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Women Farmers' Dream of Home: A Bioregional Analysis of Harriette Simpson Arnow's *Hunter's Horn* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract:

Harriette Arnow's *Hunter's Horn* (1949) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) constitute important contributions to the literature of farming and to the tradition of American literary bioregionalism. One of the main characters in each novel is a woman who is a farmer at heart and who struggles to fulfill her dream of finding her home territory. The lives of Arnow's Milly Ballew and Kingsolver's Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener, who both come from a family line of displaced people, are shaped by their desire to put their roots down and become members of a place – of both its nonhuman and human communities. Therefore, Milly's and Lusa's coming to live on the Ballew homestead in the Smokey Creek valley, KY, and the Widener homestead in the Egg Fork valley, VA, respectively, includes getting to know intimately the soil, flora, and fauna of the locality, as well as their husband's extended families and other local people. Through this kind of apprenticeship in becoming familiar with a place, Milly and Lusa become unusually effective gardeners, develop a special empathy with the animals that share their territory, and eventually find their niche in the community of mountain farmers in their valleys. A bioregional analysis of Arnow's and Kingsolver's Appalachian fiction thus shows that both authors focus on exploring the possibilities of reinhabiting a place sustainably, for the long-haul.

The Appalachian novels of Harriette Arnow and Barbara Kingsolver constitute important contributions to the literature of farming, sometimes called georgic literature,[1] and to the tradition of American literary bioregionalism.[2] Specifically, Arnow's *Hunter's Horn* (1949) and Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) are texts that grow out of the natural and social history of the Southern Appalachian bioregion, focusing mainly on the life of the local farming communities. *Hunter's Horn* is set in the 1930s and 40s, at a time when small-scale, subsistence farming was fast disappearing in the Appalachians, a time when graveled roads were starting to penetrate into the mountains and the pre-war industrial boom was siphoning people off to work in northern cities. *Prodigal Summer* then records the gradual recovery of family-operated organic farms in the 1980s and 90s. When viewed

[1] I use the term georgic as a distinct genre of environmental literature that grapples with the human need to work the land in order to grow enough food, but at the same time maintaining long-term soil fertility. Timothy Sweet describes georgic as a type of pastoral that does not focus on "the retreat to nature or the separation of the country from the city" but attempts to gain "an understanding of the transformations of [the natural] environment which are necessary to produce human life and culture" (Sweet 2002: 5).

[2] Bioregionalism emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all the various parts of a particular bioregion, including its climate, topography, flora and fauna, and human cultures. In this paper I draw especially on the works of Gary Snyder (*The Practice of the Wild*, *A Place in Space*), Wendell Berry (*The Unsettling of America*, *What Are People For?*), and Kirkpatrick Sale (*Dwellers in the Land*). Essentially, bioregionalism encourages people to "explore more deeply the natural and cultural landscape in which they already live" rather than seeking temporary refuge and glimpses of salvation in some supposedly pristine wilderness areas (Garrard 2004: 118).

together, the two novels trace the history of the cyclical transformations of the mountain communities and their farming practices throughout the course of the twentieth century.

To underline the resonance between the patterns of the natural environment and the patterns of the mountain economy and culture, *Hunter's Horn* and *Prodigal Summer* foreground the need to establish one's own territory, a need that is shared by most organisms. One of the main characters in each novel is a woman who is a farmer at heart and who struggles to fulfill her dream of finding her home territory. The lives of Arnow's Milly Ballew and Kingsolver's Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener, who both come from a family line of displaced people, are shaped by their desire to put their roots down and become members of a place – of both its nonhuman and human communities. Therefore, Milly's and Lusa's coming to live on the Ballew homestead in the Smokey Creek valley, KY, and the Widener homestead in the Egg Fork valley, VA, respectively, includes getting to know intimately the soil, flora, and fauna of the locality, as well as their husband's extended families and other local people. Through this kind of apprenticeship in becoming familiar with a place, Milly and Lusa become unusually effective gardeners, develop a special empathy with the animals that share their territory, and eventually find their niche in the community of mountain farmers in their valleys. A bioregional analysis of Arnow's and Kingsolver's Appalachian fiction thus shows that both authors focus on exploring the possibilities of reinhabiting a place sustainably, for the long-haul.[3]

Bioregions can be of various sizes and they can be distinguished according to various defining features, for instance watersheds (in the sense of drainage basins), land forms, elevation, soil type, plant communities, lifestyles and so forth (Dodge 1990:6-7). A crucial element in the portrait of any bioregion is that its borders are "porous, permeable, arguable," and that a particular place is always part of more than one bioregion (Snyder 1995:220). Moreover, the term bioregion usually "refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness—to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place" (Berg and Dasmann 1978:218). Therefore, the history of family farming in Southern Appalachia, characterized by the integration of the indigenous knowledge and practice of Cherokee agriculturalists with the customs of European peasants, plays a central role in the history of the bioregion.

Southern Appalachia is one the most culturally diverse as well as biologically productive ecosystems in North America. The backbone of the bioregion is formed by the Appalachian Mountain chain. The line between the southern and northern parts is usually drawn in the area where glaciers, during the Pleistocene era, extended as far south as the Ohio River, New York State, northern Pennsylvania, and New Jersey (Raitz and Ulack 1984:42, Brooks 1965:166). Since Southern Appalachia has not been glaciated, it is a refuge for unique, endemic plant species that went extinct elsewhere during the last ice age. The other features that contribute to the uniqueness of the Appalachian ecosystem are the nearby ocean and the predominant westerly winds that bring moist air from the Gulf of Mexico into the mountains (Raitz and Ulack 1984:51-56). These rains have cloaked the westward slopes of Southern Appalachia in temperate rain forests dominated by deciduous trees (Raitz and Ulack 1984:39). Due to the variations in altitude, precipitation, soil, ground water, slope faces, and other factors, more than 125 tree species have been identified in this bioregion (Sutton and Sutton 1985:81). Moreover, the rainforest shelters a dense undergrowth of shrubs and herbs (Raitz and Ulack 1984:70).

However, this unique bioregion has long been over-exploited by humans. Large-scale modification of the environment began with the arrival of European fur-traders in the mid-eighteenth century (Davis 2000:24). Gradually, mining and logging also came in, and later dam construction and the tourist industry. The most destructive human activity to date has been strip mining, also known as mountaintop removal, which is destroying large areas at an unprecedented rate.[4] As Wendell Berry points out in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, one of the strongest undercurrents in

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[3] The concepts of bioregion and reinhabitation are closely related. As Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann put it, reinhabitation is "a process that involves learning to live-in-place," that is "following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site" and "evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site" (Berg and Dasmann 1978:217). In other words, reinhabitation "involves applying for membership in a biotic community and ceasing to be its exploiter" (Berg and Dasmann 1978:218).

[4] The most evocative nonfiction examination of the effects of mountaintop removal to date is Eric Reece's *Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness*.

American history has been “domestic colonialism that, by policy, converts productive farm, forest, and grazing lands into strip mines” (Berry 1977:6). According to Berry, the recovery of small-scale subsistence farming is essential to the rejuvenation of healthy family and community life in the mountains (Berry 1977:43).

Both Arnow and Kingsolver grew up on small farms in eastern Kentucky, in the border zone where the rugged Appalachian Mountains become foothills and begin to merge into the more prosperous bluegrass country. After going away to attend college and begin their careers, Arnow and Kingsolver secured their own land and returned to various forms of small-scale farming. Arnow, after a five-year stay on a mountain farm on the Cumberland river, left Appalachia and settled north, outside of Anne Arbor, Michigan (Billips 2003:130-133). Kingsolver, after dividing her time between Appalachia and Arizona for almost twenty years, ended up moving south to the mountains of Virginia (Snodgrass 2004:7-30). They both made it their priority to try “to become native” in their chosen homes, to find “ecologically and socially sustainable patterns of existence” within these home places (Berg and Dasmann 1978:217-218). This process of becoming native to a place is also at the core of much of their writing. Arnow’s *Hunter’s Horn* and Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* are bioregional texts in that they affirm the notion of home as entailing a form of ‘membership’ in the local ecosystem.[5] Further, they are bioregional in that they portray home as a palimpsest of “geology, meteorology, history, myth, etymology, family genealogy, agricultural practice, storytelling, and regional folk ways” (Kowalewski 2003:17).

In Arnow’s *Hunter’s Horn*, Milly Ballew is determined to cling to her dream of living on her own farm in the place that had belonged to her husband’s family for generations. When Milly was a child, her father was a traveling preacher and she never had a place that she could call home. After she married Nunn Ballew, they lived for several years in a company mining town, saving to buy at least a section of land on the Old Ballew Place. Milly was happy to be able to eventually settle on the farm, even though from the time of the death of Nunn’s grandparents it had been rented by a succession of temporary tenants who plowed even “the steep hill sides [. . .] and never gave anything back, not even a fence rail or a shovelful of manure,” leaving the soil so depleted and eroded away that it was almost “not worth the buying” (Arnow 1949:17). In the following hard years that form the centre of the novel, Milly perseveres in her determination to care for the damaged land. She perseveres in spite of the fact that her husband turns out to be more interested in hunting than farming, and in spite of the fact that her younger children lack proper medical care and her older children are often overworked. As time passes, Milly begins to feel at home on the place. For instance, she can tell winter is coming when the wind changes direction and starts carrying different sounds (Arnow 1949: 223), and she recognizes that spring is on the way when one day the morning sun starts moving back north along the horizon. No one else in the family is as excited, but Milly, before she settled in the Smokey Creek valley, “had never lived long enough in one place to get acquainted with all the paths of the sun through all the seasons” (Arnow 1949:246). Only now does she feel anchored, in place, resolved to raise her family there.

Like Milly, Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener of Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* is at first a stranger among the mountain farmers around Egg Fork. She grew up in the city of Lexington, feeling “trapped” on a small piece of lawn and dreaming of “pastures,” amusing herself by catching butterflies and moths and “coveting those that hid in wilder places” (Kingsolver 2000:35). Lusa’s grandparents on both sides of the family had been land owners but they lost their land in Palestine and Poland in the Second World War. It is through their stories and songs that Lusa has gained a strong desire to live on a farm, too. When the opportunity arises, she quits her laboratory research on moths’ pheromones and marries a farmer from the Southern Appalachians. Like Milly, Lusa soon becomes attuned to the rhythms that guide her life at the foot of Zebulon Mountain; in fact, she comes to “think of Zebulon as another man in her life, larger and steadier than any other companion she had ever known” (Kingsolver 2000:32). Lusa learns “to tell time with her skin,” according to the changes in the mountain’s breathing: in the morning the mountain always takes “one long, slow inhalation” and then lets it back out throughout the evening, at first “bear[ing] gently on the back of Lusa’s neck,”

[5] Here I use the term membership in the way it is used in Gary Snyder’s and Wendell Berry’s writing, signifying vernacular as well as scientific knowledge of place, and affection as well as responsibility towards all of its human and nonhuman inhabitants.

becoming “insistent as a lover’s sigh, sweetened by the damp woods, cooling her nape and shoulders whenever she pauses in her evening work in the kitchen” (Kingsolver 2000:31-32). Pain and tragedy are unavoidable, but they do not break Lusa’s dream of home. Gradually, as Lusa begins to find her role in the clan of her husband’s relatives, she also restores the farm’s role as a place that holds the Widener family together.

Milly’s and Lusa’s committed stewardship of the farm land is thus interconnected with their role within their families. As Milly’s husband goes fox-hunting any time the weather is favorable, neglecting the fields as well as the children, Milly takes over much of his share of the work – and without complaint. She knows that before she came to live on this farm, the land had supported six generations of the Ballew family and that “the old people had prospered there and raised thirteen children with never the need for a bite of store-bought meat or bread” (Arnow 1949:14). Envisioning that one day she may also reach such a level of self-sufficiency, she tries hard to provide well for her family, mainly by keeping a large vegetable garden. Since Milly has a special talent for “cool things,” she “most generally had the earliest and finest lettuce of anybody in the country [. . .] and her cabbages always grew so fast that worms never had a chance (Arnow 1949:379). At the end of the fall season “the house was so crammed with food against the winter that the old floors in the loft room sagged” (Arnow 1949:284). It is mainly the satisfaction and succor Milly draws from both working the land and feeding her children with the results of that work that sustain her through the many hardships of her life. In the words of Wendell Berry, “soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life” (Berry 1977:86). In her portrait of Milly’s gift for gardening, Arnow celebrates the ancient connection between tilling the earth and cultivating the spirit.

Kingsolver also uses the idea of gardening – that is, participation in the process of planting, nurturing, and harvesting one’s family’s food – to suggest the possibility of attaining bodily as well as spiritual health. Even though Lusa had never gardened until she moved into the mountains, in a little over a year on the farm she has mastered growing and preserving a rich variety of vegetables and fruits. After her husband dies in a car accident, she decides to stay on the farm and takes over its management with a resourcefulness that astonishes all of her in-laws. As Jewel, one of Lusa’s sisters-in-law, observes, “nobody’s done this much putting up since Mommy died. You should be real proud of yourself. And you should quit. Don’t kill yourself” (Kingsolver 2000:401). To this comment Lusa responds: “The truth is, I like doing it. I won’t have to spend money on food this year. And it seems like hard work is the only thing that stops my brain from running in circles” (Kingsolver 2000: 401). Soon after this exchange Lusa realizes that she has been “called” to this place in order to become a landholder as well as to step in for Jewel, who is fatally ill with cancer (Kingsolver 2000: 437). By becoming an adoptive mother to Jewel’s two children and changing her own and the children’s name to Widener, Lusa also assures the continuity of the Widener family’s presence on their homestead, at least for another generation.

In addition to their outstanding gardening skills, Milly and Lusa are especially attuned to certain animals with whom they share the farm environment. Milly feels a close kinship with her hound dogs, not only because they protect the household and are gentle with her children, but also because of the loyalty, companionship, and empathy between them. For instance, when Milly’s first dog, Zing, comes home from a hunt one night, Milly knows right away that this hunt has been particularly hard on the aging hound. After all the children are settled for the night, Milly starts a new fire in the kitchen, and, “holding the lamp carefully so that the light did not shine directly onto his face, she went over Zing’s head and body for possible cuts and bruises, and picked up each hard calloused paw,” looking for imbedded pieces of stones (Arnow 1949:33). Then she goes to the spring and warms a bowl of milk for the tired dog. Later, Milly is delighted when Nunn brings home two pedigree pups, Vinie and Sam, even though the money Nunn has spent on them and their special food means the family is barely going to make it through the winter. Soon the pups become “Milly’s own,” even more then Zing had been (Arnow 1949:211). As Milly’s current pregnancy progresses and she begins to feel slow and heavy, the pups continue to keep “at her heels” wherever she goes, “matching their swift pace to her slow one, sometimes running round and round her, but never leaping on her” (Arnow 1949:226). Milly senses that the pups “understood how things were with her better than any of her human family” (Arnow 1949:226). This type of communication between the human mother and

the canine young within the farm household indicates that one's relationship to one's home territory includes more than can be articulated in words.

Lusa's relationship to the Widener farm likewise consists of bonds that are beyond the words she can share with her parents in Lexington or with her in-laws in Egg Fork. There are "the odors of honeysuckle and freshly turned earth, and ancient songs played out on the roof by the rain" (Kingsolver 2000: 239). Perhaps most importantly for Lusa, there are "moths tracing spirals in the moonlight" (Kingsolver 2000: 239). The omnipresent moths play a multitude of roles in Lusa's life on Zebulon Mountain, but the crucial moth experience in her settling on the farm takes place repeatedly in her dreams: a moth man, who turns out to be "not a man but a mountain with the silky, pale-green extremities and maroon shoulders of a luna moth," chooses Lusa from among a field full of women wrapped in cocoons of blankets, and when she asks him how he knew it was her, he tells her, "I've always known you that well" (Kingsolver 2000:79). This is how Lusa grows to understand that she is home, that she has been chosen to come to this place.

By grounding their novels in the farming communities of Southern Appalachia, Arnow and Kingsolver expose the difficulties to be faced as well as the rewards to be gained in the human search for a place to dwell in. They center their novels on women who have farming in their bones and who strive to reclaim their homes with as much affection and commitment to the worn out soil as to their families and communities. Arnow and Kingsolver thus show that local soil and local culture matter and that their well-being is intimately related. Moreover, their stories of human fidelity to place indicate a path towards the possibility of reinhabitating bioregions throughout the world.

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