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CHAPTER TWO

THE ARIDITY OF GRACE: COMMUNITY AND ECOFEMINISM IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *ANIMAL DREAMS* AND *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

RICHARD MAGEE

I have borrowed my title from an essay by Kathleen Norris called "The Grace of Aridity and Other Comedies." Norris, in turn, has borrowed the phrase from Graham Greene's novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*, about a man who is spiritually burnt-out but who inadvertently seems to find some sort of grace in an unlikely place. To Norris, people who live in places the "rest of the world considers God-forsaken" have achieved grace by loving the place because it is forsaken and by "recognizing and accepting what is there."¹ This acceptance constitutes a grace that frequently becomes lost in the excesses of American culture. The phrase has resonance for readers of Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams*, which is set in Grace, Arizona. The inhabitants of this town have achieved grace in Norris's sense in that they are struggling to live in a forsaken landscape. They live in an arid community clinging to the river running through their town. Yet the very things that make the town seem inhospitable—the aridity, the problems with the river, the smallness—are the very things that provide a strong sense of community and connect the people to each other.

The difficulty of living in the desert landscape also serves as a metaphor for Barbara Kingsolver's approach to nature writing. In both *Animal Dreams* and her later novel *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver constructs narratives of community inhabited by characters with a vivid awareness of the natural world and the threats to that world; furthermore, both novels feature strong female characters who long for a more harmonious life within nature. The novels develop and present forthright ecofeminist themes, with the women in the texts representing ideals of

ecologically sensitive living who seek to educate their communities about threats to the environment and the defenses against those threats. Kingsolver's ecofeminist vision, however, is frequently complicated and contradictory; just as the desert landscape presents its inhabitants with numerous challenges, Kingsolver's narratives of community, by their very structure and implicit concerns, undermine and complicate her agenda. The ecofeminism in Kingsolver's novels is problematized by the necessarily conservative language and rhetorical tropes that Kingsolver uses to promote a radical agenda.

The overall structure, the character types, and many of the tropes in both of her novels indicate the complexity of Kingsolver's vision and the difficulties of incorporating a radical environmental awareness into modern American culture. In *Prodigal Summer*, Lusa and her husband, Cole, are arguing about the seemingly contradictory needs and concerns of farmers and environmentalists when the topic of a bee infestation at the local church comes up. Cole attacks Lusa's urban background, saying that people like her get "sentimental in a place where nature's already been dead for fifty years."² His point is that she cannot see the real problems that nature creates for rural communities, and that, as a consequence, she sentimentalizes nature. Cole's accusation contributes two important concepts: First, he conceptualizes "nature" as something separate from the human. "Nature" is dead in the city. Second, he denigrates sentimentalism as a false way of looking at nature that does not or will not face the practical realities of daily life.

I will come back to the first point later in my discussion, but for now, I wish to consider the implications of Cole's criticism of sentimentalism, as it is particularly important in light of Kingsolver's narrative structure. Both novels closely follow the structure and present many of the same themes found in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Suzanne Clark looks at the formal structure of sentimental literature in *Sentimental Modernism*, where she says that the "rhetorical stance [of the sentimental] is profoundly intertwined with the historical conflicts of middle-class culture."³ The women who were writing these works, and the women and girls who were reading them, felt barred from many of the canonical conflicts: politics, war, and even to a certain extent the frontier. Therefore, the conflicts that were left—the home economy, relationships, the local community, and so on—became the fodder of their fictions. Because the concerns were largely personal and intimate rather than global, sentimental literature sought to "elicit feelings of empathy and concern."⁴ Above all, the well-being of the immediate community and the characters who peopled the community established the aesthetic, rhetorical, and

thematic structures of sentimental fiction. Kingsolver, though, while deploying the "narrative of community,"⁵ where the interactions and emotional lives of the characters are central, struggles to evade the constraints that the sentimental structure imposes while at the same time she needs to make use of the powerful emotional impact that the sentimental can create. Her novels are simultaneously validations of the characters' vibrant emotional lives and strong refutations of much of "middle-class culture." Thus, Kingsolver constructs a narrative with the sentimental tropes of family and domestic concerns that seeks to critique the sentimental tradition while also investing it with a radical social agenda.

There are other similarities between Kingsolver's fiction and the sentimental and domestic fiction of the nineteenth century, as Kingsolver clearly places *Animal Dreams* in the Harriet Beecher Stowe tradition of social justice. Kingsolver presents a scene with a modern-day parallel to the social upheaval and moral dilemmas of slavery in Stowe's time. In an episode that illustrates the transformation of the sentimental in a self-aware, self-referential postmodern world, Codi remembers a dog that she and her sister Hallie had briefly cared for after the dog's owners, refugees from El Salvador, were sent back. The two sisters take in the refugees and briefly care for the dog, acts of kindness consistent with the sentimental vision. When kindness becomes too much work, they back off, taking mental refuge in euphemisms like "Humane Society." Significantly, Codi does not mention what happens to the mother and daughter, except that they have been returned to their place of persecution. The dog metonymically stands in for the whole group, and Codi realizes that she is not entirely capable of escaping her culpability even with soothing terms. Codi is able to stand back and assess her reaction to what is essentially a latter-day Fugitive Slave Act, and she notes with irony that society still readily provides her with a means to avoid her guilt. Her connection to the refugees is based on an emotional, sentimental appeal, just as much of the pathos of Stowe's depiction of slavery is rooted in the same sort of appeal. The most important difference between Kingsolver's indictment of American policy and Stowe's critique of slavery is that Kingsolver more directly implicates the mass of American society.

Despite Cole's implicit claim in *Prodigal Summer* that the sentimental is weak or somehow flawed, such writing does present a formidable argumentative strategy by employing the readers' emotions as a link between the textual world and the world the reader inhabits. This link also partly ameliorates one of the weaknesses that "traditional nature writing" holds for modern readers. As Lawrence Buell points out in *Writing for an*

Endangered World, traditional nature writing, with its emphasis on the exemplary landscape, tends toward the "downplay if not the exclusion of social justice concerns."⁶ When traditional nature writing extols the beauty of, for example, a Yosemite sunrise, it perpetuates the nature/culture divide by presenting a pristine landscape untouched by human hands as somehow the only model for environmental concern. Such thinking, moreover, elides the social realities of this model of environmental concern: that elites, usually white males, work for the preservation of exemplary landscapes while ignoring the problems facing a small, poor community in rural Arizona.

In *Prodigal Summer*, all of the main female characters clearly represent nature, and the men represent (agri)culture, in the construct that Sherry Ortner contemplates and critiques.⁷ Not only do the women represent nature, they represent different stages of nature. Deanna is the primitive, maternal (by the end of the novel she discovers she is pregnant), and primal earth-goddess. Nannie Rawley is the old woman with the lifetime of natural folk wisdom stored up in her head. Lusa is the modern, educated woman who uses her intelligence as well as her fierce determination and family attachments to become a more ecologically sensitive farmer than any of the men who farm around her could hope to be.

The symbolic weight that these three women carry points toward the difficulty Kingsolver faces in her attempt to construct an ecofeminist model. With no significant exceptions, the men in the novel remain obstinately wedded to industrial agriculture and the modern chemical industrial complex that infuses large-scale farming. The essentialist juxtaposition of caring earth mother with toxic man quickly becomes a parody of itself. Furthermore, the tension between these poles becomes untenable when the construct excludes men from the community until they can become enlightened enough to be reintegrated. The tensions in the novel between the opposing poles of ecofeminist and toxic man cannot be resolved, and Kingsolver's characters find themselves feeling confused sympathy for their opponents.

The ongoing argument over pesticide use between Nannie Rawley, the old woman organic farmer, and Garnett Walker III, the retired vocational agriculture teacher and strong proponent of agricultural chemical use, illustrates the oversimplification and instability of the female-nature/male-culture dichotomy. In virtually every scene with these two characters, Garnett is planning some assault on the pests of his gardens with ever stronger chemicals, and Nannie tries to set him straight. Finally they sit down so Nannie can explain the Volterra principle, which

states that pesticide use kills both predator and prey insects, but, because of the quicker life cycle and greater fecundity of prey (or pest) insects, their population rebounds more quickly. As a result, overuse of pesticides can, in the long run, increase the number of pests because their natural enemies have been killed off more effectively. When Nannie finishes explaining this, Garnett says, "I didn't find the fault in your thinking."⁸ Rather than admit a biological principle that argues against pesticides makes sense, Toxic Man expresses his frustration that he cannot refute the argument. Their feud is further destabilized when the two begin to edge closer to a friendly accommodation, undermining the opposing terms.

In Kingsolver's construction of ecological themes, the human concerns are not ignored, but are presented as parallel to, and inseparable from, the concerns of non-human nature; unlike Cole's implication that humans and nature are separate, Kingsolver asserts their interdependence. The central human concern is community, and this notion is developed by William Shutkin, an environmental lawyer and activist who writes about what he calls "civic environmentalism" in *The Land that Could Be*. He sees parallels between the "rise in economic and social inequality" and "the deterioration of the American environment, both built and undeveloped."⁹ For Shutkin, the most important force for change is community-based environmental action.¹⁰ Furthermore, according to Buell, "contemporary ecopopulism" is most notable for the inclusion, even the leadership, of "nonelites" who emphasize community. The community mindedness creates an "'anthropocentric' emphasis on environmentalism as instrument of social justice as against an 'ecocentric' emphasis on caring for nature as a good in itself."¹¹ Shutkin and Buell both argue that modern environmentalism is headed toward an emphasis on human community and a turning away from a vision of nature as only something separate from humans. Buell also notes that many of the people leading the environmental justice movement are women and minority group members.¹² In both of Kingsolver's novels under discussion, the environmental movements are led by women.

Kingsolver also complicates the notion of community, a concept that is central to sentimental texts, by challenging the power that the community insider has over the outsider and providing an avenue for the outsider to become integrated into the community. In the ecological framework of *Prodigal Summer*, the web of familial, economic, and emotional interconnections that make up the community symbolizes the larger web of environmental interconnections. Lusa, the widowed scientist turned farmer, stands at an important nexus of these interconnections, and the difficulties she both faces and creates illustrate the complicated and

often contradictory nature of the terms “family” and “nature.” Lusa is an outsider, a non-native invader who, through marriage, inherits the family farm. She struggles to find acceptance in spite of her “foreign name,”¹³ fancy education, and unusual ideas about everything from pesticide use to goat farming. By showing her commitment to the land, refusing to give up and go back “where she belongs,” Lusa integrates herself into the Zebulon community.

Lusa’s integration into the community finds a parallel in the honeysuckle plant that symbolizes her status as an outsider as well as her fight to become an insider. In the beginning of the novel, Lusa recalls an argument she and her husband had had about the invading plant and an article in the newspaper recommending a “stout chemical defoliant”¹⁴ to get rid of it. In this argument, Lusa plays the role of the condescending, sophisticated outsider to Cole’s self-mocking apotheosis of the hillbilly. Finally, at the end of their argument, Lusa says that “the world will not end if you let honeysuckle have the side of your barn.”¹⁵ Near the end of the novel, after Lusa has established her goat-raising business with the help of community labor and community knowledge (from Garnett Walker, Nannie’s nemesis), she sees the barn almost entirely lost beneath the luxuriant growth of honeysuckle. She wonders how she could have been “so sanctimonious about honeysuckle.”¹⁶ At that point she realizes that honeysuckle is not a native plant, but an exotic invasive species that has crowded out less aggressive native plants; she comes to the final realization that Cole’s “instincts about the plant had been right” and that she needs forgiveness for a “city person’s audacity.”¹⁷ In the honeysuckle, Lusa sees herself—a foreign invader crowding out the natives.

In his investigation of *Animal Dreams*, David Cassuto points out that Kingsolver is attempting to present an alternative vision of western community, “predicated on an organicist, ecofeminist vision.”¹⁸ While he says that Kingsolver does not succeed in her attempts to “describe a new western reality,” we must take it as a noble failure arising from the juxtaposition of radical environmentalism with conservative sentimental rhetoric. The reason she fails, says Cassuto, is not because of any fatal flaw in her reasoning, but because of the newness of her vision. In *Animal Dreams* the environmental issue she confronts is western water use in a “post-Reclamation society.”¹⁹ This society is difficult to imagine because the intricate web of laws relating to water rights and the vision of proper water usage in the arid southwestern United States go back over a century; a challenge to this old vision is obviously facing a difficult battle. Cassuto notes that Kingsolver’s language itself adds to the difficulty because her ideas, “if actualized [...] will topple the current power structure.”²⁰ In

Animal Dreams as well as in *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver must craft a new rhetoric to combat the power structure that is destroying the environment. When the language of nature—"mountain"—comes to mean "corporation," and when the "modern farmer" really must be the "modern chemist," the language that is left to criticize the structure becomes palpably weakened. The rhetorical tropes of sentimentalism, when yoked to an ecofeminist ideology, produce a language radically at odds with our expectations. The maternal didacticism of sentimentalism combines with ecofeminist tenets, resulting in women who speak in lectures and men who petulantly and ineffectually try to refute them.

Kingsolver's reliance on the mythic structure of the traditional American Western further complicates her attempts to challenge the status quo while operating from within that structure. *Animal Dreams* features many of the characters, the plot devices, and the setting of the Western, but each element challenges the tradition and breaks down the categories. As Naomi Jacobs points out, Codi, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, enters the town in the same manner as the lone gunslinger in the traditional Western, where she finds herself forced to confront the evil machinations of the black-hat bad guys (the appropriately named Black Mountain Mining Company). The categories, though, break down. Codi is not really an outsider, but is returning to and discovering her roots. The showdown with the mining company is not single combat but involves the community women rallying to save the town. Similarly, the ecofeminist categories become unstable as Codi must navigate both the matriarchal and patriarchal power structures to arrive at her understanding of home and environment.

Codi's path to understanding the environment similarly demolishes the simplistic matriarchal/patriarchal categories as she seeks spiritual guidance from her old boyfriend, Loyd. As Codi is teaching in Arizona, her sister, Hallie, is teaching in Nicaragua, and Codi wonders at her sister's ability to put her life in danger for something she believes in. She asks Loyd what he would be willing to die for, and he says, "The land." Codi misunderstands him, and thinks he means the reservation his family lives on, but he corrects her with disgust, saying he is not talking about property. Later, when Codi is watching some of Loyd's family perform a rain dance, she speculates that prayer, and this dance in particular, are simply a "glorified attempt at a business transaction."²¹ Loyd explains that the dance is more of an offering, and he uses the analogy of a houseguest leaving a note thanking the host to keep things "in balance." Codi is taken by this idea and feels guilty for the "bluntly utilitarian" Anglo culture that fails to see the spiritual dimensions of the land, but can only see the

resources to be taken. John Coates points out that modern western society consistently sees nature and people “primarily as commodities,” and that shifting the focus to see them otherwise would be a “fundamentally spiritual” shift.²² When Codi attempts to reject the materialistic thinking that makes nature a commodity, she is making a radically spiritual move.

However, Kingsolver is not simply inverting an ecofeminist/matriarchal model by placing the words of spiritual wisdom in the mouth of a man. Loyd himself also breaks down the categories and shows the inherent instability of the male/female, culture/nature divide. Loyd is a man, but he shows a more visceral appreciation for and understanding of the land than Codi. He is “associated with both wild nature and domesticity.”²³ As such, he clearly demonstrates feminine attributes. His name and heritage further destabilize the categories. From his father, Loyd gets his name, Peregrina, the significance of which becomes clear when he notes that on his father’s side, he is Navajo and Apache, both of which, he claims, are wanderers, people fond of peregrination. On his mother’s side, though, he is a Pueblo, who, he says, “are homebodies.”²⁴ He carries the name of the wanderers, yet he identifies with the stability of the home-loving people of his mother. In this way, Loyd embodies neither and both masculine and feminine traits and ideals, and his understanding of the landscape is neither and both masculine and feminine.

With Loyd’s guidance, Codi ponders the notion that all humans are God’s houseguests, and catalogs more of the environmental depredations in and around Grace. Not only was the Black Mountain mine poisoning the water, but it was also leaving behind huge contaminated piles of mine tailings. Another mining concern was destroying another mountain to obtain pumice to be used to manufacture stonewashed denim jeans. “To people who think of themselves as God’s houseguests,” she thinks, “American enterprise must look arrogant beyond belief.”²⁵ Codi’s epiphany signals an important turning point in the novel. Before this, her feelings for the environmental degradation had been characterized by an angry resentment that the scientific evidence was ignored, but her spiritual understanding provides her with a more powerful rhetorical tool to use. Ironically, her hard, “masculine,” and scientific approach is transformed into the soft, feminine, emotional approach only after Loyd teaches her.

Codi’s activism pulls her toward ecofeminism, as it involves a group of the women of Grace known as the “Stitch and Bitch” club, but again, Kingsolver challenges the traditional gender roles. The strong matriarchal flavor of the group pervades all of their activities and informs the strategies they use to gain justice from the mining company that has been poisoning their water. Through the group’s dynamics, Kingsolver

constructs an ecofeminist vision of community and ecological action. When the women gather to discuss the town's future, they dismiss the men as being ineffectual or uninterested. The men, one woman notes, are too busy watching the football game to help plan a response to the mine's actions—except that they all probably turned the station to the Miss America pageant as soon as the women left the house for the meeting. Another woman sums up the difference. The group discusses possible actions to take, including using dynamite to blow up the mine or the proposed dam, but this woman points out that they do not know how to use dynamite while the men do. When the women ponder explosive action, they are bending gender rules and acting in a more "masculine" fashion. The men, however, would be scared to use such drastic means, or would not see the need to resort to them; their passivity, traditionally a "feminine" trait, dramatically demonstrates the limitations of traditional gender labels. Echoing Codi's sentiment about the frontier mentality, one woman says that the men "think the trees can die and we can just go somewhere else, and as long as we fry up the bacon for them in the same old pan, they think it would be... *home*."²⁶ The woman's fears about the men's ineffectuality emphasize the central issue that has galvanized the Stitch and Bitch club, which is that environmental degradation is ultimately about the degradation of the home.

Although the men cannot take action, the women can, allowing Kingsolver to set up an ecofeminist dichotomy of nature and culture that she again complicates and deconstructs. The Stitch and Bitch club sets out to call attention to the plight of Grace, hoping to gain wider attention and thereby forcing the mining company to make reparations. A notable peculiarity of Grace is a large population of peacocks brought by the Spanish family that originally settled the town. The Stitch and Bitch women traditionally construct peacock-shaped piñatas for special occasions, and they decide to make dozens of the peacocks with a small history of the town and its problems with the mine attached, and then sell them in Tucson to raise funds for a legal challenge. When the group of *small-town women appears in the city with the brightly colored piñatas*, they capture enormous attention that eventually aids their victory over the mining company. In this case, the women do not simply represent nature but culture as well. Their piñatas are an old cultural tradition in the town, and the women are the guardians and teachers of the tradition. By using the piñatas to represent both the cultural traditions of the community and its environmental problems, the club also challenges the notion that nature and culture are discreet entities. Instead of separate, culture is rooted in the

natural surroundings and is properly thought of as a product of the environment instead of a clashing ideal.

Nature and culture are not necessarily mutually reinforcing ideals, though, as another of the women points out to Codi. The company that is causing so many problems for Grace is called Black Mountain, and Codi shortens the name to "the Mountain." Her friend Viola curtly admonishes her: "Don't call that company the Mountain," she tells her because she does not want to associate the mining company with something natural and unmovable. Codi defensively replies that she had heard "the men call it that." Here again, the men are unable to differentiate between natural (the mountain) and unnatural (the Black Mountain corporation), and they fail to understand the seriousness of the problem facing the town. Viola takes the important rhetorical stand of separating the exploitative practices of the company from natural processes, and thus makes the company an alien other or intruder that can be defeated. Codi, whose connections to the town are more troubled than Viola's, is at first unable to recognize this important distinction and must defer to Viola's matriarchal authority.

Kathleen Norris suggests that when people fail to understand and appreciate their landscapes—for example, by building impractical mansions with huge lawns that strain the shallow aquifers—they have fallen from grace. The spiritual failings that lead to this fall from grace also contribute to a loss of the sacred within our everyday lives. When the sacred is lost, humans and nature become commodities with commercial worth obscuring any other intrinsic value. By the end of *Animal Dreams*, Codi has realized that she must take the responsibility for reclaiming her grace and fighting for the preservation of her home's environment. As she ends her essay, Norris wonders whether the "right to life" is open only to those who can afford to pay for it. Water, she says, is necessary for life and is therefore sacred, but the inability to see it as other than a commodity represents another denial of grace. Through her involvement with the Stitch and Bitch club, Codi has found a way to save grace by saving Grace.

Barbara Kingsolver's ecofeminist narratives are firmly rooted in the earth her characters care so much about. The arid desert of Grace and the forested mountains of Zebulon are both, in some senses, marginal communities. Grace maintains a tenuous hold on life by clinging to the river that runs through the community, even if that river has been poisoned by the neglect and outright criminal behavior of outsiders. Zebulon, on the other hand, seems almost overwhelmed by nature's fecundity, and the lush Appalachian forests are far, both metaphorically and in actual miles, from Grace, but the land nevertheless is equally poor and socially marginal to

the larger moneyed concerns. It is in Grace, though, that Kingsolver's environmental vision projects most clearly. The more precarious desert life and more varied community complicates the narrative to the point that Kingsolver's ecofeminist approach falls apart, which in turn makes her narrative of the landscape richer and more interesting. It is as if Kingsolver also needs the complications of the God-forsaken to provide the necessary creative friction.

Notes

¹ Kathleen Norris. "The Grace of Aridity and Other Comedies." *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2004*. Ed. Philip Zaleski. (Boston: Houghton, 2004), 185.

² Barbara Kingsolver. *Prodigal Summer* (New York: Harper, 2000), 45.

³ Suzanne Clark. *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 2.

⁴ Joanne Dobson. "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (June 1997): 268.

⁵ I am taking the term "narrative of community" from Sandra Zagarell, who uses the phrase to define one of the key traits of sentimental literature.

⁶ Lawrence Buell. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U. S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 230.

⁷ Sherry B. Ortner "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974) 67-87.

⁸ Kingsolver, *Prodigal*, 275.

⁹ William A. Shutkin. *The Land that Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁰ Shutkin, *Land*, 13-14.

¹¹ Buell, *Endangered*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹³ Kingsolver, *Prodigal*, 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁸ David N. Cassuto. *Dripping Dry: Literature, Politics, and Water in the Desert Southwest*. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2001), 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

²¹ Barbara Kingsolver. *Animal Dreams* (New York: Harper, 1990), 239.

²² Coates, John. "From Ecology to Spirituality and Social Justice." *Currents: New Scholarship in the Human Services*. 2004.

<http://www.fsw.ucalgary.ca/currents/articles/articles/coates/main.htm>.

June 1, 2004, 4, 2.

²³ Jacobs, Naomi. "Barbara Kingsolver's Anti-Western: 'Unraveling the Myths' in *Animal Dreams*." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*. 2.2 (Fall 2003).

http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2003/jacobs.htm.

March 8, 2006.

²⁴ Kingsolver, *Animal*, 213.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 179, italics in original.