Bible. In Prodigal Summer, the human behaviors have profound influences on nature, but in Kingsolver’s epic novel of Africa, Kingsolver uses oppression of nature as a reflection of oppression of marginalized people. Kingsolver sets The Poisonwood Bible in Congo in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time of turmoil and civil uprisings. As a second grader, Kingsolver lived in Africa
reason she uses multiple characters’ perspectives in *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver creates five different voices for the five women. Kingsolver writes that she conceived of this structure from the very beginning of her work on the novel, and she spent about a year honing her ability to tell a story from each of the five characters’ perspectives. Though this took a great deal of work, Kingsolver writes that she did not want to insult her readers by offering one answer to the question, “What did we do to Africa, and how do we feel about it?” (FAQ 7). Each of the women gives a different perspective of Africa and what the western world has done to it, as well as varied responses to how they feel about it. Rachel, the oldest sister, dismisses the role she played, while Orleanna lives paralyzed by guilt. Each of the women represents a political position which we may also take (FAQ 7).

Much of the allegorical nature of this novel lies in Kingsolver’s repeated connections between the physical land—the flora and fauna—and the political land—the people, government, and culture. As an arrogant proselytizer, Nathan desires to exercise dominion over the Congolese and over the literal land of the Congo. The Price family quickly realizes that they have entered another world: Kingsolver describes a lush landscape which proves unsettling to the missionary family, just as it did to the Portuguese colonizers. Leah decides that Central Africa is a rowdy society of flora and fauna that have managed to balance together on a trembling geologic plate for ten million years: when you clear off part of the plate, the whole slides into ruin. Stop clearing, and the balance slowly returns. (*Bible* 525)

Kingsolver’s descriptions of the physical environs parallels the colonization and rape of the continent of Africa by European colonizers.

Nathan decides that he must plant a garden by command of “the Saviour, who obviously is all in favor of subduing the untamed wilderness for a garden” (36). The words which
for a year while her father served as a physician in the Congo. However, Kingsolver contradicts the notion that The Poisonwood Bible is autobiographical; she had a good experience in Africa. Instead, her interest in the subject of the novel rises from her fascination with postcolonialism and imperialism, and she tackles these two interrelated issues in her massive bestseller, The Poisonwood Bible. This novel has inspired the most critical material of any of Kingsolver’s texts, and many literary and cultural critics have done postcolonial readings of The Poisonwood Bible. While its postcolonial bent certainly validates this critique, very few critics have recognized Kingsolver’s use of the physical landscape as a metaphor for the people of Africa. In Kingsolver’s sprawling work, a missionary family treads across the literal and figurative soil of Africa.

The novel’s antagonist and father/husband figure, Nathan Price, marches into Kilanga, Congo where he plans to be “a powerful instrument” of God’s will (Bible 18). A fiery and hard-headed man, Kingsolver paints him, not as a representative of Christ, but as an arrogant Westerner. Bombastic and abusive, Nathan vehemently insists that the African people turn from total depravity to the “Truth.” Truth, in Nathan’s eyes, is not just the Christian religion, but the ways of the Western world. To Nathan, God has laid forth his requirements and Nathan remains oblivious to everything else. Critic Amanda Cockrell correctly points out that “the personal wants of the increasingly deranged missionary Nathan Price mirror the political wants of the West, obsessed with controlling the uncontrollable and indecipherable territory of the Congo” (Cockrell 9). About The Poisonwood Bible, Kingsolver writes that it is “a political allegory, in which the small incidents of characters’ lives shed light on larger events in our world” (FAQ 6).

Orleanna, Nathan’s wife, and her four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May, narrate the story. Each narrator possesses a distinct voice, vocabulary, and syntax. For the same
Kingsolver employs implicitly demonstrate Nathan's violence against the land: "he beat down;" he "began to rip out long handfuls of grass with quick, energetic jerks as though tearing out the hair of the world;" he hacked at plants until their flowers rolled away "like severed heads" (36, 38, emphasis added). Nathan ignores the well-meaning advice of a Congolese woman who tries to explain that his flat American garden will never withstand the torrential rains of west Africa. The rains prove less of a problem than something else which Nathan ignored: the need for pollinators. The seeds he brought with him sprout and grow flowers, but no fruit.

The image of a beautiful but functionally dead garden serves as a metaphor for the failure of the Price family to convert the African people to Christianity. Nathan sees the word of God as a seed, and himself as the farmer. But he comes without the knowledge of the Congolese people and without a respect for their ways, so his seeds of evangelism wash away or sprout only to remain unfertilized. Just as Nathan acts in ignorance of the language, customs, and religions of the Congolese, he does not care to understand the relationships and connections inherent in the natural world of Congo.

Orleanna Price opens the book with a retrospective account of the opulent profusion of the Congolese jungle:

Every space is filled with life: delicate poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves. Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The breathing of monkeys. A glide of snake belly on branch. A single-file army of ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous queen [. . .] This forest eats itself and lives forever. (5) This short passage is packed with adumbration for things to come in the novel. The snake, ants, and the pulsing drive for survival all make multiple, well-planned reappearances throughout the
narrative. Orléanna’s opening to the novel exposes her bias in how she looks at what happens in Congo: she focuses on the ways in which Africa destroys her family. However, she warns the reader to “be careful. Later on you’ll have to decide what sympathy [the girls] deserve” (5). On the forest pathway, she waves her hand in front of her to clear the spider webs, and “behind them the curtain closes. The spiders return to their killing ways” (6). In this scene, Orléanna views the spiders as killers, the encumbrance which she must remove to make progress. The girls, in contrast, appear as “pale, doomed blossoms” (5).

Kingsolver uses irony and a circular method of narrative by concluding The Poisonwood Bible with the same scene, told from Ruth May’s perspective. Now “the eyes in the trees,” Ruth May dies of a mamba snake bite. Echoes of the opening scene resonate through the closing chapter: “the glide of belly on branch;” “vines strangling their kin in the wrestle for sunlight;” “the forest eats itself and lives forever” (537). But then Kingsolver masterfully discloses a secret which had been hidden in Orléanna’s chapter. Whereas Orléanna refers to the spiders’ “killing ways” and her children’s innocence, Ruth May reveals the impact which the family has upon the forest. As the smallest child reaches to snatch a leaf, she spies a plump, orange-bodied spider that has been knocked to the ground. The spider is on its back and fatly vulnerable, struggling to find its pointed feet and scurry back into the air. The child delicately reaches out her toe and squashes the spider. Its dark blood squirts sideways, alarmingly. (538)

In this beautiful use of irony, Kingsolver corrects Orléanna’s perspective, a human-centered prospective, by concluding the narrative with the voice of the trees. “Every life is different because you passed this way and touched history” (538).
Nature in Kingsolver’s Creative Nonfiction

In her essays, Kingsolver proves that fiction is not the only genre in which she can use a narrative to teach her readers. Though essay collections have not sold well traditionally, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*, published in 1995, sold more copies in the first month than any of her preceding works. Likewise, *Small Wonder* has done surprisingly well in book sales. Like another leading essayist, Wendell Berry, Kingsolver blends personal experience, opinion, and a gifted writing style in the essay form to delight and teach readers. Especially when read as a collection, Kingsolver’s essays sustain an ecological literary criticism while also displaying the author’s talent for creatively and humbly educating her audience. Though one may read each of Kingsolver’s published essays as individual pieces, she writes in the preface to *High Tide in Tucson* that her “intent was to make it a book, with a beginning, an end, and a modicum of reason. The essays are meant to be read in order, since some connect with and depend on their predecessors” (x). In her essays, Kingsolver employs personification of organic life, humor, and humility to show her readers our place in this world.

Many themes present in Kingsolver’s fiction reappear in her creative nonfiction: humans as part of nature, ecological balance, sustainability and responsibility. The title essay of *High Tide in Tucson* pivots upon Kingsolver’s reflections on the accidental transplantation of a hermit crab from the Bahamas to “Tucson, Arizona, where the nearest standing water source of any real account was the municipal sewage-treatment plant” (*Tide* 2). Like her method for creating empathy with animals in *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver uses personification of the crustaceous Buster to illustrate the uniqueness and value in a small, seemingly inconsequential crab. By watching Buster skitter around his terrarium, Kingsolver recalls her audience to an appreciation
for the adaptability of this crab and of all species. Though a hermit crab seems insignificant, Kingsolver endows him with worth as a part of life on this planet.

Kingsolver further implies the crab’s importance by drawing direct connections between Buster’s displacement and adaptation to her own personal experience. “When I was twenty-two, I donned the shell of a tiny yellow Renault and drove with all I owned from Kentucky to Tucson” (Tide 6, emphasis added). The move was tumultuous, and the author finds that she still possesses a longing in her bones for her childhood home. Like Buster, who awakes to a place vastly different from a tropical beach, Kingsolver writes, “I open my eyes on every new day expecting that a creek will run through my backyard under broad-leafed maples, and that my mother will be whistling in the kitchen” (6). By establishing the common experience she shares with Buster the crab, Kingsolver encourages her readers to renew “our membership in the animal kingdom” (10), the same proposal she makes in *Prodigal Summer*.

This prevalent proposition that humans belong to the animal kingdom resurfaces in multiple essays, yet Kingsolver always employs a different central illustration. “Lily’s Chickens,” an essay in *Small Wonder*, is an excellent example of her ability to create an image, push beyond that image to a deeper meaning, and then return to the image with lessons she has gleaned from it. This essay begins, “My daughter is in love. She’s only five years old, but this is real. Her beau is shorter than she is, by a wide margin, and she couldn’t care less. He has dark eyes, a loud voice, and tendency to crow” (*Wonder* 109). The “beau” is Mr. Doodle, “the love child of a Rose-comb and a Wyandotte” (110). Kingsolver works her magic of storytelling in a passage about Mr. Doodle’s antics, again employing personification by imaging the rooster as a loving husband to his harem:

He rushes up to the caterpillar with a valiant air, picking it up in his beak and flogging it
repeatedly against the ground until the clear and present danger of caterpillar attack has passed. Then he cocks his head and gently approaches [one of his hens] with a throaty little pickup line, dropping the defeated morsel at her feet. He doles out the food equitably, herds his dizzy-headed girls to the roost when it’s time for bed, and uses an impressive vocabulary to address their specific needs. (111)

The images used to describe a simple domestic scene imbue it with wonder at an animal which Kingsolver admits has “the I.Q. of an eggplant” (112). Kingsolver shows her respect and empathy with the characters of Mr. Doodle and Buster through the employment of personification, often to a humorous end.

Kingsolver’s storytelling balances on the point of earnestness and humor. As yet unexplored by critics, Kingsolver’s use of humor deserves brief mention. As illustrated by Katrina Schimoeller Peiffer in Coyote at Large: Humor in American Nature Writing, the traditions inherent in criticism have “conspired to train us to perceive only the solemnity and seriousness in nature writing” (ix). A serious reading of an ecologically-oriented text ignores, and sometimes disapproves, the comedic in nature writing. Peiffer questions this practice by asserting that American nature writers, including Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Rachel Carson, are “all in some way, comic moralists,” (xi) and that the study of humor in their texts does not undermine their moral imperatives, but actually strengthens them. In a point most applicable to a reading of Kingsolver’s texts, Pieffer writes, “fundamental to the perception of humor is our ability to shift perspective and see our world differently, as if to arrive at a new reality” (10). Kingsolver’s use of humor in her essay collections illustrates this “shift [of] perspective” as she seeks to draw her readers into a “new reality” in which humans take a more balanced and responsible role.
Rarely does Kingsolver write an entire essay intended to be comedic. Rather, Kingsolver’s wit frequently inhabits a single word or phrase, rather than an entire scene. For example, Buster’s “rapture is the day [Kingsolver] drag[s] the unidentifiable things in cottage cheese containers out of the back of the fridge” (Tide 3). The word “rapture” associated with a crab strikes a comedic tone—what does a crab’s rapture look like, after all? Kingsolver’s reference to the quintessential leftovers in the cottage cheese containers reminds the reader of his or her multiple experiences with just such refrigerator horrors. Kingsolver often writes a very serious paragraph, and then catches her readers off-guard with a surprising conclusion. For example, in a discussion about humans’ long-held assumption that we may quickly kill any animals or plants which we label “unquestionable enemies,” Kingsolver concludes with just such a trope. She states the assumptions, and then concludes the paragraph with an ironic smile: “There will always be more passenger pigeons where those came from” (Wonder 64).

In her nonfiction, Kingsolver also employs hyperbole, frequently in conjunction with engaging similes. In “Postcards from an Imaginary Mom,” Kingsolver reflects on a book promotion tour she had to make for her publisher. She employs this simile to describe her experience: “Promoting novels in a sound-bite culture is like selling elephants from a gumball machine. Cramped. Put in your nickel and stand back” (Tide 161). The author has spent months and three hundred pages penning a worthy piece of writing, and then interviewers ask for a “seven word answer” (161) to the question, “what is your book about?” Kingsolver’s image of the elephant-gumball machine is perfect. Witty gems such as these are sprinkled throughout the essays. Amidst Kingsolver’s memories of her hometown: “We had two stoplights, which were set to burn green in all directions after 6 P.M., so as not, should the event of traffic arise, to slow anybody up” (Tide 47). After publishing Pigs in Heaven, an early novel, Kingsolver received
“more pig-oriented items” than she ever thought existed. She adds parenthetically, “I’m pretty sure I’m going to call my next novel Mustang Convertible Dreams” (Tide 244). Such moments discount any assessment of Kingsolver which implies that her serious side overshadows delight in the simple pleasures of life, such as laughter and fresh tomatoes.

Kingsolver’s ironic humor enables her to write her opinion with a humble, not sardonic, smile, as she often divulges embarrassing or humbling things about herself as a source of comedy. While a reader may disagree with an opinion Kingsolver holds, one does not feel belittled by the author. By inviting her readers to laugh with her at her own expense, Kingsolver discards the author-as-god card in favor of playing a conspiratorial game with her readers. In “Making Peace,” Kingsolver writes about a herd of desert-dwelling wooly pigs who repeatedly eat everything she plants in her garden.

In a fit of spite, I went to a nursery that specializes in exotics, and brought home an Adenium obesum. This is the beautiful plant whose singularly lethal sap is used by African hunters to poison their darts. [The wooly pigs] understand spite: they uprooted my Adenium obesum, gored it, and left it for dead. (Tide 25-26)

In the midst of her impassioned requests that humans look around at our world and recognize our place in it, Kingsolver willingly exposes her own foibles and experiences as both a source of illustration and humor. This humility is the sweetener which keeps Kingsolver’s opinionated essays from turning into a lecture under which readers chaff. Her gifted voice and balanced wit provide an intriguing body of work which sustains both an ecologically thematic reading and a literary reading of Kingsolver’s artistic use of humor.

The essay genre provides Kingsolver with a forum in which she may candidly advocate ecological responsibility. In contrast to her fictional texts, where she must create an entirely
fictional world to explore ecological issues, the essay collections permit Kingsolver to use her own voice and her own perspective without veiling them or creating a narrator. The above examples of Kingsolver’s style provide proof that Kingsolver does not dispose of artful characterization and literary forms in her nonfiction works. “Lily’s Chickens” includes wonderful descriptions in the form of a vignette about a family of chickens. From that literary moment, Kingsolver seamlessly draws her reader from the humorous descriptions of the chickens’ antics to her family’s food ethic, an action which she could not take in a traditional novel or short story. The raising of chickens becomes a synecdoche for the Kingsolver family’s food ethic:

It’s more along the lines of religion, something we believe in the way families believe in patriotism and loving thy neighbor as thyself. If our food ethic seems an unusual orthodoxy to set alongside those other two, it probably shouldn’t. We consider them to be connected.

(Wonder 113)

By writing essays, Kingsolver employs humor, vivid imagery, and didactic artistry to show her readers our place in the world. Her purpose in writing, in her own words, is to poke America’s “belly from the inside with [her] one little life and the small, pointed sword of [her] pen” (Wonder 113). That pen is never as sharp as when Kingsolver sets down her thoughts in an essay.

A Place in the Dialogue: Kingsolver and Other Writers

For Kingsolver, art is inherently political, and an artist faces a world that needs change for the better. Not surprisingly, Kingsolver appreciates authors with whom she feels an ecological kinship. While Kingsolver questions the traditional white male canon, she counts
classics like Shakespeare and Dickens among her favorites. However, she rates Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* as her two most treasured books. One can see how these two socially-active texts have inspired Kingsolver in her own writing. When asked by an aspiring author if someone can become a good writer without liking to read, Kingsolver replied, “Not on your life” (FAQ 16). From an early age, she “read continually,” and enjoyed varied eras and authors (“Sacred” 307). In her latest collection of essays, *Small Wonder*, she explicitly cites thirty three different writers, in a list so diverse as to include Heraclitus and Al Gore, Emily Dickinson and John Irving. Kingsolver acknowledges the interdependence she has with other writers, and knows her place in the world of literature. When asked why she continues reading other materials while she writes in spite of the possibility that those other writers might contaminate her style, Kingsolver wittily replies, “When I’m writing, I read Steinbeck and Shakespeare with all my might and pray to be contaminated” (FAQ 16).

Foremost among those authors to whom she alludes the most often are Wendell Berry and Henry David Thoreau.

In “The Forest in the Seeds,” an essay explicitly inspired by Henry David Thoreau, Kingsolver praises his “expansive poetic sensibility” and “categorical thoroughness” (Tide 237). Having read everything Thoreau ever wrote, Kingsolver reflects that “[Thoreau’s] gifts as a writer transcended his contributions to natural science. Thoreau dismissed the notion that poetry and science are incompatible, and captured for his readers the simple wonder we hastily leave behind in the age of reason” (238). Mostly, however, Kingsolver marvels at Thoreau’s recognition that, even in science, there is no such thing as pure objectivism, in contrast to the objectivist view held by some modern science writers (239). Kingsolver recommends Thoreau as a cure for “the tyranny of impatience” so prevalent in our time and culture.
Like Thoreau, Kingsolver seeks the balance between the “telescopic” and “microscopic” views of the world. At one extreme, an observant author may examine something finite so closely that context disappears and meaning becomes null. At the other, “the distant and idealized view” is also flawed because there is too much space between observer and observed (Schneider 2). Particularly in The Poisonwood Bible, Kingsolver strives to maintain this balance by using her scientific knowledge of African flora and fauna to illustrate a transcendental truth about the world’s treatment of Africa. Kingsolver obviously respects Thoreau a great deal, and gratefully acknowledges him as a profound influence on her own writing and thinking.

Besides her admiration for Thoreau, Kingsolver respectfully aligns herself with a fellow Kentuckian. In her foreword to Small Wonder, Kingsolver writes that she appreciates “anything by Wendell Berry” (xvi), and prefaces the entire collection with a quote from Berry: “To treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it.” Kingsolver acknowledges Berry by name, but his influence upon Kingsolver’s own writing becomes evident in less explicit ways as well. The intertextuality between Berry and Kingsolver proves helpful in the discussion of Kingsolver’s advocacy for sustainable agriculture, organics, and the power implicit in the choices we make. Two exemplary essays, Berry’s “For Love of the Land” and Kingsolver’s “A Good Farmer” provide insightful connections between the two writers’ ethic of humility in our dependence upon the land.

In an openly personal essay, Berry describes himself as “a conservationist and a farmer, a wilderness advocate and an agrarian.” In other words, he has spent most of his life “on two losing sides” (“Love” 50). He writes that he cares deeply for the wilderness, but also for “economic landscapes,” explicitly expressing his concern for those who rely upon the land for
their livelihoods. This focus immediately differentiates between Berry and environmentalists who advocate conservation of wilderness to the neglect of land used for food production. The idealistic environmental conservationists, Berry writes, should care about farming for the simple reason that “conservationists eat” (51). In another essay, Berry expresses frustration at people who do not “betray any premonition that the survival of farmers might involve the survival of anyone else” (“Head” 22). Survival of humans literally depends upon a sustainable agriculture, but many Americans live as if farming has no impact on them at all.

Similarly, Kingsolver writes,

In my professional life I’ve learned that as long as I write novels and nonfiction books about strictly human conventions and constructions, I’m taken seriously. But when my writing strays into that muddy territory where humans are forced to own up to our dependency on the land, I’m apt to be declared quaintly irrelevant by the small, acutely urban clique that decides in this country what will be called worthy literature. (“Farmer” 13)

This reflects the frustration Berry expresses about the distance between urban intellectuals and reality. In response to so many people living in cities and never seeing produce anywhere but the grocery store, Kingsolver encourages her readers to “get acquainted with [their] food chain” (“Farmer” 14). As Berry puts it, “to be interested in food but not in food production is clearly absurd” (“Love” 51).

Berry and Kingsolver adamantly challenge the “imposed acrimony” (“Farmer” 13) culture creates between producers and consumers of food, the wild and the domestic. These two humanly constructed dichotomies serve as a false buffer between what we eat and where it comes from. In “Ecology and American Literature: Thoreau and Un-Thoreau,” Karl Kroebler writes that “ecology forces us out of the binary oversimplifications of all contemporary thinking”
The popular culture/nature debate denies the flexible relationship these two “opposites” have with each other. This binary opposition allows people to speak about saving the earth while eating whatever the supermarket provides and the government allows. Berry argues that those who advocate conservation while ignoring the food they eat directly support those very entities which cause the greatest environmental damage to air, land, and water. In her essay, Kingsolver decries the
gustatory industries [which] treat food items like spoiled little celebrities, zipping them around the globe in luxurious air-conditioned cabins, dressing them up in gaudy outfits, spritzing them with makeup and breaking the bank on advertising. (“Farmer” 14)
Theorizing and protesting are not enough—each person must not only advocate ecological responsibility, but live it.

Both of these authors do more than sit in their offices, writing books: they shift ecological responsibility from authorities like The National Wildlife Federation and the United State Department of Agriculture to the shoulders of all Americans. Berry and Kingsolver advocate that everyone take personal responsibility for the decisions they make on a daily basis. In their book, Farming in Nature’s Image, Judith Soule and Jon Piper state that “society as a whole presently subsidizes agriculture’s energy use by tolerating environmental degradation” (23). Likewise, Kingsolver writes, “Before anyone rules out eating locally and organically because it seems expensive, I’d ask him or her to figure out the costs paid outside the store: the health costs, the land costs, the big environmental Visa bill that sooner or later comes due” (Wonder 125). Kingsolver and Berry offer solutions to the vitally practical side to the problems which plague our economic and ecological checkbooks.
In contrast to Kingsolver and Berry’s humanistic ecology, some environmental groups today ignore the human implications of environmental protection measures. In his exploration of ecological writing, Kroeber states, “today, all significant writers whose focus is natural phenomena are in essence ‘deep ecologists’” (“Thoreau” 311). Deep ecologists “desire the health of nature even if that means limiting, or doing away with, human activities and human beings, an anti-anthropocentrism summarized by the bumper sticker: ‘Save the Planet. Kill yourself’” (“Thoreau” 311). Kroeber’s generalized categorization of “all significant writers” in environmental writing neglects Berry and Kingsolver’s shared understanding that humans hold a vital and valuable role as part of the ecological system. Neither one would place such a bumper sticker on their car. In contrast, Kingsolver and Berry take a more complex ethic of ecology than Kroeber suggests in his essay. They do not simply reverse the binary opposition of culture/nature and human/nonhuman. Instead, they search for responsible ways to improve social and ecological systems.

Kingsolver claims that pursuing a system of sustainable agriculture is “a political choice, a scientific one, a personal and a convivial one” (“Farmer” 18). The continued survival of humanity depends directly upon the success of farmers and sustainable agriculture. One cannot simply deny the dependence we have upon the land. Berry also recognizes the implications of the interconnections which comprise our nation’s ecological balance: he recently decided that he would no longer endorse or support “wilderness-preservation projects that do not seek also to improve the health of the surrounding economic landscapes and human communities” (“Love” 51, emphasis added). In spite of his earlier thesis about deep ecologists, Kroeber includes Berry in his survey of important environmental writers, stating that Berry adamantly states that “proper farming, cultivation of one’s own land, is humankind’s best means of participating
interdependently with nature” (“Thoreau” 321). Thus, Berry’s decision to only support movements which seek to enhance both natural and human life serves to underline what both these practical conservationists argue in their respective essays—unless the conservationist and farmer join forces in finding ways to sustain the land, they will “simply concede an easy victory to their common enemy: the corporate totalitarianism” which destroys not only the physical ecology, but “its human communities (“Love” 56). Not an easy task, but a necessary one.

“Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you're a thousand miles from the cornfield,” said Dwight D. Eisenhower (Columbia Dictionary of Quotations). Neither Kingsolver nor Berry lives more than a few feet from a productive field, garden, or orchard, and neither claim that farming is easy. While the two authors and Berry share an optimism about the potential for reversing damage done to the land, neither author lives under any illusion about the difficulty of farming. Kingsolver works the land all year round, from May to August in Kentucky, and from September to April in Arizona. Berry lives and works on a small farm in Henry County, Kentucky, the place where he was born in 1938 (Kibler 9). Both writers cherish their connection with the land. In “Lily’s Chickens,” Kingsolver writes,

the soreness in my hamstrings at the end of a hard day of planting or hoeing feels good in a way I can hardly explain [. . .] I’ve found the deepest kind of physical satisfaction in giving my body’s muscles, senses, and attentiveness over to the purpose for which they were originally designed. (Wonder 128)

Kingsolver’s self-proclaimed pantheism does not diminish her wonder over the natural world. In fact, she holds to many of the tenets which Wendell Berry has used in his theology of ecology. The mystery of life to which Berry consistently refers appears as a prevalent theme in Kingsolver’s fiction and nonfiction. In an essay she composed with her husband, Steven Hopp,
Kingsolver describes the profusion of wild desert blooms one year to a friend living in the Northeast. Bewildered, the northerner asks, “If they weren’t there last year, and this year they are, then who planted them?” Kingsolver replies, “God planted them!” (Wonder 90).

Kingsolver, like Berry, appropriates elements of religious faith to express truth. At the conclusion of the essay about the desert wildflowers, Kingsolver takes on a religious tone of description: “The flowers will go on mystifying us, answering to a clock that ticks so slowly we won’t live long enough to hear it” (92). Kingsolver’s reverence for living things inspires her to write that she “thinks it wise to enter the doors of creation not with a lion tamer’s whip and chair, but with the reverence humankind has traditionally summoned for entering places of worship: a temple, a mosque, or a cathedral” (108).

The two Kentuckians share a humility because of their interdependency with the land and nonhuman species. They both advocate organic agriculture, stewardship, and social justice, all of which comprise an ecological ethic. Humans have a place within the network of life around them. Berry writes that human beings should “seek a life in this world that ‘never exceeds natural limits, never grows beyond the power of its place to support it, produces no waste, and enriches itself by death and decay’” (qtd Lucas 75). This quote resonates with Kingsolver as she discusses her family’s habits of conservation:

Likening a voluntary simplicity to a religion is neither hyperbole nor sacrilege. Some people look around and declare the root of all evil to be sex or blasphemy, and so they aspire to be pious and chaste. Where I look for evil I’m more likely to see degradations of human and natural life, an immoral gap between rich and poor, a ravaged earth. At the root of these, I see greed and overconsumption by the powerful minority. I was born to that caste, but I can aspire to waste not and want less. (Wonder 123)
Putting Kingsolver in Her Place

Barbara Kingsolver views literature as an instrument of social change, and her passion for ecology informs her characters, plots, and themes. Kingsolver writes out of her ecological ethic, which she has developed over a lifetime of studying and loving nature. She avoids the dangerous pitfall of romanticizing nature because her background in science gives her a firm foundation. Upon that scholarly appreciation for nature, Kingsolver constructs beautiful and balanced representations of natural processes. The texts discussed in this paper, Prodigal Summer, The Poisonwood Bible, and multiple essays, offer readers a world in which Kingsolver poses a question and then offers various possible answers. In each of these texts, Kingsolver unravels an anthropocentric view of the world, legitimizing the claims of the land and of nonhuman species. She also reveals that our treatment of nature often reflects our personal arrogance or humility, as she does in The Poisonwood Bible through Nathan Price’s character.

Kingsolver herself is humble in acknowledging her place among other ecological thinkers and writers. Critics employing an ecological literary form of interpretation discover a valuable means of critiquing her works and showing her artistic didacticism. In both her fiction and nonfiction, Kingsolver asks, “What is the nature of our relationship with other forms of life and the organic world, and how do we live in that place responsibly?” To answer this question in Prodigal Summer, Nannie, Deanna, and Lusa each articulate the inherent worth in all of life. In her essays, Kingsolver explores the implications of our place within that network of interdependencies by creating minute images to illuminate the importance of ecological balance. Kingsolver’s answer to the “big question” of humans’ place can indeed “shift the world a bit on its axis” (FAQ 16).
Kingsolver’s gifted narrative style may cause the world to willingly shift. Her authorial humility attracts readers and critics who feel disgusted with authors who write solely for their own edification. Masterful employment of humor and irony establish Kingsolver as a comic moralist, and keep her texts from becoming too heavy-handed or solemn. Kingsolver’s joy and hope permeate her writing, and because of her writing style, she has introduced a whole generation of readers to the joys of being members of the animal kingdom. With that joy comes the responsibility which we each bear to live responsibly in our place in the world. As long as readers open Kingsolver’s books, her words will serve as a reminder of these ecological truths: Solitude is only a human presumption, and humility is the only appropriate response to the world around us. She reminds us what it means

To be surrounded by a singing, mating, howling commotion of other species, each of which could possibly care less about our economic status or our running day calendar. *Wildness puts us in our place.* It reminds us that our plans are small and somewhat absurd. It reminds us why, in those cases in which our plans might influence many future generations, we ought to choose carefully. *(Wonder 40, emphasis added)*

Kingsolver’s books do not only delight and inspire her readers; through her words, Kingsolver teaches us our place in this beautiful, intricate place we call home.
Over the course of my research and reading of Kingsolver’s texts, I explored many intriguing themes. For the length and scope of this paper, I chose to focus upon the ecological themes in two of Kingsolver’s novels and some of her essays. However, Kingsolver’s texts can sustain readings concerned with war/justice issues, imbalance of power, American cultural arrogance, postcolonial issues, poverty/homelessness, feminism, etc. Her social activism in protesting the Vietnam War, First Gulf War, and now the War in Iraq provide ample material for an entirely different study of pacifism and anti-militarism, a possibility I seriously considered pursuing for this project, and may work on at a later time. For an accessible way to examine some of these other prevalent themes in Kingsolver’s texts, see her two essay collections.


For examples of a sustained comedic/ironic style, see “Taming the Beast with Two Backs” in Small Wonder, “Life without Go-Go Boots” and “The Muscle Mystique,” both in High Tide in Tucson.
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