

**“The Things That Attach People”:
A Critical Literary Analysis of the Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver**

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ABSTRACT

This is the first full-length scholarly work dedicated to the fiction of Kentucky-raised feminist activist and trained biologist Barbara Kingsolver. Interrogating the political efficacy of the work of an author who proclaims that art “should be political” and that “literature should inform as well as enlighten”, this thesis explores the ways in which Kingsolver positions herself variously as an environmentalist, liberal, communitarian, feminist and agrarian. It unpacks the author’s issues-based approach to writing fiction and its effect on her commercial popularity and through close readings of her fiction provides an assessment of this popular and critically acclaimed contemporary American writer.

This study maps the oeuvre of a writer who has achieved critical success in the form of Pulitzer nominations, American Booksellers Book of the Year awards, a National Medal for Arts, and commercial success in the form of bestselling novels and even non-fiction works – not to mention the populist accolade of being selected as an Oprah’s Book Club author. It analyses tropes, techniques and tensions in Kingsolver’s novels and short stories published between 1988 and 2001, namely *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), and *Prodigal Summer* (2001). Rather than act as an introductory survey, this assessment posits that there exists a difficult but fruitful tension between writing fiction for readers and writing to a political agenda. Kingsolver promotes both of these through her narrative strategies and preoccupations. In the end, I argue that Kingsolver’s pursuit of popular appeal, far from compromising her politics, is a political strategy in itself.

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INTRODUCTION

Barbara Kingsolver claims to start “every book, every novel, with a question” in the hope of writing her way “to an answer.”¹ It is appropriate that the first full-length study of Kingsolver’s fiction should also begin with a set of questions and the intention of writing towards answering them. Asking literary and political questions of Kingsolver’s fiction, I offer close readings of her six fictional books in order to map Kingsolver’s popular appeal and to assess the extent to which the novels and short stories explore the political positions she espouses. I locate Kingsolver’s combination of global and local themes on a political-literary spectrum, arguing that such fiction is too often reduced to a misleading binary of popular and literary. I analyse her fictional negotiation of the perceived tension between art and the market, and art and politics, and explore the extent to which Kingsolver’s pursuit of literary popularity may also be said to compromise her politics.

Interviewers flag Kingsolver’s ability to “straddle different worlds with apparent ease” and this trait stands out both in the ways in which her fictional characters represent a variety of political viewpoints, and in her own multiple roles as “bestselling writer, eco-campaigner, farmer [and] mother.”² Just as Hollywood films must appeal to multiple demographics to create blockbuster audiences, so Kingsolver’s spectrum of political positions can be seen as the logical extension of a search for mass appeal in a series of niche markets. My methodology is as multi-faceted as the structuring principles and thematic preoccupations of Kingsolver’s fiction. I analyse her narrative techniques and the tropes she employs, and examine their potential political effects in order to define the Kingsolver oeuvre. I suggest that in different novels Kingsolver selectively

¹ Elisabeth L. Beattie, “Barbara Kingsolver Interview” in *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*, ed. Elisabeth L. Beattie (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 164.

² Ed Pilkington, “Back to the land: Barbara Kingsolver Interview,” *The Guardian* (June 26, 2007), <http://lifeandhealth.guardian.co.uk/consumer/story/0,,2111508,00.html> (accessed July 12, 2007).

adopts guiding principles that mark her work as (variously) regional, communitarian, environmentalist, feminist, and liberal. While the existing journalism and critical articles about Kingsolver highlight these various aspects of her fiction and non-fiction work, all return to the fact that her work is overwhelmingly popular.³ This popularity will therefore be explored in the context of its “middlebrow” tendencies, in a revision of a term first made popular in the late nineteenth century.

The title of this thesis refers to a statement made by Kingsolver during a 1993 interview in which she claimed her fiction is about “the things that attach people, rather than the things that drive them apart.”⁴ This thesis explores the ways in which Kingsolver’s preoccupation with interrelatedness in all its facets illuminates her appeal to a popular audience for her fiction, which I argue is itself a political strategy. Issues that Kingsolver claims to be “central to my reason for living”⁵ unsurprisingly recur in her fiction. *Publishers Weekly* glibly, but fairly accurately, lists “Kingsolverian” issues as “Native Americans, US involvement in Nicaragua, environmental issues, parental relationships [and] women taking charge of their own lives.”⁶ However, it is not only these political issues which inspire this thesis, but the precise ways in which they are presented so as to appeal to a popular readership. As Kingsolver notes, the issues to which she returns are “fundamentally related, fundamentally the same” and “can be reduced to a certain central idea – seeing ourselves are part of something larger.”⁷ In this way, interrelatedness extends beyond themes and tropes to aesthetics, to reveal the structuring political principles of her popular fictions.

³ To take a single Kingsolver novel as an example of the author’s commercial and critical popularity, *The Poisonwood Bible* was the American Booksellers Book of the Year 1998, and appeared in the top ten books of 1998 as compiled by the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Village Voice*. That year, it was also a critically acclaimed runner up for the PEN/Faulkner and Pulitzer literary prizes. While sales figures are notoriously difficult to assess accurately, *Publishing Research Quarterly* reports that *The Poisonwood Bible* remained in the Top 100 Bestselling book chart for 137 weeks.

⁴ Perry, 154.

⁵ See Kendall, 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Kingsolver's protagonists, the intertexts she creates with other novels, and the way she arranges the chapters in her novels each exhibit a reliance on interrelatedness as a way to explore political issues through empathetic characters and romantic stories which in turn secure popular appeal. Her characters are predominantly female and are often related. For example, although seemingly unrelated at the beginning of the novel, the things that attach *Prodigal Summer*'s Lusa, Deanna and Nannie are gradually revealed as family and environmental ties. Such tangled points of interrelatedness include the revelation that Deanna is Nannie's stepdaughter, Lusa shares an ecological mindset with Nannie, and Lusa has adopted Nannie's neighbour's grandchildren. Although Kingsolver's characters take personal decisions which lead them into very different situations, the same political "lesson" of interrelatedness is always learned, whether by children living in the colonial Congo, a teacher learning to herd goats in Appalachia, or a woman who decides to drive across America until her car breaks down. This thesis argues that such recurring "lessons" of interrelatedness raise awareness of the author's chosen issues and that this is a result of the political strategy of Kingsolver's fiction to appeal to a broad readership through empathetic characters.

Kingsolver links other books into her narratives to illuminate her characters and the reasons for their relationships. The things that attach people are embedded in her themes and narrative choices. In *Prodigal Summer*, Lusa's book about moths offers shorthand for her education in biology and its description of moth love is a metaphor for her impulsive, primal love for Cole. This intertext emphasizes the ecological webs that attach people. The Bible is deployed by various characters in *The Poisonwood Bible* emphasizing its role as the text that can both unite and divide, and even Nathan's destructive use of verses to justify his behaviour offers points of intersection for other characters. His daughters, wife, and the villagers form relationships in reaction to

Nathan's developing madness, which is offered as a morality tale as is the consequence of civil war which drives people apart.

Some of Kingsolver's themes and most contentious issues seem, at first sight, to engage with the things that drive people apart rather than bring them together. Her professed aim of reclaiming and representing Native American culture, for example, is itself a point of debate and dissent. She has been criticized by Native American writers and scholars including Sherman Alexie and A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff for employing Native American communities as little more than exotic backdrops. My titular reference to "the things that attach people" is sufficiently open so that the thesis may also interrogate the contradictions and limitations in Kingsolver's fiction as well as the criticisms it has received.

Political Art?

Kingsolver's fiction is political and not only in the inclusive sense that Frederic Jameson argues for in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), that everything is "in the last instance" political. Instead, her narratives are political in the first instance, in keeping with Anthony Hutchison's definition of political fictions as those that "explicitly seek to represent politics."⁸ Not only does Kingsolver proclaim her political intentions in interviews, but her characters also explicitly pursue various political crusades, uncovering as they do industrial pollution (*Animal Dreams*), colonial oppression (*The Poisonwood Bible*), and the complexities of Native American adoption (*Pigs in Heaven*). Kingsolver's writing is a form of political activism in itself and she claims to advocate political activism for her readers. She seems to envisage her fiction as more than the sum of its literary parts and tries to create a place for activism in fiction by creating "ordinary" characters and plot-driven narratives that will appeal to a mass readership. I

⁸ Anthony B. Hutchison, *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), xvii.

posit Kingsolver's narratives as political where they explicitly engage with political conflicts, from large-scale international incidents that actually happened, such as the 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba in *The Poisonwood Bible*; to the minutiae of the quotidian exemplified in neighbours Nannie and Garnett arguing over the merits of organic farming and farming using pesticides in *Prodigal Summer*.

I suggest that Kingsolver's fiction is political insofar as it maps her self-conscious claims and reflections onto political intention and in terms of artistic effect. Historical materialists Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean argue that politically critical discourses need to emphasise and reflect upon their own discursive and institutional functions and my critical methodology is informed by Landry and Maclean's notion of a materialist feminism, which considers the investigation of "artefacts of culture" as a "potential site of political contestation through critique."⁹ As such, my critical analysis of Kingsolver's narratives explores their ability to sustain critique and contributes to their consideration as political fiction.

Emerging as a published writer in the late 1980s, Kingsolver was a contemporary of "New Americanists" Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, whose critique of the disjunction between politics and literature rejected the positioning of ideology as un-American.¹⁰ Arguing that "art *should* be political,"¹¹ Kingsolver disputes the separation of politics and literature, and creates fiction which explicitly marries the two. Kingsolver's narratives engage with contemporary political issues and include such apparently disparate settings and preoccupations as an Appalachian ecological novel and five women's stories of life in the Congo. However, Kingsolver's central theme of interrelatedness – political, local, global, ecological, or personal – does not change.

⁹ Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), x–xi.

¹⁰ See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Anne Stephenson, "Author Mixes Art, Politics," *The Arizona Republic* (14 November 1995): D3.

Instead, it finds its fictional outlet in characters as they deal with issues as seemingly varied as colonialism and crop diversification, in locales as apparently diverse as Africa and the American Southwest. Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, engages with political issues from Native American adoption and US foreign policy in South America, to the nation's low-waged underclass. In this novel, protagonist Taylor Greer is placed in situations which challenge her liberal and patriotic sense of American identity. Greer is a typical Kingsolverian character, embodying a broader political conflict through its effects on her personal life.

Typically, Kingsolver's fictions tell stories of rural American women struggling against environmental, political and personal injustice. She rewrites the same character over and over again. *New York Times* columnist and Southern literary critic Jack Butler described her first protagonist, Taylor Greer, as a "down-home superwoman," who is "articulate, innately fair and decent, tough as they come and yet country to the bone."¹² The same description would apply with equal accuracy to Lusa Landowski in *Prodigal Summer* who also struggles to find family in an unfamiliar environment and adopts a daughter through a chance encounter. Leah Price in *The Poisonwood Bible* also fulfils the characteristics of the Kingsolverian heroine, railing against injustice in the Congo while immersing herself in the country and raising a family. Kingsolver herself notes that the themes of Native American culture, US foreign policy (whether in South America or Africa), environmental issues, parent-child relationships and women taking charge of their own lives, are all issues that "will keep turning up" in her work because they are "fundamentally the same" and can be "reduced to a certain central idea – seeing ourselves as part of something larger."¹³

¹² Jack Butler, "She Hung the Moon and Plugged in All the Stars." *The New York Times* (April 10, 1988): A15.

¹³ Lisa See Kendall, "Barbara Kingsolver: Her Fiction Features Ordinary People Heroically Committed to Political Issues." *Publishers Weekly* 237.35 (August 31, 1990): 46-47.

Kingsolver's attempt to assert a political position achieves a degree of success when she chooses to extol that position through fiction. Sales of *Holding the Line*, her non-fiction account of a 1983 mining strike in Arizona, do not approach the levels of her fictional treatment of a similar incident in the 1990 novel *Animal Dreams*. Kingsolver's political writing achieves a broader appeal in the guise of fiction and the combination of global political themes with local details, "ordinary" characters, and interwoven multiple plots, defines Kingsolver's popularity.

Focusing on the perspectives of her multiple protagonists, and personalising political themes related broadly to issues of multiculturalism, Kingsolver's fiction does not engage directly with the problems of identity politics or "multiculturalism" but Kingsolver writes out of the context of liberal reactions against the supposedly divisive effects of identity politics, so inflamed during the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. Her fiction invariably represents communities in which the existence of multiculturalism, defined at the most straightforward level of multiple cultural groups existing within a larger national group, is a given. She explores the tensions and relationships that test and attach different groups and imagines communities in which apparent differences in the beginning ensure community survival by the end. For example, in *The Poisonwood Bible* Congolese teacher Anatole and Southern missionary daughter Leah Price are only able to survive swarms of locusts and political witch hunts together.

In propounding a notion of interrelatedness through her representations of literally "multicultural" relationships and communities, Kingsolver's fiction is not sufficiently distanced from liberal political ideology to avoid criticism. Making her characters (im)plausible political mouthpieces risks subsuming both the achievements and struggles of living to the mantra of interrelatedness and is a constant tension in Kingsolver's fiction. This tension in turn shapes my exploration of the narrative and

political effectiveness of Kingsolver's fictions. Her interweaving of characterisation and political issues works particularly well in certain novels and stories, but prompts accusations of didacticism in other narratives.¹⁴ As such, rather than working towards a judgement of Kingsolver's narratives, this thesis negotiates the tensions between the aspects of her fictions that work well and those which are most revealing of the difficulties inherent in representing political issues in fiction.

By investing her diverse American protagonists with a sense of shared local identity in national, global and ecological communities, Kingsolver's fiction counters the association of multiculturalism with ethnocentric separatism. Kingsolver's commercial appeal suggests that her readers are not confined to a particular minority. Political historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., whose criticism of multiculturalism was based on ideals of nationhood over community differences, posited that the burden to make the United States a unified country "lies more with the complacent majority than with the beleaguered minorities."¹⁵ Kingsolver's self-proclaimed agenda to marry art and politics in fiction which has plot, pace, and popular appeal, suggests that in writing about the things that attach people, the "marginalised characters" of her fiction function to engage politically a broad spectrum of "complacent" readers.

Having grown up in Appalachia, with its "juxtaposition of extreme poverty and extreme wealth,"¹⁶ Kingsolver's fiction proclaims the political agenda of unpacking the myth of classlessness that she calls the "religion of America."¹⁷ Characters such as *The Bean Trees*' intelligent, hard-working Taylor Greer embody Kingsolver's rejection of the

¹⁴ *The Poisonwood Bible* has been likened to works by George Eliot, Tolstoy, and Dickens, for its parallel insistence that "political power, resistance, and change are essential to plot, rather than mere scenery behind it." Liane Ellison Norman, "Ignorance and Grace: Lessons from *The Poisonwood Bible*," *Sojourners* 28.2 (March 1999): 59. In contrast, *The Bean Trees*' interrelated characters and political destinies have been described as "too contrived for comfort." Patricia Holt, "A Soft/Tough Survivor: Book Review of *The Bean Trees*," *San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Review* (March 6, 1988): 1.

¹⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 24.

¹⁶ Donna Perry, "Interview with Barbara Kingsolver," in *Back Talk: Women Writers Speak Out*, edited by Donna Perry (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 145.

¹⁷ Robin Epstein, "The Progressive Interview: Barbara Kingsolver," *The Progressive* (February 1996): 36.

aspirational American dream that anyone can succeed. In a 1996 interview, Kingsolver asked, “For how many generations now has that been untrue?”¹⁸ and her fiction similarly challenges the illusion of meritocracy. In the sequel *Pigs in Heaven*, Taylor lives in poverty, working fifty-hour weeks, while her boyfriend Jax confesses, shamefaced, how as a child he believed “the usual American thing. If you’re industrious and have clean thoughts you will grow up to be the vice president of Motorola” (PH 88). Such assertions exemplify Kingsolver’s fictional commitment to what she calls the “business of fiction,” that is, to “probe the tender spots of an imperfect world.”¹⁹

It is Kingsolver’s combination of commercial success and political representation that makes her fiction fascinating. By merit of its popular appeal, her fiction can reach readers that non-fiction cannot. Kingsolver claims she began writing fiction precisely because non-fiction writing does not have this broad appeal. As she points out in a 1998 interview with *New York Magazine*, “If I were to write a non-fiction book about the brief blossoming and destruction of the independence of the Congo, and what the C.I.A. had to do with it, then probably all 85 people who are interested in the subject would read it.”²⁰ Instead, she wrote an entertaining novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and in this way conveyed her political message to millions of people.²¹ The success of this novel, with its unashamedly political agenda, exemplifies Kingsolver’s commitment to the political role of literature. Working within the recognition that “time is precious,”²² Kingsolver uses her fiction to “raise a little ruckus” and encourage “people to notice how things are in the world.”²³ This idea is reflected in her first book, *Holding the Line*, which developed out of journalistic articles about the 1983 Phelps Dodge mining dispute in Arizona. Having campaigned and participated in direct action,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder: Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 213.

²⁰ Sarah Kerr, “The Novel as Indictment,” *New York Times Magazine* (October 11, 1998): 52.

²¹ Chapter Four offers a closer analysis of the fact-infused nature of Kingsolver’s fiction.

²² Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*, 210.

²³ Stephenson, D3.

and having already represented the experiences of the Arizona strikers in her journalism, Kingsolver went on to write about the protesting women of an Arizona mining town in *Animal Dreams*. This section of the Introduction begins to explore the tension between her political allegiances and the ways in which they emerge in her novels.

Kingsolver's popularity, based in part on her fusion of fact and fiction, the personal and the political, and so-called "highbrow and lowbrow," affords her work an acclaim and popularity that extends from Oprah to Pulitzer. Although she is a political writer, opening up awareness of political issues at a domestic level, this thesis suggests that rather than subverting high/low distinctions, Kingsolver is also a broadly popular writer. This thesis explores the extent to which Kingsolver's appeal might be usefully seen in relation to ideas of the "middlebrow" as a bridge between the binaries and hierarchies of "high art" and "popular culture." Joan Shelley Rubin's analysis of the emergence of the "middlebrow" in American literary history notes that "expertise came to be viewed as the antidote to bewilderment"²⁴ as nineteenth-century Americans sought advice about book selection in much the same way as readers do today. Oprah's Book Club is only one example of the continuing middlebrow craving for self-proclaimed "experts" to advise on what to read. Even novelists instruct readers how to read their novels, with Kingsolver's introductions, author's notes, and suggestions for further reading conforming to a middlebrow tradition of literary didacticism. These devices and appendices emphasise Kingsolver's negotiation of the space between so-called low- and highbrow by harnessing commercial acclaim for critical political ends. This trend is exhibited not only in her novels, with their balance of plot and politics, but also by Kingsolver's various projects. Her novels and non-fiction books afford her the audience, commercial influence, and financial security that gets her voice heard, and by

²⁴ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middle/Brow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 18. Rubin cites Noah Porter's popular *Books and Reading: Or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them* (1871) as exemplifying this trend in the nineteenth century.

extension, the voices of her chosen “others.” This is evidenced not only by her own fictional representations, but also through her funding of the Bellwether Prize for literature of social change.²⁵

Far from denying accusations of didacticism, Kingsolver suggests that her work aims to teach people something; as this introduction’s opening quotation suggests, it is designed to offer answers to questions which they didn’t necessarily even know how to ask. Kingsolver states her fiction aims to offer “a specific answer to a general question that will somehow shed light on specifics of every different reader’s life,”²⁶ a broad liberal claim. However, what she suggests is an altruistic desire to offer answers and encourage understanding, risks tipping over into patronizing didacticism. She even cites the maxim, “Literature should inform as well as enlighten.”²⁷ On her website, she states “I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the people I grew up with--who may not often read anything but the Sears catalogue--to read my books.”²⁸ While claiming to privilege ordinary people in her writing, Kingsolver nonetheless positions them firmly at the other end of the spectrum of critical understanding of what they read from an English professor. Her novels reflect this sometimes uneasy balance between characterization and claimed message, populism and intellectual sophistication. It is not assured that the ordinary reader will grasp the symbolism.

Kingsolver’s fictional (and avowedly personal) commitment to the interrelatedness of environmental and human communities is coupled with an emphasis on the need to increase social capital. These thematic trends find parallels in a

²⁵ The Bellwether Prize for Fiction “in Support of a Literature of Social Change,” was founded and is fully funded by Barbara Kingsolver. In even-numbered years since 2000, it has been awarding \$25,000 and guaranteed publication to an unpublished work of serious literary fiction that addresses “issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships.” See The Bellwether Prize Official Website, “Homepage,” <http://www.bellwetherprize.org> (accessed October 15, 2007).

²⁶ Beattie, 164.

²⁷ Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*, 213.

²⁸ Harper Collins, “Barbara Kingsolver - Author Bio,” HarperAcademic, http://www.harperacademic.com/catalog/author_xml.asp?authorID=5311 (accessed March 12, 2005).

communitarian philosophy, which emphasises the way communities shape and define individuals. Kingsolver's fiction posits the relationship between community and individual as symbiotic; it straddles the divide between the liberal idea of individuals autonomously creating communities and the communitarian principle that individuals are created by their communities, the latter as propounded by Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift in questioning who exists independently of "the ends that give [their] life meaning and value?"²⁹ I suggest that these contradictory theoretical positions exemplify Kingsolver's representation of multiple political viewpoints in her fiction, as a way of engaging a variety of readers and offering a forum for debate about contemporary issues. However open this may seem upon initial reading, in the end, rather than prompting debate, Kingsolver co-opts multiple and often contradictory theoretical positions in order to represent a single, tangled, selective political viewpoint: her own. Kingsolver's characters are united by her knowledge of their voices, through research and experience. Labels such as feminist, liberal, southern, rural and ecofeminist are therefore useful starting points for analysis of Kingsolver's fiction, but none are exclusive or definitive.

The contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in Kingsolver's identification with -isms from feminism to environmentalism may be understood through Graham Huggan's conception of the Postcolonial Exotic, whereby postcolonial products are marketed for western consumption. Kingsolver markets her selected "-isms" for western consumption, particularly through representation of supposedly holistic Native American and Congolese communities. Huggan argues that postcolonial writers gain cultural currency from their perceived "anti-imperialist resistance,"³⁰ even as resistance itself emerges as a commodity to be consumed. Recalling bell hooks' suggestion that

²⁹ Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians: Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 10.

³⁰ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 29.

marginality “offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds,”³¹ Kingsolver’s fiction claims to speak from the margins but it is consumed by the centre. Kingsolver advocates social and political change but she may also be seen as profiteering from the margins, an idea that is compounded by further contradictions between her proclaimed political intentions and their representational effect in her fiction. Kingsolver’s distinctive form of liberalism (encapsulating selective aspects of pluralism, regionalism, feminism, etc.) suffers from the dilemma that Huggan describes as facing advocates of cosmopolitanism; the contradiction between the representation of their politics as “a synonym for cultural tolerance and for the ‘reciprocal interconnectedness’...that signifies an open liberal-pluralist worldview” or as a “cover for new forms of ethnocentrism” and “mystification of the continuing asymmetries of power within inclusive conceptions of global culture.”³² These interpretations signal the tension inherent within Kingsolver’s didactic authorial claims and the claims she makes for her characters, and highlight that the political efficacy of her fiction risks being compromised by its dual function as both an “exotic” commodity to be consumed and an educational tool.

Kingsolver explores Native American adoption, fast food culture, political refugees, colonialism, injustice on a global and local scale, alternative agriculture, poverty, images of beauty, and environmentalism, among a variety of contemporary concerns. Her depiction of a panoply of issues exemplifies the need for the tapestry of understanding which her fiction propounds. For example, in *Animal Dreams*, Codi’s desire to belong again in her old home town runs alongside the novel’s political theme of overcoming ethnic and environmental oppression. Kingsolver’s fiction, therefore, perpetuates a self-confirming logic, suggesting the need to seek alternative ways of

³¹ bell hooks, “marginality as a site of resistance,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. R. Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 341.

³² Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 11.

understanding. For example, without explicitly citing ecocritical theory, Kingsolver's fiction engages strongly with ecofeminist principles. Kingsolver's characters and environments are represented according to the broad ecofeminist premise that women and nature are linked by their shared experiences of domination and that women should work to create a healthy environment. Women interact with the environment, and struggle to combat pollution in *Prodigal Summer* and *Animal Dreams*. In their resolve, they are contrasted with Kingsolver's white male characters who embody apathy or opposition.³³ *Prodigal Summer*'s Garnett Walker is vehemently opposed to his neighbour Nannie Rawley's organic farming, despite the fact that his wife died of a cancer which may have been caused by pesticides.³⁴ The male characters in *Animal Dreams* are resigned to the mining companies' pollution of their orchards, believing that "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...it would be home" (AD 179). It is the women who are left to coordinate the protest against environmental damage.

Feminism, in the liberal sense of a commitment to fighting gender inequality, shapes Kingsolver's characters' personal and political choices, and underpins her authorial identity. However, Kingsolver's celebration of strong, intelligent and politically vociferous female characters at times reinforces binaries rather than critiquing them. Her women are environmentally-, community- and family-oriented, while some of her white male characters, for example *The Poisonwood Bible*'s Nathan Price, are demonised as oppressive patriarchal monsters. While Kingsolver personally claims to be a feminist

³³ That Kingsolver also differentiates between white and Native American men, idealising the environmentally holistic character of Loyd Peregrina in *Animal Dreams* for example, does not undermine an ecofeminist reading of these novels. The parallel hierarchies of oppression between women, environment, and marginalised minorities, only serve to emphasise Kingsolver's feminist-influenced environmentalism. Loyd may be a man, but he is represented as an outsider to white patriarchal power structures just as much as the women of Grace.

³⁴ Suzanne W. Jones' offers an environmental reading of *Prodigal Summer* in "The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*," in *Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South since 1920*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006), 177-187. I discuss Jones' essay later in this Introduction and in more detail in Chapter Five.

(“Do I consider myself a feminist? Absolutely...Who doesn’t anymore?”³⁵), she responded strongly to the CliffNotes interpretation of *The Bean Trees*, stating “they made too much of the idea that I was making a feminist statement, when I wasn’t. I was simply expressing reality about women and how they relate.”³⁶ Her explicit attempts to differentiate between personal and literary feminism remain unconvincing, particularly given her self-proclaimed political agenda and her characters’ gender-inflected crusades. Describing the political within her fiction predominantly in terms of the “reality” of women’s lives and relationships suggests that, in harnessing the political to the everyday, she is working to remain middlebrow.

While she dubs herself a “little old Socialist,”³⁷ Kingsolver’s stance is philosophical and moral. This is the case not only for her characters, but also, according to interviews, her authorial persona too. I argue that her fiction supports racial, ethnic, sexual and religious tolerance in the way that Andrew R. Murphy describes as “almost universally recognized by both critics and supporters as central to the liberal tradition.”³⁸ If anything, she is liberal rather than Liberal or Socialist. But Kingsolver’s liberalism is not fixed or comprehensive; neither the author nor her characters embody an uncomplicated political and economic liberalism. Instead, Kingsolver selects issues regarding tolerance and justice as the primary aspects of liberalism in her characters’ “profiles.” And her choice to represent certain social and political issues that typically affect voters as well as readers goes some way towards explaining her popularity.

While Kingsolver’s characters often struggle with poverty and directly condemn the promise of an “American dream” that equates working hard with prosperity, her

³⁵ Anon, “South’s lyrical dialogue echoes in Barbara Kingsolver’s novels,” *Denver Post* (September 29, 1993): 1F.

³⁶ Kate Zernike, “The Reviews Are In,” *New York Times* (August 4, 2002): 4A.7. Zernike asked five authors, Sandra Cisneros, Arthur Miller, Barbara Kingsolver, Tim O’Brien and Alice Walker, to see how well the CliffNotes study guide interpreted their books.

³⁷ Epstein, 36.

³⁸ Andrew R. Murphy, “Tolerance, Toleration, and the Liberal Tradition,” *Polity* 29, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 593.

didactic narrative style contains within it its own dangerous maxim. Her protagonists embody the idea that books about ordinary people, not famous, rich, or powerful people, but the American everyman and woman, can affect political change. However, such trenchant didacticism can have the opposite effect: rather than inspiring readers to take such actions in their own lives, the reading of the book becomes the political action in itself. The happy resolution of the novels risks allowing the reader to feel like there's no need to act because either someone else is taking action or things will resolve themselves naturally anyway. This is compounded when the author herself imbues even the purchasing forum of her novels with a political agenda, as with the US book tour for *Prodigal Summer* which was replaced by a series of environmental fundraisers.

Crucially, Kingsolver's marginalised white characters *choose* to live on the edge. Unlike the peripheral Native American characters in *The Bean Trees*, *Pigs in Heaven* and *Animal Dreams*, her white characters' positions at the margins of American culture are ones they opt for. *Prodigal Summer*'s Lusa gives up her job as a university biology lecturer to become an Appalachian farmer's wife; *The Bean Trees*' Taylor resigns from hospital employment to live on the road; *Animal Dreams*' Codi abandons a medical career and long-term boyfriend to return to her hometown. In their respective searches for "home," the marginal positions of Kingsolver's female protagonists suggest that a sense of "belonging" may best be found in the social margins. Kingsolver's "margins" are ethnically diverse, environmentally aware, female-driven, and family oriented. Her "marginal" characters understand poverty and injustice but, unlike many members of America's low wage underclass, are able to create homes from this position.³⁹

Kingsolver's characters challenge gender, class, and political boundaries so that her readers will not have to. Reading a Kingsolver novel, empathising with characters

³⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich's study, *Nickel and Dimed: Undercover in Low-Wage USA* (London: Granta, 2002), instead represents low wage Americans living predominantly day-to-day in temporary accommodation. While Taylor in *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* experiences a taste of this, it is her choice to remove herself from family and her choice to return.

and awakening to issues, becomes the self-affirming, appeasing political action in itself. Through her best-selling fiction, representations of marginality therefore become products to be consumed, rather than problems to be faced with political action. Consuming the narrative and participating in community become interchangeable, and the risk is that the commodification of the radical or marginal results in the writing and reading of stories coming to replace real economic and political change.

That said, Kingsolver's fiction is also an investment, planting seeds of political thought for the future and recognising the linear development of people's awakening. If she is right, fiction may plant an idea, the idea becomes integrated into the reader's thoughts and values, and over time, into possible political action. Kingsolver's novels teach that action can be effective; her characters often achieve justice and a personal sense of belonging. Action is part of the development process of the individual but Kingsolver's apparent commitment to this long-term reader awakening leaves her open to criticism. Purporting to invest in popular culture so that it will pay political and environmental dividends in the future could be seen as excusing fiction's failure to effect immediate change. Like the asparagus plants which she describes sweating to dig "into countless yards I was destined to leave behind,"⁴⁰ Kingsolver's non-fiction and fiction can be heavy-handed in telling readers to think beyond their own generation and immediate experience. It instructs readers to imagine a future in which environmental justice and social interrelatedness will be valued, but expressed as fiction it allows readers to wallow in liberally-commendable but resolutely passive principles.

⁴⁰ Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 29. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text as AVM.

Ordinary/Marginalised Voices

In my discussion of the political aspects of Kingsolver's fiction, I have been employing the term "ordinary" and "marginalised" without fully addressing their complex semantic baggage as critically contested terms. That many of Kingsolver's characters are simultaneously "ordinary" and marginalised by their race, class and region, highlights the elusive nature of the "ordinary," which critics such as Graham Peachy suggest is more often understood by "what it is *not*" rather than "what it is."⁴¹ There is a dual connotation to the ordinary when considered in relation to Kingsolver's fiction: the act of writing "ordinary" voices considered by the author to be marginalised is political, yet it also underpins the popular appeal of the author's work.

Kingsolver's challenging-yet-familiar voices go some way towards explaining her popularity. They appeal to the details of people's lives while simultaneously illuminating the heroic within personal and domestic detail. When questioned about this tendency in her fiction in a 1996 interview in *The Progressive*, Kingsolver stated categorically: "The things you do in your life, from day to day to day, which you have probably never thought of as the stuff of literature, are heroic."⁴² In making such claims, Kingsolver positions herself as a liberating writer, bringing voices which have previously been overlooked or actively silenced into the public arena. As Njabulo Ndebele suggests, to evoke the ordinary is a political act: "ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle."⁴³ The idea of the ordinary as marginalised is propounded by Michel de Certeau, who suggests that contemporary marginality is "no longer limited to minority groups," but extends to

⁴¹ Graham Peachy, "Introduction," in Njabulo S. Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 6.

⁴² Epstein, 34.

⁴³ Ndebele, 57.

a “silent majority.”⁴⁴ This thesis explores the ways in which Kingsolver represents characters that are marginalised either as the apparently silent “ordinary” majority, or by a minority status marked by race, class, and region.

Barbara Kingsolver’s predominantly female characters are working mothers, single parents, checkout assistants, farmers’ wives, schoolteachers. Their daily lives are not necessarily aspirational. They live in small towns, defined by community and family ties. They struggle for money. Their romances do not always blossom. They clothe and feed and teach their children the best they can. Through such details, Kingsolver makes clear that they are the most ordinary of characters living prosaic lives. Yet they also constantly defy the limitations of such apparent “ordinariness” and remind the reader, and the critic, that there is no such thing as an ordinary life.

Roland Barthes explored the idea that unlike other professionals, “the writer keeps his writer’s nature everywhere...as a kind of intrinsically different being.”⁴⁵ Kingsolver, like the ubiquitous writer in Barthes, may conceive of her writerly position as different and enabling, yet she is resolute in her personal commitment to an increasingly idiosyncratic perception of what “ordinary” means. Her characters are “ordinary” in much the same way as she claims to be. In her non-fiction work, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Kingsolver describes her own lifestyle as centring on the land and family, eschewing the trappings of celebrity or luxury. Barbara Kingsolver, the book practically screams, is “just” an “ordinary” working mother and smallholder and yet her privileged perception and representation of what is “ordinary” is anything but. Rather, as Joe Moran develops Barthes’ observation in *Star Authors*, celebrities are

⁴⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1984), xvii.

⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Writer on Holiday,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Virago, 2000), 30.

“simultaneously extraordinary and familiar”⁴⁶, and Kingsolver presents herself as a down-to-earth working mother both in her celebrity appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and in articles including “Best-Selling Author Barbara Kingsolver Returns to Her Appalachian Roots,” which led with a cover photograph of Kingsolver and her family on the spartan porch of their cabin home.⁴⁷ This “ordinary” image is always achieved within the context of her extraordinary, bestselling status. In addition to this combination of authorial identity markers, Kingsolver highlights the authority of her fictions by making her political claims explicit in interviews and including factual markers such as bibliographies in her novels.

Through familiar female voices, each tinged with a regionalism which speaks to another level of “authentic” narrative detail, Kingsolver’s women seem to challenge political and social hierarchies, fighting injustices in their families and local communities. They offer alternative ways of approaching old problems, often through seemingly small shifts in behaviour. They face the past in order to construct hopeful futures on a personal and a broader political level. This thesis will address the balance Kingsolver attempts to establish between familiar characters and challenging political ideas. In so doing, it will explore the extent to which her female protagonists occupy a spectrum of self-consciously political viewpoints.

In her professedly liberal desire to give voice to the previously marginalised, Kingsolver ends up making her characters speak for her idiosyncratic political agenda, co-opting the tension between voices as proof of a democratic literary inclusivity. Discussing the perceived “shift from novels about liberation to novels about

⁴⁶ Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 8. See also Joshua Gamson, *Claim to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 191.

⁴⁷ Martha Barnette, “Best-Selling Author Barbara Kingsolver Returns to her Appalachian Roots,” *Louisville Courier-Journal Scene Magazine* (June 24, 2000): 12-13. The emphasis in the title of the *Louisville Courier-Journal Scene Magazine* article is mine.

connection,”⁴⁸ Jay Clayton asserts that the very ideal of community necessitates exclusion, in much the same way as I posit that Kingsolver’s inclusiveness is inherently selective. She chooses which “marginalised” voices to represent, and neglects others. There is a contradiction between Kingsolver’s apparent commitment to the need for political dialogue in literature, and her single overriding viewpoint. Novels which might seem on first reading to be heteroglossic in style and form, are finally revealed to be contained within a monologic narrative.

Kingsolver’s proclaimed multiple viewpoints are actually a fallacy: each protagonist ultimately represents aspects of the author’s own, sometimes contradictory, views. While Kingsolver’s characters are not, it should be understood, uncomplicated mirrors of her own experience, the differences between characters are mirrored by contradictory statements made by Kingsolver in interviews and essays. And while she appears at first sight to create characters that live on the so-called margins of society, none are truly impoverished or marginalised. Some may choose the margins, but they remain middle-class, privileged, and educated. Leah may live in a mud hut in Angola by the end of *The Poisonwood Bible*, but that is her life choice, wrought in part out of love for her husband, and in part out of guilt for her nation’s role in the Congo’s downfall. As a result, the archetypal Kingsolver character risks being perceived as their own worst enemy or, at the very least, as the embodiment of a somewhat naïve middle-class “liberalism.” Leah, who lives an incredibly unusual life for a teenaged girl from Georgia, highlights this class-oriented sense of the ordinary. Her education and the lifestyle afforded by her father’s missionary status shape the political awakening which her time in Africa inspires. And Leah is hardly an isolated case; *Prodigal Summer*’s Lusa is not only a Virginia farmer’s wife struggling to make ends meet, she is also a Jewish scientist with connections to cultures beyond her valley home secured through academic friends,

⁴⁸ Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 131.

geographically-scattered family, and religious traditions. I temper Kingsolver's claims to writing about ordinary people with the suggestion that all of her characters are *extraordinary*. And while exposing the myth of the "ordinary" could be interpreted as the intended effect of her fiction, this thesis is shaped by the assertion that Kingsolver's characters are, in the final analysis, firmly embedded in the author's own middle-class sense of what is "ordinary."

Her characters and communities embrace the multicultural and pluralist principle of maintaining the unique cultural identities of minority groups within a larger society, while commending certain traits as worth co-opting into the dominant culture. These aspects of cultural pluralism in Kingsolver's fiction are not only defined in terms of ethnic or racial minority communities, but through her representation of predominantly white socially marginalised characters. She creates protagonists who, in fighting injustice against ethnic minorities, combat their own ingrained sense of inferiority and insignificance as unvoiced, un- or under-represented Americans: they may have the vote, but their nation does not represent them. It is not only in her fiction that Kingsolver examines the American myth of classlessness; she claims in interviews that her imperative is "to record, not just the past, but specifically, the voices of those who've had their voices taken away from them."⁴⁹ Nevertheless, while Native Americans, immigrant refugees, and African characters appear, they are only represented through the voices of her white protagonists.⁵⁰

While Kingsolver's protagonists are often poor and white, they are not uncomplicatedly represented or (under-)read as such. Taylor Greer, for example, lives in motels, works low-wage manual jobs and feeds herself and daughter Turtle on peanut butter sandwiches to make ends meet despite being smart and hard-working. In

⁴⁹ Beattie, 157.

⁵⁰ Sharon Monteith explores this trope in detail through an analysis of interracial literary friendships in *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000).

representing a variety of poor white characters as they struggle with poverty, Kingsolver contributes to a tradition of making marginalized white voices audible. There is a longstanding tradition of representing poor whites on the political and economic margins in American writing. The Bundren family of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the Joads in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and James Agee and Walker Evans' invocation of the experiences of three southern sharecropping families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) are among the canonical, Depression-era examples of this trend. In subsequent decades, writers as different as Carolyn Chute, Dorothy Allison and Kaye Gibbons have challenged the ideal of whites as the normative bodies against which all "others" are judged.

In her representation of poor whites, Kingsolver's extended families also contain characters at both ends of the age spectrum. In *Prodigal Summer*, for example, pivotal characters range from 6-year-old Crystal to pensioner Garnett. And, as Jay Clayton notes, the very old and the very young are often considered the most marginalised in US society.⁵¹ Kingsolver's democratic vision of society is at its most effective in the narratives in which her characters are marginalised not only by region, gender and class, but also by their age. However, while her inclusive social agenda is notably effective in novels like *Prodigal Summer*, when it ensures male and female, old and young are represented, with varying religious beliefs, there are exceptions. *The Poisonwood Bible's* multitude of voices may offer apparently diverse political and spiritual views, but they are crystallised in a single world view afforded by their American characters' race and nationality. Kingsolver's choice of characters reveals more about the author's representation of ordinariness than whiteness, though whiteness may simply be another marker of the "ordinary" to white, middle-class Kingsolver. I argue that while the ability

⁵¹ Clayton, 141.

to capture the ordinary is at the heart of her popular appeal to “ordinary” readers, it is also what often keeps hers from being considered as aesthetically complicated literature.

“The Business of Fiction”: Oprah and Kingsolver

Kingsolver’s shifting role in popular culture is exemplified through her interactions with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Kingsolver represents Oprah in her fiction while, in turn, Oprah endorses Kingsolver on her show, highlighting parallels between these two successful women. Tactically, they are both storytellers who represent the political through personal and local details. Commercially, they have a shared appeal as “bestsellers” in their respective fields.

In her 1993 novel *Pigs in Heaven*, Kingsolver’s fictional protagonists Taylor and Turtle appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as guests in an episode about children who save lives. Five years later, her Pulitzer-nominated novel *The Poisonwood Bible* was chosen as an Oprah’s Book Club selection and Kingsolver herself appeared on the show to discuss the novel with Oprah in 1998. The increasingly popular area of scholarship on the Oprah Winfrey phenomenon often focuses on her book club as a publishing powerhouse, revealing of the nation’s social and political hierarchies.⁵² In an evolving field of study, Kingsolver fits some of the paradigms proposed by Eva Ilouz: Oprah novels tend to be about women trying to “rewrite the narrative of their lives through the experience of suffering” while remaining relatively divorced from others.⁵³ Kingsolver’s novels also fit Ilouz’s definition of “Oprah books” as predominantly first-person narratives which explore the boundaries and the “implosion of the family,” “troubled motherhood,” and women’s friendship even if some of these relationships are defined

⁵² For a fuller discussion of the cultural role of The Oprah Winfrey Show, see Moran, *Star Authors* and Eva Ilouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Ilouz maps the common tropes of Oprah novels, and suggests that these chosen works illustrate “the cultural continuity among ‘middle,’ ‘high,’ and ‘low’ aspects of Oprah’s cultural enterprise,” 103.

⁵³ Ilouz, 109-110.

as “problematic and painful,” and which involve the absence of “the strong, protective, and omnipotent man.”⁵⁴ Rather than simply reciting the conclusions made about Oprah authors in previous scholarship, I explore the variously commercial and literary aspects of Kingsolver’s fiction as they find recognition on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

For Kingsolver, Oprah represented the opportunity to spread the novel’s political message beyond its already large readership to Oprah’s global television audience. *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Kingsolver’s discussion of it on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, foregrounds the political through the personal details of the Price family’s lives. In contrast, Oprah’s Book Club emphasises effecting personal rather than political change, and the comments of panels and Oprah herself about Kingsolver’s novel emphasise that the Congo was a “canvas” for a story about family, trauma, and overcoming patriarchal and racial oppression. Kingsolver’s emphasis on the global and colonial implications of American political involvement in the Congo, and Oprah’s foregrounding of Orleanna’s personal struggles, highlights their differing emphases on the role of fiction. While Kingsolver’s characters’ act as the starting point for considering the broader political topics of her fiction, Oprah’s treatment of *The Poisonwood Bible* suggests that the women’s personal stories are *themselves* the political topic. Kingsolver’s representation of the political through the personal stories of the Price women emphasises the efficacy of her middlebrow linking of the hierarchies of “high art” and “popular culture.”

There is no denying that being an Oprah author boosts book sales. In an article in *Publishing Research Quarterly*, economists Richard Butler, Benjamin W. Cowan and Sebastian Nilsson claim that the “Oprah effect” for each book equates to about \$80 million in retail sales.⁵⁵ In light of her power to influence, Oprah Winfrey was honoured

⁵⁴ Kingsolver’s narratives sit less comfortably with Ilouz’s suggestion that in Oprah novels, a “‘tragedy’ happens at the very beginning of the novel or is known to the *narrator*,” falling in love is “conspicuously absent” and suffering is “presented as central to the formation of identity.” Ilouz, 103-110.

⁵⁵ Richard Butler, Benjamin W. Cowan and Sebastian Nilsson, “From Obscurity to

by the American Association of Publishers in 2002 for her “significant achievements in promoting American books and authors.”⁵⁶ Having been endorsed by the show, Kingsolver’s readership predictably increased, with *The Poisonwood Bible* staying in the Top 150 book chart for 137 weeks, longer than any other Oprah author.⁵⁷

Kingsolver’s interactions with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, her literary prizes and subsequent funding of The Bellwether Prize, exhibit her ability to exploit the inter-reliance of cultural and economic capital. In his study of literary celebrity, Joe Moran posits literary prizes as exemplifying the interconnectedness of such capital in the “creation of contemporary literary fame.”⁵⁸ Kingsolver co-opts her literary fame for her own ideological ends and, having benefited from mainstream literary prizes, she uses her financial success to fund a prize that is “In Support of a Literature of Social Change.”⁵⁹

Kingsolver’s Bellwether Prize for Fiction exemplifies my analysis of her fiction as explicitly political, didactic and commercially appealing. As she states on the Bellwether homepage:

Fiction has a unique capacity to bring difficult issues to a broad readership on a personal level, creating empathy...for the theoretical stranger. Its capacity for invoking moral and social responsibility is enormous.⁶⁰

The broad readership that Kingsolver describes here is only made possible by writing fiction that has commercial appeal, and then by using her reputation to raise awareness of other fiction writers who may not be as accessible. Writing and promoting fiction as an imaginative political “movement” towards moral and social responsibility, Kingsolver creates politically- and ethically-compatible communities of readers which resonate with literary critic James Boyd White’s discussion of “establishing a community in

Bestseller: Examining the Impact of Oprah’s Book Club Selections,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 23-34.

⁵⁶ American Association of Publishers, “Press Release 29 October 2002,” <http://www.publishers.org/press/releases.cfm?PressReleaseArticleID=104> (accessed October 17, 2006).

⁵⁷ Butler, Cowan and Nilsson, 23-34.

⁵⁸ Moran, 44.

⁵⁹ The Bellwether Prize Official Website.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

language.”⁶¹ It is this community of readers that Kingsolver’s fiction (and her endorsement of Bellwether authors) cultivates and that she encourages to express their political agency. White argues that not only is a text’s most important meaning to be found “in the community that it establishes with its reader,”⁶² but also “all literature, fictional or nonfictional, necessarily has an ethical and political dimension.”⁶³ While based in a tradition of foregrounding readership communities, this claim also finds parallels in the emerging field of cognitive poetics with its emphasis on the centrality of reader context in the creation of textual meaning.⁶⁴

These various literary critics gesture towards the basic premise of Kingsolver’s fiction: that communities of readers, founded through their relationships with particular texts, are to some extent political. The consideration of cultural forms as catalysts for political and moral change has been explored by numerous cultural theorists but is neatly expressed by philosopher Richard Rorty, who claims that “the novel, the movie and the television program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principle vehicles of moral change and progress.”⁶⁵ In her literary study of interracial friendships, Sharon Monteith cites Rorty as she expresses the extent to which there has been further “erosion of the boundaries” between so-called “high” and “low” cultural forms since the end of the 1960s.⁶⁶ Monteith’s suggestion of the ways in which the popular success of contemporary fiction can be determined in relation to the extent to which it engages with “wider ideological considerations and social ideals” informs my analysis of Kingsolver’s fiction as political, popular, and in need of scholarly analysis.

⁶¹ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 14.

⁶² White, 17.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ My understanding of cognitive poetics has been guided by Peter Stockwell’s *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁶⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi. As quoted in Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?*, 23.

⁶⁶ Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?*, 23.

Kingsolver's fiction is firmly rooted in this context as she claims to write fiction which encourages people to think about political issues and experiences beyond their own.

Oprah's Book Club choices and the audiences she creates represent and empathise with groups and individuals who have been victimised, thus creating empathetic communities of viewers and readers. This so-called "victim chic" and the trope of women surviving by overcoming oppression underlines the idea of the Oprah show itself as a storytelling medium. Oprah's shows, like the novels she chooses, make heroes of the overlooked, marginalised and oppressed. This is a cathartic process; viewers and readers respond to cultural media such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, or a Kingsolver novel, as representing and creating communities which embody and inspire change and progress.

Having fictionalised Oprah in *Pigs in Heaven* and the experiences of protagonist Taylor Greer as she appears on the show, Kingsolver extends the symbiotic relationship of fiction and cultural reality by being interviewed by Oprah during the show's discussion of *The Poisonwood Bible*. Unlike *The Poisonwood Bible* show, when Kingsolver barely got a word in between Oprah and the "ordinary" female readers at the book's "dinner table" discussion, Kingsolver puts words into Oprah's mouth in *Pigs in Heaven*. The representation of *The Poisonwood Bible* on the Oprah website and the discussion with the female readers on the show undoubtedly informed the way the novel was read. In subsequent website and show discussions, certain aspects of the novel are emphasised over others. Kingsolver's highlighting of the fallout from colonialism and patriarchy is sidelined by discussions of the Congo as setting and of the story as a family saga.

While Oprah does not rely on Kingsolver for success, the success of her book club relies on authors such as Kingsolver, whose fiction combines recognisably literary traits with an accessibility which confirms Oprah's "democratic" ethos. Like Kingsolver's characters who even individually represent a range of social, political, and

economic hierarchies, as Eva Illouz notes, Oprah's show penetrates and transforms a similarly "wide variety of social spheres."⁶⁷ Illouz suggests that Oprah commands the power "to change the lives of homeless people as well as of entire industrial branches"⁶⁸ in much the same way as I claim Kingsolver's characters attempt to do. To take a single example, *Animal Dreams*' Codi Noline studies to be a doctor, lives as a housewife in Europe, and then teaches in a rural high school while sleeping in a small house in her friend's back yard. Codi not only helps house South American refugees in Tucson, but she tackles the pollution of local environments by industrial mining corporations.

Kingsolver's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and her earlier fictional representation of the show embody the idea of the "ordinary" through which Kingsolver defines her characters and readership. In stressing that her characters and readers are ordinary people, she simultaneously exposes the ordinary as a misnomer. Kingsolver claims that people's ordinary lives are "heroic." In her fictions, the everyday experiences of an "ordinary" life are local studies of global issues. Her characters read the Sears catalogue, they juggle work with family, and through the course of the novel their "ordinary" revelations encourage readers to see the political in their lives. Kingsolver's mimetic relationship with *The Oprah Winfrey Show* highlights this imagined conflation of reader with character and goes some way to explaining her popularity. Kingsolver and Oprah's successes testify to their chameleon-like abilities to tap into those "issues" which capture the popular imagination.

Kingsolver and Oprah both exhibit a literary "brand" trading on personal and local stories. Their parallel methodologies converge with their thematic interest in narratives forged against racial, regional/national, and gendered oppression. Oprah's South African Leadership Academy for Girls is only one of the programmes she has

⁶⁷ Illouz, 152.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

designed to help “educate impoverished women and children around the world,”⁶⁹ all of which fall under the banner “How You Can Make a Difference.” Like Kingsolver’s representation of personal stories centred on regionally-nuanced political issues, the author’s Bellwether Prize conforms to a parallel interest in stories of political and social engagement. Kingsolver uses Oprah’s endorsement to confirm and promote her “ordinary” characters’ appeal. Her characters are the kinds of people who would appear on the show (indeed, as Taylor and Turtle, they have!), and Kingsolver herself has too. Oprah achieves a representational sense of authority by cultivating a celebrity which, like Kingsolver’s own fame, balances the “ordinary” and the iconic.

Kingsolver and Oprah also make parallel claims to represent the marginalized in America and to create communities of audiences and readers. Kingsolver’s fiction, and a talk show like Oprah’s, purports to represent such communities as extended family, wherein members share a bond of apparent honesty. For the people of Kingsolver’s imagined towns of Heaven, Oklahoma (*Pigs in Heaven*), Grace, Arizona (*Animal Dreams*), and Egg Fork, Kentucky (*Prodigal Summer*), the bond of local identity unites otherwise disparate residents. These residents can be newcomers, as is Alice to Heaven, Lusa to Egg Fork, and Taylor to Tuscon, or locals returning after a period of exile, like Codi to Grace. It is not their claim to belonging through ancestry or race, but their grounded and chosen commitment to the locality, which precipitates membership in the community-as-family.⁷⁰ None of the few examples of nuclear families in Kingsolver’s work are particularly successful (the Prices in *The Poisonwood Bible*, for example), but family groupings are often supplemented by the wider community. Codi’s sister Hallie, for example, is absent throughout *Animal Dreams*, but the community of Grace comes to

⁶⁹ The Oprah Winfrey Show, “Philanthropy Homepage,” The Official Oprah Winfrey Show Website, http://www2.oprah.com/philanthropy/philanthropy_landing.jhtml (accessed June 1, 2007).

⁷⁰ See James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 103-106 for his discussion of identity and place. Peacock explores how spaces become symbols with meaning and “a focus of identity.”

complement rather than supplant her family. In Kingsolver's fiction, such communities look beyond a geographically defined region to confirm their localised community.

Local details, global themes

Kingsolver's characters and their worlds embody a Southern-ness which extends beyond Appalachia and past the Mason-Dixon line, to the American Southwest and even as far as the Congo in West Africa. This is in keeping with Kingsolver's claim that "Almost all of my characters come from me."⁷¹ Kingsolver grew up in Kentucky, spent time in the Congo as a child, and, until 2006, divided her time between homes in the Appalachian mountains and the desert near Tucson, Arizona. Kingsolver and her family now live on a smallholding in Southwestern Virginia, or "southern Appalachia" as she calls it (AVM 3). Her heroines, even those firmly located in the Southwest, such as Codi in *Animal Dreams*, are infused with a defiant regionalism which Kingsolver claims is a result of her own localised "Southern" identification. Without wishing to accept her self-defined identity simplistically, I suggest that in their preoccupation with the past, Kingsolver's characters are at least partially defined by their regional histories and traumas. In this way, her characters promote the apparently Southern facet of her authorial identity, and her novels in turn benefit from the proliferation of interest in regionalism in general and the US South in particular. In interviews, for instance, Kingsolver tells of being inspired by Bobbie Ann Mason's respectful representation of her fellow Kentuckians in fiction, but I would argue that Kingsolver's regionalism is more environmentally than culturally grounded. Her Southern characters embody a popular perception of the rural, community-oriented and environmentally-distinctive locale that is one facet of a traditionally "Southern" setting, even as they pack up and head westward (as Taylor does in *The Bean Trees*), forge new lives on foreign soil (as the Prices do in *The Poisonwood*

⁷¹ Perry, 151.

Bible), or shirk tradition in the counties of their birth (as do Lusa, Deanna and Nannie in the Appalachian-set *Prodigal Summer*).

Kingsolver alludes to her preoccupation with local detail in interviews, stating that when reading other authors, she has “tossed aside stories because...birds sang on the wrong continents or full moons appeared two weeks apart.” Confiding that she “can’t abide” fiction that “fails to get its facts straight,”⁷² Kingsolver’s own fiction is infused with local details particular to the various environments of her characters. In Kingsolver’s introduction to The Nature Conservancy’s collection of “Stories of Place,” for example, she clarifies her philosophy that story is “our grand explanation for ourselves, and it grows from place.”⁷³ This philosophy recalls canonical Southern writers’ attention to place such as Eudora Welty in *One Writer’s Beginnings* and in her novels and stories; William Faulkner, across his Yoknapatawpha novels; and Wendell Berry in environmentally-conscious writings based in his smallholding in Kentucky. Kingsolver’s emphasis on place also highlights both her astute positioning of herself within the frameworks of an increasingly bankable environmentally-aware rhetoric, and her chameleon-like appeal within such niches. Indeed, her work has appeared in collections of stories and essays by Agrarian, Kentucky, Women, Environmental and Southern writers.⁷⁴ It is impossible to know whether this is a canny marketing ploy, or a

⁷² Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*, 212.

⁷³ Barbara Kingsolver, introduction to *Off the Beaten Path: Stories of Place*, edited by Joseph Barato and Lisa Weinerman Horak of The Nature Conservancy (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 19.

⁷⁴ Kingsolver’s articles, short stories and novel extracts appear in collections including *Women Writing in Appalachia*, eds. Sandra L. Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 330; *Homeland and Beyond: An Anthology of Kentucky Short Stories*, ed. Morris Allen Grubbs (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, Summer 2001); *New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best 1988*, ed. Shannon Ravenel (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1988); *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003); *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1992); *Mothers - Twenty Stories of Contemporary Motherhood*, eds. Katrina Kenison and Kathleen Hirsch (New York: North Point Press, 1996); *The Single Mother’s Companion: Essays and Stories by Women*, ed. Marsha R. Leslie (Seattle: Seal Press, 1994); *Dreamers and Desperadoes: Contemporary Short Fiction of the American West*, eds. Craig Lesley and Kathryn Stavrakis (New York: Laurel, 1993); *New Writers of the Purple Sage: An Anthology of Recent Western Writing*, ed. Russell Martin (New York: Penguin, 1992); *The Western Women’s Reader: The Remarkable Writings of Women Who Shaped the American West, Spanning 300 Years*, eds. Lillian Schlissel and Catherine Lavender (New York: HarperPerennial, 2000); *Getting Over the Color Green: Southwestern American Literature: An Anthology of Contemporary Environmental Literature from the American*

natural or convenient meeting of Kingsolver's personal preoccupations with popular cultural and political issues. She neatly draws together seemingly distinct strands of thematic interest by harbouring them in her familiar and empathetic characters and local narrative detail, whether describing the indigenous fruit trees of Grace's orchards in *Animal Dreams* or perfecting the Price girls' Georgia accents and teenage slang in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Kingsolver conforms to the idea that "Southern writers have always written books that are deeply rooted in that place and culture but say something beyond that place."⁷⁵ In this way, she identifies local details as anchors for universal themes.

My analysis of Kingsolver's key themes and narrative techniques proposes an environmentally-located guiding principle, but one which is nuanced more by the local than the regional. The terms "local" and "regional" both allow for the cognitive mapping of a group identity that is simultaneously spatially and culturally determined. This identifying grouping of people into a community that forms the local, and subsequent grouping of local communities to form a region, allows for an organisation of place that is not as concrete as geographical borders alone. For the purposes of this thesis, my working definition of "local" is as a specific place with which a community of people identify. The borders of this local defining "place" depend on the context of the community of individuals that choose to identify with it. In Kingsolver's fiction, such "places" vary in scope according to each novel's setting but are consistently determined by her protagonists' engagement with their environments. The more aware her characters become of environment, and of related global and political issues, the more specifically their locality comes to be determined. This idea of the "local" can therefore be seen to draw upon James Peacock's concept of "grounded globalism," which fuses

Southwest, ed. Scott Slovic (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995); and *The Best American Science and Nature Writing*, ed. Edward O. Wilson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

⁷⁵ Perry, 150.

“a transformative global identity to a sustaining regional identity.”⁷⁶ For Lusa in *Prodigal Summer*, her locality initially incorporates her old Lexington home but comes to be more narrowly defined as the limits of her land in Zebulon Valley as she recognises her reliance on the land and the global influences which can shape its economic fortunes.

The valleys and communities that border on Zebulon function in turn as part of Lusa’s wider consciousness of the “region” of Appalachia, of which both she and Cole are a part, even before they meet. My working definition of “regional” also builds upon the term’s broader spatial reach, with each region containing multiple local communities. My understanding of region as a spatial and cultural umbrella term is further shaped by the scope for inclusion allowed by Raymond Williams’ description of the region as representing “a distinct place and way of life.”⁷⁷ The use of regional in this thesis incorporates within its “distinctiveness” the idea that it comprises multiple local communities, each more intimately grounded in their own closely-known environment.

In his extended and creative discussion of environmentally-grounded regionalism, Jack Temple Kirby notes the suggestion by literary critic Fred Hobson that postmodern southern literature “is autochthonous, which means indigenous yet free of cultural and territorial entrapment.”⁷⁸ While Kirby’s *Mockingbird Song* addresses southern literary landscapes through evocative prose and historical narrative, he suggests a region freeing itself of geographical and social boundaries in favour of a sense of environmental location and identity. Kirby links this idea explicitly to the field of criticism that is Southern Studies.

Southern regionalism counts environmental located-ness and the influence of history among its contributing factors. In orientating his model for regional-to-global

⁷⁶ James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xi.

⁷⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 265.

⁷⁸ Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 312.

identity, James L. Peacock analyses the combination of grounded and historical aspects of the South, describing the “most crucial change in the history of the region” as its coming to “define its identity as a region, as the South”⁷⁹ in the early nineteenth century. Dividing the history of the South into three phases, Peacock suggests that this earlier shift from global to regional identity is now in the process of returning to its global roots. He describes globalization as a “momentous force for the South because it reverses a trend that made the South in the first place” when it “had to turn inward to define a distinctive identity.”⁸⁰ I suggest that Kingsolver’s work strives to be autochthonous, celebrating such distinctiveness of identity and particularity of place through a variety of imagined locales. My analysis of Kingsolver’s fiction engages not only with the “local” and “regional,” but also with Peacock’s concept of a locally-grounded global identity which may transcend regional identity.⁸¹ To return to *Prodigal Summer* as an example, the character of Lusa embodies such a grounded identity, as she forges a future for her farm through understanding the local demands of her mountainous plot of land and farming in-laws, and the global demand for what it can produce. In Kingsolver’s attempt to be locally “indigenous,” globally aware, and free of the “cultural and territorial entrapment” that regionalism threatens, her characters draw strength from a translocal and “glocal” methodology, rather than a specifically Southern regional framework.⁸² In so doing, she sidesteps categorisation as a “regional writer,” in

⁷⁹ Peacock, *Grounded Globalism*, 31.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁸² Peacock explores this shift from regional to global and “glocal” frameworks in depth in *Grounded Globalism*. The emergence of glocal frameworks is also exhibited in journals such as *The Global South* which claims to concentrate on the literature and cultures of “various Souths—from the North American South to the European South, Latin and Central America, Africa, Asia, and Australia” which share “comparable experiences that differentiate them from mainstream and hegemonic cultures in their locations” Indiana University Press, “The Global South,” <http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/gso> (accessed June 7, 2008).

keeping with David Marion Holman's observation that "regional" is traditionally "the faint praise that damns."⁸³

The term translocal has been circulating for decades, but has recently been adopted by Arjun Appadurai in his discussion of locality as a constant struggle with different social factors negotiating to define and produce locality, rather than a bounded site.⁸⁴ My use of the term "translocal" is necessarily more specific than the broad focus afforded by such a breadth and history of sociological analysis. I offer a reading of Kingsolver's narratives which analyses the specific connections she makes between sets of local details. Kingsolver's fiction exhibits aspects of translocalism in so far as it remains anchored in the local details of multiple locales, and emphasises the interrelations between them. This is exhibited most dramatically in *The Poisonwood Bible*, with the Price family's descriptions of the parallels and differences between the environments of their Congolese nation and US State of Georgia, offering fundamental environmental and political grounding to their political choices.

Kingsolver's representation of rootedness and belonging within a global context is usefully elucidated by James Peacock's definition of "grounded globalism," as the combination of a "particularized sense of place in memory and history and a more global concern about place based on ecology," predicated on the "distinctively Southern sense of place."⁸⁵ However, Kingsolver's fiction is grounded in local *environmental* detail rather than broadly southern concerns. It represents a combination of translocal

⁸³ David Marion Holman, *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction*, introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 14-15.

⁸⁴ For detailed sociological analysis of the term "translocal," and its development over the last thirty years, see Dan Martindale, *Small Town and the Nation: The Conflict of Local and Translocal Forces* (Westport: Greenwood, 1969) and Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnascapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Interventions: Anthropologies of the Present*, ed. R.G. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 2001), 191-210. See also Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). The emergence of Indiana University Press journal *The Global South*, in 2007 also exhibits the prevalence of the translocal in literary and cultural criticism.

⁸⁵ James L. Peacock, "The South and Grounded Globalism," in *The American South in a Global World*, edited by James L. Peacock, Harry L. Watson and Carrie R. Matthews (Chapel Hill: The University North Carolina Press, 2005), 273.

communities with a global perspective which is not tied to a specific region. As such, while translocalism and grounded globalism contribute towards my analysis of Kingsolver's novels, this thesis suggests that Kingsolver's fiction functions within a glocal context. According to The Glocal Initiative, whose maxim is the familiar "Think Global, Act Local," glocalisation encourages people to "Think Big. Start Small. Act Now."⁸⁶ Kingsolver's fiction, with its broad political themes grounded in local detail and the personal experiences of its ordinary characters, propounds a similar political message. While the terms glocal, translocal and grounded globalism will therefore appear in my thesis, alongside the tropes which Kingsolver's fiction shares with the recognisable themes of feminist, southern, or communitarian literature, I use these various categories and terms to explore the contexts of Kingsolver's fiction and its readership, rather than as structuring theoretical terminology.

Kingsolver represents places through their details, whether the voices of their residents or the scent of their flowers, and her fiction propounds a sense of the local which defies broader regionalisms with their identifying shorthand, in favour of recognising the distinctiveness of a character's individual world, down to the individuality of people's homes, families, and villages. Each locality is as broad as her individual character imagines it to be. For Adah in *The Poisonwood Bible*, locality transcends national borders, reaching between the Congolese village of Kilanga and her university labs in Atlanta, Georgia. The local lived experience is central to Kingsolver's fiction. In contrast to Adah, the locality of *Prodigal Summer*'s Deanna Wolfe extends only across the ridge of Zebulon Mountain, with the town of Egg Fork in the valley below represented as a lifestyle away from her own log cabin existence. That is not to say that regional tropes do not emerge; indeed, the Price girls embody a recognisable idea of 1950s Southern girlhood, yet Kingsolver's characters are not only southern. The girls

⁸⁶ The Glocal Initiative, "Homepage," <http://www.theglobalinitiative.org/> (accessed on July 1, 2007).

defy what Wendell Berry calls the “flaws and dangers” of absentee regionalism, through their representation of local details of their Bethlehem and Kilanga homes, recognising that neither the South nor Africa is only one place.⁸⁷

While they are not unique to the region, sense of place, storytelling, and the importance of history are often foregrounded in discussions of southern writing.⁸⁸ Kingsolver’s character Crystal in *Prodigal Summer* draws upon a tradition of tomboyish female protagonists in Southern literature, from Carson McCullers’ Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) to Scout Finch in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and more recently, Lenny and Alma in Jayne Anne Phillips’ *Shelter* (1995). Crystal’s father is reported as considering her brusque behaviour and rejection of female norms (whether clothes or interests), the result of a lack of a white southern female role model. In contrast, Crystal’s dying mother Jewel is happy for her daughter to pursue her interest in the natural world, however un-feminine that may make her behaviour seem. Lusa teaches Crystal about the different insects on the farm, encouraging her niece to understand the local environment and grow into herself through her relationship with that environment. Kingsolver propounds Lusa as a new kind of role model for Crystal; an “ordinary” heroine who embodies the global in the local, and relates to her world “by understanding it, not by dominating...or owning the world or other people.”⁸⁹

The regional concerns of Kingsolver’s Appalachian home infuse the way her protagonists address “universal” themes. Her fiction refutes limiting representations of rural America, such as that of Appalachia as an “illiterate” and “pathetically belated” region lagging behind contemporary American society, epitomized by William Goodell

⁸⁷ Wendell Berry, “Imagination in Place” in *Place in American Fiction: Excursions and Explorations*, eds. H.L. Weatherby and George Core (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 76.

⁸⁸ For examples of this tendency, see Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds. *Look away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004) and Richard Gray, “Foreword” in *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones & Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

⁸⁹ Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, *The Female Hero in American Literature* (New York: Bowker, 1981), 5.

Frost's infamous 1899 *Atlantic Monthly* article "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains."⁹⁰ In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver transports such embattled ideas of the regional to another continent, denying parallel stereotypes of Africa as an ahistorical region or biblical garden to be tamed. The idea of a constantly changing culture, rather than a frozen and ahistorical one, as Goodell Frost implies of Appalachia, is confirmed in Kingsolver's African-set novel. When the remaining Price women attempt to return to Kilanga to leave a marker on Ruth May's grave, they are told that the village no longer exists, highlighting that the Congo, like America, is a rapidly changing society and forcing readers to question cultural assumptions closer to home.

The very distinctiveness of Kingsolver's voices and the range of localities experienced and represented by her southern-born heroines, emphasises the idea that the South is not only one place, but an imagined locale made up of what Richard Gray calls "a multiplicity of communities."⁹¹ As writer and ecologist Wendell Berry emphasises in an environmental context: "Identifying with "The South," as if it were somehow all one and the same place, would not help you to write any more than it would help you to farm."⁹² Instead Berry, like Kingsolver, anchors his writing in local, specific place-based detail. Like Berry, Kingsolver has also chosen to settle on a farm in the South, but defined more intimately than the traits of region allow: the topography and local knowledge of the specific acres on which they live dominate their writing. In writing the non-fiction *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Kingsolver emphasises the particular

⁹⁰ William Goodell Frost, "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (1899): 311-319. For more contemporary discussions of such representations of Appalachia, see Rodger Cunningham, "Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia" in *The Future of Southern Letters*, edited by Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41-53; and Ronald D. Eller, "Foreword" in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*, edited by Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999).

⁹¹ Gray, "Foreword," xxiii.

⁹² Berry, "Imagination in Place," 76. Many scholars have also commented that the South is not one place, including Richard Gray, who argues that South "has never *not* been made up of a number of castes, classes, and smaller communities that at best live in uneasy coexistence with each other and at worst are in active conflict." *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 501.

challenges of cultivating her patch of land which forces an inventiveness and adaptability she had previously represented through Lusa's agricultural tribulations in *Prodigal Summer*. As Berry states, "Having settled even in so marginal a place as [northeastern Kentucky], undertaking to live in it even by such marginal farming as I have done, one is...removed from easy access to the abstractions of regionalism, politics, economics and the academic life. To farm is to be placed absolutely."⁹³

Kingsolver's "ordinary" characters are "placed absolutely" but regional "abstractions" are made concrete when they extend the borders of their lives to encompass experiences in Nicaragua, the Congo, the American southwest, and life in Native American reservation communities. Characters transcend national and regional borders but continue to identify with local and environmental histories, recognising more specific and diverse usable pasts upon which to found their identities.⁹⁴ In her examination of the American farmer in literature, Mary Weaks-Baxter discusses how the shifting imaginative emphasis from plantation owner to yeoman farmer served to reframe southern literature "in the context of the common man and woman" and allowed writers "to recover a usable past" that helped them "to find a place for themselves and for the South in the world at large."⁹⁵ Kingsolver's work emerges as the contemporary manifestation of this trend, representing the often environmental and land-based struggles of the "common man and woman" in her fiction. This is personalised further in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, wherein Kingsolver describes her family's effort to grow all their own food, and to gain independence from industrial agriculture which she deems damaging to environmental and human health.

⁹³ Berry, "Imagination in Place," 77.

⁹⁴ The emergence of the term "usable past" is regularly credited to Van Wyck Brooks in his 1915 book *America's Coming Of Age* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), but more recently features in Richard Reising's *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

⁹⁵ Mary Weaks-Baxter, *Reclaiming the American Farmer: The Reinvention of a Regional Mythology in Twentieth-Century Southern Writing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 6.

In this regard, Kingsolver finds parallels with the Jeffersonian ideal that the “cultivators of the earth” are the “most independent,” the “most virtuous” and the “most valuable citizens,” as “tied to their country” through a relationship with the land.⁹⁶ In the fictional characters of Lusa, Nannie and Deanna in *Prodigal Summer* and through her own smallholding experience, Kingsolver represents the model of the yeoman farmer finding economic sustenance through working the land. To this extent, her work borders on the agrarian, but redeploys the model as a forward-looking one. As such, Kingsolver wrests relationships with the land from the historic and presents the recognition of interconnection and local identity as essential for a globalised future.⁹⁷

In this way, it is the intention of this thesis to unpack the intertexts and contexts which shape Kingsolver’s fiction and to propose ways of reading her work. While this thesis does not purport to offer an overview of New Historicism, the work of Stephen Greenblatt, surmises the ideal for new literary histories and analysis which informs my approach to the historical contexts of Kingsolver’s fiction (both of the author and of her fictional worlds). Greenblatt posits that the acceptance, “even if it feels clever and tactically enabling, of the traditional model of literary history, with its concern to purify the dialect of the tribe, robs the hitherto marginalized groups of their revolutionary potential: a potential that lies in the impurity of languages and ethnicities, in tangled lines of access and blockage, in the flesh-and-blood intensity of loss, assimilation, and invention, and in the daring intersection of multiple identities.” He argues that the new literary histories that these groups are “poised to write” should “do more than put them

⁹⁶ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to John Jay,” in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson - Volume IV*, Notes on Virginia II, Correspondence 1782-1786, Federal Edition, collected and edited by Paul Leicester Ford (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904) <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/756/86377/1989337> (accessed February 10, 2007).

⁹⁷ Suzanne W. Jones’ essay “The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*” offers a “new agrarian” reading of Kingsolver’s 2000 novel. *Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South since 1920*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006), 177-187. See Chapter Five for my reading of *Prodigal Summer*.

on the map, they should transform the act of mapmaking.”⁹⁸ At her most effective and least affected, Kingsolver’s fiction comes close to representing these “tangled lines” and “daring intersections” of identities, ethnicities, languages and the borders between them.

In his 2001 essay for a special issue of *PMLA*, entitled “Globalizing Literary Studies,” Greenblatt suggests that “interest in local knowledge has usefully called attention to shared speech patterns, communal stories, and collective obsessions, often transmitted across generational and geographic boundaries.”⁹⁹ His celebration of local knowledge, like Jack Temple Kirby’s in *Mockingbird Song*, is tempered by the awareness that local culture is always informed by the global or the “glocal.”¹⁰⁰ It is this balancing act, lauding the local while simultaneously recognising its interdependence, which informs my analysis of Kingsolver’s fiction. This dynamic emerges in all of her novels and short stories to varying degrees, and in interviews as well as her fiction, Kingsolver underlines that the interrelation between the local and global is not only a symptom of modernity, but rather a long-standing tradition, as Greenblatt argues too: it is an “ancient” and vital global cultural discourse.¹⁰¹ Like Kingsolver, Greenblatt is keen to avoid the easy confusion of “globalization with American triumphalism.”¹⁰²

The Poisonwood Bible’s representation of the United States’ actions in the Congo and the localised experiences of one family from Georgia in the village of Kilanga flags not only Kingsolver’s preoccupation with local and global currents but also a critique of American “triumphalism.” In this Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel, Kingsolver creates communities grounded in local environments but interrelated by long-standing global influences. The economic power of the United States informs both the daily lives of the residents of the Congo and those of Georgia. The political struggles of the Congolese

⁹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, “Racial Memory and Literary History,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (January 2001): 61.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ See also *The Global South*, Vol 1.1 (2007), edited by Alfred J. Lopez and Adetayo Alabi, Indiana University Press <http://inscribe.iupress.org/toc/gso/1/1> (accessed January 21, 2008).

¹⁰¹ Greenblatt, 59.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

are shaped by this power which funds the assassination of their president, profits from their diamond mines and underwrites debts that they can never pay back.

This dynamic of local details united by global influences emerged in Kingsolver's work as early as her first essay collection, wherein she describes how local wildlife forced her to revise her planned Tucson garden and how she turned to Pueblo architecture for inspiration, noting that the Pueblo, "as I understand their way of life, seem to be more territorial than proprietary, and they've lived in the desert for eight centuries."¹⁰³ In *Animal Dreams*, Codi's descriptions of a Pueblo village and her hometown's Day of the Dead traditions exhibit the connections and shared influences of the Spanish, Mexican and Native American Pueblo peoples dating back to the nineteenth century. While hardly an "ancient" epoch, this too suggests Kingsolver's recognition of a local/global dialogue which long precedes terminology such as translocal, globalisation, or "glocal."

None of Kingsolver's characters, even those who purposefully isolate themselves, live in a cultural vacuum. In *Prodigal Summer*, forest ranger Deanna Wolfe removes herself both physically and emotionally from the community of Egg Fork, looking down on her former home from an isolated mountain cabin. However, the "outside world" is never far away. Eventually she cannot escape the biological imperative to mate and the young hunter Eddie Bondo enters not just her forest locale but her body and she becomes pregnant during their passionate affair. Although he is a transient hunter, following coyote and big game, his presence and eventual absence are each keenly felt by Deanna. This relationship with a man so different from herself ultimately results in Deanna reconnecting with her family in the valley. Like Kingsolver's representation of the half-breed dogs in the valley who result from mating with Deanna's beloved and migratory coyotes, the cross-breeding between migratory outsider

¹⁰³ Barbara Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Essays from Now or Never* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 32.

Eddie and Egg Fork native Deanna benefits the community's population. Greenblatt argues that celebrating local knowledge should not prevent us from seeing the "cultural *metissage*, a global circulation, mutual influence and cross-breeding deriving from the very substance of the objects we study."¹⁰⁴ Kingsolver's combination of local details and global themes exemplifies this awareness of the "cultural *metissage*" that defines the people and places in her fiction.

When authors make such explicit claims as to the political intentions of their fiction, it is inevitable that reviewers and some critics may begin to conflate their fictional characters with the author's personal experiences. Kingsolver does little to prevent this, going so far as to write both herself (as the teenaged Barbara in *Animal Dreams*) and the figures of real people such as Oprah Winfrey, into her narratives. I analyse Kingsolver's slippage between fact and fiction with a certain caution, suggesting that it is the ways in which she combines "factual" characters and histories in fictional contexts, rather than the observation that she does so, which reveals both the strengths and the inconsistencies in her fiction. By providing bibliographies which include historical and scientific sources, and Author's Notes on such sources, Kingsolver's fiction makes explicit the combination of factors she wishes to signal as influences. It is not only her representation of place and local detail, whether of Arizona or the Congo, which helps to define her brand of contemporary fiction, but the way this is combined with her political views, themselves indicated by her proclaimed reading (annotated in *The Poisonwood Bible*) and in discussions of personal experiences in interviews.¹⁰⁵ A seemingly tangled web of places, personal experiences, and political viewpoints can only

¹⁰⁴ Greenblatt, 59.

¹⁰⁵ In an interview for *The Progressive*, Kingsolver describes how the months she spent in the Congo as a child gave her "a real extreme look at what it's like to be a minority" while in an interview with Donna Perry, she claims that growing up "in an impoverished, rural place," where the "sense of community was really strong," encourages her to "celebrate dependency" in her writing. Epstein, 34; Perry, 145-146.

be understood by acknowledging their interrelatedness across her oeuvre and their distinctiveness in each fictional case.

Kingsolver Critically Located: Biography, Reviews, Criticism

Barbara Kingsolver was born in Annapolis, Maryland but grew up in rural Kentucky, near Carlisle in Nicholas County. Her family spent time in the Congo in 1963, where her father worked as a missionary doctor. She studied biology at DePauw University, Indiana where she graduated magna cum laude in 1977. After graduation, she spent time in Europe and returned to the United States in 1979. Living in Tucson, Arizona between 1979 and 2004, she studied for a Masters in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona and initially pursued a career as a scientific writer. Kingsolver gradually gave this up to pursue freelance journalism and then fiction writing, publishing her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, in 1988. Married to Steven Hopp, a professor of environmental studies, Kingsolver now lives with her family on a smallholding in the Appalachian mountains of southwestern Virginia. The family's life there is detailed in her latest non-fiction work, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007). This thesis explores her non-fiction as context and counterpoint but it focuses on Kingsolver's fiction.

Kingsolver, who claims to have started writing fiction at the age of 8, had her first short story, "Why I am a Danger to the Public," published in *New Times* in 1987.¹⁰⁶ She has gone on to publish five novels, *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) and *Prodigal Summer* (2001) and a single short story collection, *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989). Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees* and its sequel *Pigs in Heaven*, follow the story of Kentucky-born Taylor Greer as she

¹⁰⁶ Harper Collins, "FAQs," *Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*, <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question06> (accessed October 12, 2007). Barbara Kingsolver, "Why I am a Danger to the Public," *New Times* (January 4-10, 1986): 37. This story also appears in *Homeland and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

moves West to Arizona and is given a Native American baby girl, Turtle, who she struggles to adopt and care for. The first novel is predominantly narrated by Taylor and the second is written in the third person, alternating between the stories of Taylor and her mother Alice. *Homeland and Other Stories* contains twelve short stories, most of which had previously appeared in various forms in journals, collections, and magazines. The collection's final story developed out of her non-fiction work *Holding the Line*, while elements of other stories appear later in characters and relationships in the novels.¹⁰⁷

Kingsolver's second novel, *Animal Dreams* is set in the small town of Grace, Arizona as local girl Codi Noline returns home to look after her ailing father and take up a job teaching Biology at the local high school after a fourteen year absence. She becomes involved with her high school sweetheart, Native American Loyd Peregrina, and helps the community fight the pollution of its water supply by the local mining company. *Animal Dreams* alternates perspective between Codi and her father Homer. Kingsolver's best selling novel to date, *The Poisonwood Bible*, is an Oprah Book Club choice and tells the story of the Price family's move from Georgia to the Congo in 1959. Spanning four decades and told from the perspectives of wife Orleanna and her four daughters, its protagonists describe personal adventures within an at-times dangerous political context. Kingsolver's 2001 novel *Prodigal Summer* returns to the US and to Appalachia. Its three central female characters detail their lives in a mountain valley, managing the need to diversify their farms, struggling against hunters, and coping with their families as changed by deaths, births and marriages.

The story that Kingsolver tells of her political awakening is one of lifelong values inherited from book-loving parents, who taught her to know that she could "make a difference" and that she had "better make one."¹⁰⁸ In interviews, Kingsolver

¹⁰⁷ The miscommunications between Lusa and Cole in *Prodigal Summer*, for example, mirror those between Lydia and Whitman in "Blueprints," published in *Homeland and Other Stories*.

¹⁰⁸ Kerr, 52.

returns to her politically-motivated emergence as a writer. She describes growing up in the 1960s, “when convictions were fashionable,”¹⁰⁹ and learning “what it’s like to be a minority” during the months her family spent in the Congo.¹¹⁰ Despite studying biology at university, Kingsolver also followed courses in creative writing taught by Francine Prose, and claims to have started writing a short story entitled “The Last Buffalo East of the Mississippi,” ostensibly about her Cherokee great-grandmother, who was “quite deliberately left out of the family history for reasons of racism and embarrassment about mixed blood.”¹¹¹ Her stated desire to write the voices of such overlooked characters is exemplified by her experiences writing about the women involved in the 1983 Arizona Mine Strike, which emerges as a theme in her work, including the non-fiction *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (1989), and the short story “Why I am a Danger to the Public,” as well as the novel *Animal Dreams*.

Kingsolver represents herself as a political, campaigning writer with an issues-driven agenda which includes opposition to war and the promotion of literacy. She is referred to in the press in articles such as “Artists Try to Recapture Their Role as Catalysts for Debate and Dissent,” which details her endorsement of the Not in Our Name statement of conscience in opposition to the war in Iraq; and again in “Celebrities Join Efforts to Persuade People to Read More Books” which describes an advertisement featuring Rosie O’Donnell reading *The Bean Trees*.¹¹² In addition to articles and interviews, reviews of Kingsolver’s fiction appear in national newspapers including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and *Chicago Tribune*, magazines including *Newsweek*, *The Village Voice*, *Belles Lettres*, *Resurgence*, *The Women’s Review of Books*, and

¹⁰⁹ See Kendall, 46-47.

¹¹⁰ Epstein, 34.

¹¹¹ Perry, 148. “The Last Buffalo West of the Mississippi” was later published as “Homeland” in *Homeland and Other Stories*.

¹¹² Julie Salamon, “Artists Try to Recapture Their Role as Catalysts for Debate and Dissent,” *New York Times* (February 6, 2003). Dana Canedy, “Celebrities Join Efforts to Persuade People to Read More Books,” *New York Times* (April 20, 1999).

Literary Cavalcade, and specialist journals and papers such as *Library Journal*, *Smithsonian*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Nation*, *The World & I*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. The diverse international readerships of these various publications offer some indication of Kingsolver's popular appeal and influence.

However, while there is a wealth of interviews and newspaper articles about Kingsolver's novels and her political vociferousness, there is no existing scholarly work dedicated to the breadth of the author's fiction. Erika Silver Hillinger's thesis, "Literature as Narrative Ethics: Ethics, Religion, and Scripture in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*" focuses only on the moral aspects of this single Kingsolver novel. The opening chapter of Hillinger's thesis provides a summary of "the current shape of narrative ethics," while the remaining five chapters "formally explicate" *The Poisonwood Bible* as "narrative theology."¹¹³ Arlene Cinelli Odenwald's thesis, "A Stylistic Analysis of the Ethos of Characters in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*" offers a "statistical analysis of the diction of the three oldest daughters" in the novel. Categorising nouns, verbs and adjectives according to several linguistic features, Cinelli details the "emotional, informal and moral-related words" of three characters in order to map their "ethical constitutions."¹¹⁴ In her thesis, "The Racial Problem in the Literary Work of Barbara Kingsolver," Maria Luisa Martinez Alonso provides a "socioliterary study" of the "social scourge" of racial discrimination in Kingsolver's articles, essays, poetry, and full-length works *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* and *Homeland and Other Stories*.¹¹⁵ What none of the PhDs I've consulted do is try to read Kingsolver across all of her fictions and, indeed, in comparison with her non-fiction. Instead, they delimit study to a single novel in a specific thematic context, a linguistic

¹¹³ Erika Silver Hilinger, "Literature as Narrative Ethics: Ethics, Religion and Scripture in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," (PhD thesis, University of Southern California, 2007).

¹¹⁴ Arlene Cinelli Odenwald, "A Stylistic Analysis of the Ethos of Characters in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," (PhD thesis, The University of New Mexico, 2004).

¹¹⁵ Maria Luisa Martinez Alonso, "The Racial Problem in the Literary Work of Barbara Kingsolver," (PhD thesis, Universidad de Valladolid, 2002).

analysis of only three narrative sections of the multi-sectioned novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, or a single “problem” in her non-fiction and short fiction. While some studies do share some of the thematic concerns explored in this thesis, none of them integrate the fictions with a larger sense of Kingsolver’s politically-nuanced approach. Furthermore, none take a position to outline what kind of a writer the critic thinks Kingsolver is.

There has been a scattering of MA theses written in the US, Europe and the UK, a short biography, and four readers’ guides: one for her pre-1999 work, one for *The Poisonwood Bible*, one aimed explicitly at high school teachers and one an alphabetised overview.¹¹⁶ Mary Jean DeMarr’s reading companion focuses on biographical details and offers summaries and plot details in keeping with a chronological format. Linda Wagner-Martin’s brief biography is useful predominantly for its detailing of Kingsolver’s publishing deals, and is complemented by her compact guide to *The Poisonwood Bible* which provides an introductory text offering a reading group format, breaking the text down into thematic nuggets. P.L. Thomas’ introduction to the works of Kingsolver is aimed at teachers and makes suggestions about how to explore her works in the classroom as a part of the reading and writing curriculum. Mary Ellen Snodgrass’ overview of Kingsolver’s works, awards and family tree is organised in 122 alphabetical entries and provides 46 suggested writing and research topics for prospective students. While these guides are valuable indicators of Kingsolver’s wide readership, burgeoning literary celebrity status, and imaginative multi-thematic appeal, none offers a scholarly critique. Like the various MA theses, Wagner-Martin’s guide focuses on Kingsolver’s

¹¹⁶ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Great Writers: Barbara Kingsolver* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), Mary Jean DeMarr, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Poisonwood Bible: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2001), P.L. Thomas, *Reading, Learning, Teaching Barbara Kingsolver* (New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004).

female characters, their relationships and environmental themes and limits study to a single novel in comparative context.¹¹⁷

While two of the MA theses which focus on *The Poisonwood Bible* share some of the thematic concerns explored in Chapter Four of this thesis, they both limit their comparative analyses to intertexts cited by Kingsolver in the novel's Author's Note and Bibliography. Eileen Leahy Preston's MA thesis, "An Interdisciplinary Comparison of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," reads the novel through an uncomplicated mapping of its historical, religious and literary parallels with Conrad's text. Marit Reidun Erdal's Cand. Philol. thesis, "Diversity in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," explores Kingsolver's novel as a "political allegory" informed principally by Emily Dickinson's "Tell the Truth but Tell it Slant," William Carlos Williams' "A Red Wheelbarrow," Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This thesis posits that, in addition to such claimed intertexts, which principally reveal the author's political and literary aspirations, the novel is also informed by intratexts (referred to within the novel) and uncited intertexts such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Chapter Four of this thesis argues that following the author's proclaimed intertexts limits potential engagement with the political issues to the parameters of the novel, rather than encouraging readers to "come

¹¹⁷ Ceri Gorton, "Seeking Balance: Gender, Ecology and Postcolonialism in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, *Animal Dreams*, and *The Poisonwood Bible*," (masters thesis, University of Nottingham, 2004). Bénédicte Meillon, "Feminine Voices and Characters in *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver," (master's thesis, Université de Toulouse Le Mirail, 1999). Lucille Bruyand, "Gender, Origins and Culture in Barbara Kingsolver's Vision of America," (masters thesis, Université de Paris X – Nanterre, 1997). Valerie R. Fales, "How Do Stories Speak to us About Who We Are? Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*," (master's thesis, John Carroll University, 1996). Connie Sue Watts, "Ecofeminist Themes in the Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver," (masters thesis, Arizona State University, 1994). Elizabeth J. McDowell, "Power and Environmentalism in Recent Writings by Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula K. Le Guin, Alice Walker, and Terry Tempest Williams," (masters thesis, University of Oregon, 1992). Karen Griffie Phares, "Relationships in the Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver," (masters thesis, Arizona State University, 1991). Marit Reidun Erdal, "Diversity in Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*," (Cand. Philol. Thesis, University of Oslo, 2004). Eileen Leahy Preston, "An Interdisciplinary Comparison of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," (masters thesis, California State University, 2006).

to terms with our past”¹¹⁸ as Erdal suggests. Unlike this thesis, neither Preston nor Erdal indicate what kind of a writer they consider Kingsolver to be, or explore how *The Poisonwood Bible* functions with her other fictions as part of a broader political strategy.

There exist a few essays on Kingsolver’s work in journals including the *Hollins Critic*, *Arizona State Law Journal* and *Queen’s Quarterly*.¹¹⁹ Malca Litovitz’s article “Huck Finn, Barbara Kingsolver and the American Dream” offers a biographical reading of Kingsolver’s first three novels and draws intertextual parallels between *The Bean Trees* and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Litovitz’s ambitious essay draws parallels between Kingsolver and Margaret Atwood, Jane Austen, William Faulkner, George Eliot and Larry McMurtry. She also gestures towards apparent political critiques contained within Kingsolver’s narratives, positing *Pigs in Heaven*’s Barbie as “the author’s revenge” for “television culture” and its “emphasis on appearances.”¹²⁰

References to Kingsolver appear in the work of various literary critics. Kingsolver features prominently in the collaborative book project, *Making Home: Orphanhood and Agency in Contemporary American Novels*, currently being undertaken by Liz Kella, Maria Holmgren Troy and Helena Wahlström. In this book, Kingsolver’s novels will be examined alongside works by Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, Michael Cunningham, Kaye Gibbons, John Irving, Annie Proulx, Marilynne Robinson, Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison. This project focuses on contemporary orphan narratives as a means to examine “the conditions and limits for incorporating difference into the

¹¹⁸ Erdal, “Abstract.”

¹¹⁹ Amanda Cockrell, “Luna Moths, Coyotes, Sugar Skulls: The Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver, a Critical Essay,” *The Hollins Critic* 38, no. 2 (April 2001): 1-15. Cockrell offers a brief overview of Kingsolver’s novels, and touches on themes such as human interrelatedness with the land, the treatment of political minorities, and female-dominated families. Christine Metteer, “*Pigs in Heaven*: A Parable of Native American Adoption Under the Indian Child Welfare Act,” *Arizona State Law Journal* 28.2 (1996): 589-628. This article informs my analysis of *Pigs in Heaven* in Chapter Two.

¹²⁰ Malca Litovitz, “Huck Finn, Barbara Kingsolver, and the American Dream,” *Queens Quarterly* 105.4 (Winter 1998): 608.

American family and, by extension, into the American nation.”¹²¹ This is an idea which I explore in my examination of *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* in Chapter Two.

Sharon Monteith discusses Kingsolver’s fiction in the context of “dual-location novels” which re-envision Southern mores and encourage readers to think about Southern places in “new ways.”¹²² In *Remapping Southern Literature*, Robert Brinkmeyer refers to Kingsolver’s representations of Southern women seeking liberation and making connections with cultures beyond their own (often Southern) backgrounds. Using the example of Taylor Greer in *The Bean Trees*, as she finds a sense of identity in her new western home through a “reintegration into family and community,”¹²³ Brinkmeyer positions Kingsolver as a Southern writer with a clear understanding of memory and place. He compares her work to that of Eudora Welty and, in so doing, indicates the growing critical esteem for Kingsolver’s work – of which this thesis is also an example.

Suzanne Jones’s 2006 essay on the Southern family farm offers a detailed investigation of Kingsolver’s work. Jones positions her alongside essayist Wendell Berry and environmental activist and memoirist Janisse Ray, praising *Prodigal Summer* as an engaging account of Southern ecology and agriculture. My reading of *Prodigal Summer* incorporates Jones’ premise that Kingsolver’s writing about groundedness, place, and ecology draws upon her academic and personal understanding of bioregions and the Southern locale but develops Jones’ agrarian reading and questions the contradictions and complexities of Kingsolver’s style and preoccupations. Employing historian Arif Dirlik’s work on place-based imagination, Jones positions Kingsolver’s representation of place in *Prodigal Summer* within a theoretical framework which “suggests groundedness

¹²¹ Helena Wahlström, “Helena Wahlström homepage,” University of Gävle, http://www.hig.se/hs/forsk/helena_wahlstrom.html (accessed February 8, 2009)

¹²² Sharon Monteith, “Recent and Contemporary Women Writers in the South,” in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, edited by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 543.

¹²³ Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 104.

from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extralocal, all the way to the global.”¹²⁴ While Jones employs the work of a single critic to underpin her textual analysis, I nuance her use of Dirlik by combining it with the work of Stanford anthropologist Liisa Malkki and postcolonial literary theorist Graham Huggan, among others, to explore Kingsolver’s representation of place, the local, and the global, across all of her fiction.

Mary Jean DeMarr’s book, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Critical Companion*, is in the Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers series chosen by “high school English teachers and high school and public librarians.”¹²⁵ The books in the series focus on best-selling writers, a term which Series Editor Kathleen Gregory Klein defines as those who “do not simply have one successful novel, but a string of them.”¹²⁶ The featuring of Kingsolver, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Gore Vidal alongside John Grisham, Michael Crichton and Tom Clancy, is worth noting for its broad conception of popular, influential writers which defies the limitations of gender, genre or race. The series functions as a middlebrow melting pot, linking the hierarchies of so-called “high art” and “popular culture” with an uncomplicated celebration of disparate authors.

The rigid, formulaic structure of the series and the intended high school readership for DeMarr’s book limits her scope for in-depth analysis. Each book in the series is required to explain the writers’ appeal, describe how they fit “into a larger literary context” and “show readers exactly how the novels work.”¹²⁷ These series aims, and the prescribed formula of chapters “organized around three central elements: plot development...character development...and theme”¹²⁸ make for simplified and broad

¹²⁴ Arif Dirlik, “Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place,” in *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization*, eds. Roxann Prazniak and A. Dirlik (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 22. See also, Arif Dirlik, “Global South: Predicament and Promise,” *The Global South* 1, no. 1 (January 2007): 12-23.

¹²⁵ DeMarr, ix.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., x.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

conclusions. There are only one to two pages addressing plot development and narrative method for each of Kingsolver's books. DeMarr's book centres on intangible assertions about Kingsolver's "true voice" and "true work."¹²⁹

DeMarr's biographical emphasis, in a section entitled "Professional Life and Reputation," offers a useful, if unsubstantiated, overview of Kingsolver's publishing deals and negotiations with HarperCollins over *The Poisonwood Bible*. DeMarr states that "According to *Publishers Weekly*, the reason Kingsolver considered moving [from Harper] was dissatisfaction with the booklist, which includes works by Newt Gingrich, maintained by the publishing house."¹³⁰ HarperCollins offered Kingsolver a lucrative contract and secured the establishment of the Bellwether Prize for "literature of social change." HarperCollins agreed to publish 10,000 copies of the winning novel each year, while Kingsolver used her advance from *The Poisonwood Bible* to fund the \$25,000 prize and quietened the media storm by naming HarperCollins authors such as Isabel Allende, Doris Lessing and Louise Erdrich, with whom she is "happy to be associated."¹³¹

Accepting Kingsolver's claims to intentionality at face value and blending them with narrative and biographical description, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Critical Companion* serves a different readership from this thesis. I hope to offer nuanced critical frameworks and detailed textual analysis of Kingsolver's fiction. Magali Cornier Michael's *New Visions in Contemporary Fiction* analyses Kingsolver alongside Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Ana Castillo. Michael adopts a gender-specific focus and suggests that women writers highlight the "importance and necessity of community and coalition building."¹³² However, Michael's seemingly-positive claims about women writers' ability to tackle overlooked issues contains a limiting assumption of family and community roles. While

¹²⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Magali Cornier Michael, *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction: Tan, Kingsolver, Castillo, Morrison* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 2.

Michael states that she chose the authors in her study not only for their gender but also for their ethnicity, noting that her chosen texts are “written by American women descended from racially marked ethnic groups,” no mention is made of the ways in which Kingsolver is marked as ethnically “white.”¹³³

Michael justifies the community emphasis of her study of “racially marked” authors by suggesting that their various ethnic groups have “depended on community to ensure both individual and group survival.”¹³⁴ While this thesis explores Kingsolver’s representations of community, particularly through an analysis of *Homeland*, I argue that despite steering away from limiting notions of community, Kingsolver occasionally succumbs to such representations. The Native American communities in *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* embody a long-standing community tradition which offers hope for the futures of individuals like Turtle. In *Pigs in Heaven* and *Animal Dreams*, however, white characters witness Native American community ceremonies and relate them to the reader as morality plays. I unpack the context and limitations of Kingsolver’s representations of community.

Michael discusses how *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* function as a feminist “construction of alternative models of subjectivity, community, coalition building, and collective agency that retain a sharp attention to *differences*.”¹³⁵ As examples, Michael cites the oppositions of undefined “other” cultures and women against western male characters, and collective survival and justice against the imperative to win at any cost. In contrast, I argue that Kingsolver’s fiction attempts to unpack the gender binaries rather than propound them, even if this sometimes leads to inconsistencies within and across her novels. Michael’s book focuses on popular novels without specifically laying any claim to their popularity, choosing instead to emphasise their “wide readership” and

¹³³ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 10.

position at the “forefront of literary production.”¹³⁶ She posits an embedded market-based idea of popular culture, while sidestepping the need to engage with the difficulties of defining the term.¹³⁷ Michael claims that her selected novelists are fighting patriarchal economic power through their fiction while simultaneously making claims on a market-based notion of the popular. By this logic, the commercial success of these novelists is to some extent condoned by the systems of power which Michael claims they are rallying against.

If critics employ a market-derived model of the popular, as Michael does, their analysis does not allow for an author to be both economically powerful and, at the same time, involved in critiquing economic power from the margins. Michael suggests that the novels in her study are responding to, rather than working within, “white, male centered systems of social and economic power.”¹³⁸ In contrast to Michael’s approach, this thesis proposes a definition of Kingsolver’s popularity which combines recognition of the market with a broad definition of her middlebrow tendencies. Kingsolver’s work balances the hierarchies of literariness and popularity, offering sufficient political bite to challenge the perceived dominant culture while maintaining popular appeal.

While this thesis concurs with Michael’s assertion that Kingsolver’s fiction reframes “power as derived from dynamic, collective interactions” and political identity as “something to be constructed, not empirically given,” the conclusions I draw do not align with Michael’s.¹³⁹ She argues that the novels in her study represent a feminism of activist oppositional politics that cannot embrace coalitions grounded in forms of abstract reason that established the hierarchical binaries traditionally used to reinforce

¹³⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁷ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s essay, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” unpacks the various uses of the term “popular culture,” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), 442-453.

¹³⁸ Michael, 3.

¹³⁹ Chantal Mouffe as quoted by Michael, 29.

male domination. Kingsolver herself, and my reading of her fiction, propose a more accommodative, nonhierarchical notion of coalition.

I examine Kingsolver's fiction through textual and contextual analysis, unpacking her narrative techniques and political claims.¹⁴⁰ While data on audience response is largely unavailable or rendered problematic, it would be interesting to develop the conclusions of my research in the future, testing and supplementing them with reception case studies. For the purposes of this thesis, though, I have employed a top-down approach and assume certain readerships from Kingsolver's publications, varying from magazines such as *Redbook* and *Mademoiselle* through to collections of Southwestern writers. Interrogating the ways in which Kingsolver positions herself and is positioned by different political, social and commercial interest groups has informed my understanding of the various preconditions of reading her work.

My structure is broadly chronological and as such, allows me to analyse the development of Kingsolver's narrative style and track her approach to contemporary social issues. Chapter One focuses on Kingsolver's short story collection *Homeland* (1989), which finds its origins in stories published as early as 1986. Chapter Two analyses Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees* (1988), alongside its sequel *Pigs in Heaven* (1993). Kingsolver states that she wrote *Pigs in Heaven* because she "hadn't thought about" the tribal perspective when she wrote about the adoption of a Native American child by a white mother and that she "needed to make that right in another book."¹⁴¹ As a result, it is essential that *Pigs in Heaven* is considered alongside the novel it was written in response to, in order to illuminate the claimed intentions for and reception of both works. Because of this, my analysis of *Animal Dreams* (1990) appears in chapter three,

¹⁴⁰ Newspaper, online, and journal reviews of Kingsolver's novels, along with reader forums on websites like Amazon.com and Oprah.com have also informed my analysis.

¹⁴¹ Perry, 165.

even though it was published before *Pigs in Heaven*. Chapters Four and Five focus on *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) and *Prodigal Summer* (2000) respectively.

In Chapter One, I explore connections between Kingsolver's short stories, and in turn, between her short stories and her longer fiction. This chapter also initiates my analysis of the author's emerging narrative style and thematic preoccupations with environment, memory and community, as evidenced in the *Homeland* collection. Chapter Two addresses the proclaimed politics and narrative effects of Kingsolver's representation of Native American girl Turtle and her white adoptive mother Taylor Greer in the paired novels *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*. In Chapter Three, I return to paired texts, this time focusing on the influence of Kingsolver's non-fictional work *Holding the Line* on her novel *Animal Dreams*, and develop my exploration of her representation of community and memory through an analysis of the elusive concept of "ground orientation." Chapter Four builds upon my investigation of Kingsolver's use of the tropes and techniques of non-fiction in her fiction, in particular, her bestselling Oprah's Book Club novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. My final chapter examines Kingsolver's interrelated approach through her representation of an environmentally-grounded Appalachian community in her most recent novel *Prodigal Summer*, which returns to the region of her childhood and current residence. My coda draws together ideas from the entire thesis, highlighting the parallels and discontinuities between the political and narrative approaches of these various fictional works in an attempt to unpack some of the characteristics, and indeed, the idiosyncrasies of the Kingsolver oeuvre.

CHAPTER 1

Identity, Memory and Environment in *Homeland and Other Stories*

Homeland and Other Stories is Barbara Kingsolver's only collection of short stories and contains twelve tales exploring the themes of identity, environment, and community.¹ Kingsolver imagines homelands and creates characters who attempt to overcome the tendency of rigid regional or racial identity "to plot only 'places of birth' and degrees of nativeness" that "blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them."² In each story, home is represented as a fractured and multiplicitous construct. As bell hooks notes, in rhetoric that mirrors Kingsolver's own, "home is no longer just one place." Instead, it is "that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference."³ Analysing Kingsolver's various representations of rooted identity and home, this chapter explores the different stories' chosen issues as indicators of the author's strategy of raising political awareness through an appeal to popular readership.

While focusing on the title story from *Homeland and Other Stories*, this analysis also provides an examination of Kingsolver's other published short stories, which have appeared in a multitude of national magazines, journals, and in anthologies of, variously,

¹ Subsequent references to Barbara Kingsolver, *Homeland and Other Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996) will appear parenthetically in the text.

² Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1, (February 1992): 38. This is a special edition of *Cultural Anthropology*, entitled "Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." The related emphasis on migration underlines Malkki's usefulness as a paradigmatic framework. Malkki examines the way rootedness and migration contributes to the formation of identity, with reference to specific case studies of North African refugees. Her postcolonial examination of the effects of colonization and migration upon indigenous peoples further justifies the use of her research as an appropriate critical framework for Kingsolver's fictional examination of the effect of American colonialism on Native peoples and the environment.

³ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1999), 148.

Southern, Western, Appalachian and Kentucky writing.⁴ In addition to being located within different regional designations, Kingsolver is frequently anthologised in collections of women's short stories, often on the subject of motherhood.⁵ That she is included in so many categories indicates her self-defined status on the margins, which may go some way towards explaining the search for belonging at the heart of her narratives. While fellow Kentucky writers such as Morris Allen Grubs and Bobby Ann Mason suggest that it is their very status as Kentuckians which underpins their search for home, the liminal spaces which Kingsolver represents suggest that it is the margins that define the centre for her.

The preface to *Home and Beyond: An Anthology of Kentucky Stories* places Kingsolver firmly within a state-specific regional context which although sidestepping a more general "Southern" categorization does not preclude it. The collection opens with a quotation from Bobby Ann Mason's Commencement Address at the University of Kentucky in 1994, in which she states, "Kentucky, which sits between North and South, not quite in the East and not quite in the Midwest, is very near the heart of America. We are the microcosm of this nation, both what's best about it and what's worst."⁶ Kentucky's identity as a borderline space between the clearly defined regions of North and South offers, for Mason, a definition of the whole nation. In keeping with the idea of Kentucky as a representational space, Hollis Summers suggests that "the art of

⁴ Excerpts from *The Bean Trees* and *Prodigal Summer* appear in Sandra L. Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson, eds., *Women Writing in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003). "Homeland" appears in Morris Allen Grubbs, ed., *Home and Beyond: An Anthology of Kentucky Short Stories* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001). "Why I Am a Danger to the Public" appears in Craig Lesley and Katheryn Stavrakis, eds., *Dreamers and Desperadoes: Contemporary Short Fiction of the American West* (New York: Laurel, 1993) and in Russell Martin, ed., *New Writers of the Purple Sage: An Anthology of Recent Western Writing* (New York: Penguin, 1992). "Rose-Johnny" appears in Shannon Ravenel, ed., *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best 1988* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1988) and in *Virginia Quarterly Review* 63, (Winter 1987): 88-109.

⁵ "Quality Time" appears in Katrina Kenison and Kathleen Hirsch eds., *Mothers – Twenty Stories of Contemporary Motherhood* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), Claudia O'Keefe, ed., *Mother* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) and Marsha R. Leslie, ed., *The Single Mother's Companion: Essays and Stories by Women* (Seattle, Wash: Seal Press, 1994). Also, "Stone Dreams" appears in Geeta Lothari ed., *'Did My Mama Like To Dance?' and Other Stories about Mothers and Daughters* (New York: Avon Books, 1994).

⁶ Grubbs, xi.

locality transcends geography. Its true concern is the neighborhood of humanity.”⁷ Kingsolver’s short stories, and indeed the novels that follow, propound the necessity of transcending the trappings of region while retaining a place-based identity, using local details to explore universal themes. As fellow Kentuckian Morris Allen Grubbs approvingly notes, “the universal is most powerfully expressed in the local.”⁸ Kingsolver often represents isolated communities to explore issues which effect humanity in wider terms. Her status as a Kentuckian contributes to her representation of region as defined as much by its borders as the topography, people, and values which are contained by such margins.

In keeping with these suggested parallels, *Homeland and Other Stories* depicts homelands that do not exist objectively, but are (re)created (and commodified) through memory, community and individual characters. Kingsolver’s emphasis on the role of the reader in the creation of the short story reflects Flannery O’Connor’s suggestion that “meaning is what keeps the short story from being short.”⁹ Indeed, Kingsolver’s “short” stories in *Homeland and Other Stories* interact thematically and structurally as well as with the reader’s personal context, transcending their twenty or so pages to offer a cumulative exploration of the concepts of home, family and region.¹⁰

In order to unpack Kingsolver’s political and popular exploration of these concepts and to underpin this chapter’s close readings of the narratives, I will first outline her short stories and the connections between them. The title story is one of Kingsolver’s most personal, having been written in first draft when she was only nineteen years old, and

⁷ Hollis Summers, ed., *Kentucky Story: A Collection of Short Stories* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1954), as quoted in Grubbs, xii.

⁸ Grubbs, xii.

⁹ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 95-6.

¹⁰ Leslie Hunt also notes the scope of Kingsolver’s collection to cover an “expanse of geographical and emotional terrain” in its representation of homelands. “Homeland.” *Belles Lettres* 5.1 (Fall 1989): 32.

addresses her fascination with her Cherokee roots.¹¹ Set in the fictional Kentucky town of Morning Glory, “Homeland” is told from the point of view of middle-aged Gloria St Clair (née Murray) as she remembers her childhood and the final months of her great grandmother’s life. Great Mam is a Cherokee who was taken from the Hiwassee tribe as a young woman, brought to Kentucky and assimilated into white society. In the final months of her life, Gloria’s father (known as Indian John at the mine where he works) insists that Great Mam should be taken back to Hiwassee one last time, against her will, to see her homeland. The family’s journey to Cherokee, Tennessee culminates in shock at the commodification of Native American culture for which the area has become infamous. Great Mam dies soon after returning to Kentucky, although not before passing on her ecological values to her great granddaughter through a series of parables.

“Homeland” conforms to Kingsolver’s structural emphasis on origins as the foundational story in the collection while representing her personal “beginning” as a writer.¹² It also begins to draw out the themes of rupture, loss and the possibility for reimagining Southern regionalism which are developed in subsequent stories. For example, the contrast between how those within a region may wish to be defined and how they may find themselves being defined by others is exemplified most strongly in “Rose-Johnny,” wherein traditional motifs of the cult of white womanhood and of conservative decency/cruelty are dramatically ruptured through the perceptions of an innocent. There is a sense, however, that exposing social ruptures provides hope for a re-conceptualised regionalism which accepts rather than assimilates difference.

¹¹ “I wrote the first draft when I was nineteen...It was called ‘The Last Remaining Buffalo East of the Mississippi’. I was obsessed with that great-grandmother of mine: I rewrote that story every single year.” Kingsolver in Donna Perry, “Interview with Barbara Kingsolver,” in *Back Talk: Women Writers Speak Out* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 158.

¹² Laura Furman’s review of the collection similarly identifies “Homeland” as one of two stories which define the collection and praises the title story’s use of the past to enrich the narrative. The second of Furman’s defining stories is “Quality Time,” which is praised for its representation of “connections between generations of women,” a trope which I examine more closely in my analysis of *Prodigal Summer* in Chapter Five. “Wild Grapes and Ice Cream Heaven: *Homeland and Other Stories* by Barbara Kingsolver.” *Los Angeles Times* (July 16, 1989): 11

The collection's final story, "Why I am a Danger to the Public," is told from the point of view of a single mother who is also a striking miner and who is imprisoned for defending her family and her rights as a worker. Despite its grim plot, there is a determined air of optimism to the story, with the suggestion that people like narrator Vicki Morales represent hope. As Vicki states defiantly at the story's end, when she is jailed for trying to protect a miner who broke the strike and was incorrectly reported to have been injured at work, "They say he is all in one piece. Well, I am too." (244) Great Mam's death in "Homeland," like the end of the collection itself, lacks a sense of finality, and also leaves room for hope of renewal. In Great Mam's case, hope is conveyed through her great granddaughter's homage to memory – of Great Mam's stories and also of herself as a child – suggesting that "Homeland" celebrates Great Mam's legacy as much as her life. Structurally, "Homeland" is also the collection's representative story; it is the only story in the collection to complement its first-person narrator extensively with the insertion of additional stories into the existing narrative framework. "Rose-Johnny" is the only other story in the collection to employ this multilayered approach.¹³ Between the two stories, Kingsolver combines her emphasis on belonging (with its related duality of insiders and outsiders) and environmentalism with the dark ruptures of Southern history more generally indicated by the emphasis on the injustices of Native American history in "Homeland," and reiterated in the exploration of violent oppression of difference in "Rose-Johnny."

The rest of the stories in *Homeland and Other Stories* alternate between first- and third-person attempts to rediscover belonging despite generational division and trauma. "The Lost Language of Love" was first published in 1989 and is retitled "Blueprints" in *Homeland and Other Stories*, thus making explicit the collection's emphasis on the way

¹³ The status of "Rose-Johnny" as a multilayered story is also emphasized by its performance by the San Francisco theatre group Word for Word who were able to present the story exactly as written. The multiplicity of representative forms for a single work mirrors Kingsolver's narrative multilayering within a single story.

people choose to map their own origins. The two versions are identical except for their titles, each telling the story of a young couple, schoolteacher Lydia and carpenter Whitman, whose relationship comes under strain when they move from urban Sacramento to a small log cabin in the California mountains. An unnamed male biologist narrates “Covered Bridges,” which details a childless couple’s weekend of babysitting during which time they face up to wife (and poison hotline worker) Lena’s fatal insect allergy. “Quality Time” examines a day in the life of single mother Miriam and her daughter Rennie. It explores their fears of separation and the maintenance of family life within tight schedules and was reworked from “Precious Little Time” which appeared in *Redbook* in July 1989. 39-year old adulterer Diana visits the Petrified Forest with her lover Peter in “Stone Dreams,” only to find a conciliatory note from her teenaged daughter which allows her to imagine a new future for them both. “Survival Zones” is set in the small town of Elgin near Cincinnati and explores the lives of Roberta and husband Ed as their teenaged daughter Roxanne grows up and Roberta assesses her life’s achievements and their impact on her identity as a woman as well as a mother. “Islands on the Moon” explores the fractured relationship between Magda and daughter Annemarie, both of whom find themselves pregnant at the same time. When misunderstandings wrought by unexamined assumptions and failure to communicate are revealed in the traumatic event of a car crash, the fall-out in this story typifies the kinds of anxieties, divisions and connections that Kingsolver explores throughout the collection.

“Bereaved Apartments” marks Kingsolver’s first and only attempt at a story in the classic mystery genre. When reformed thief Sulie moves to Tucson from West Virginia to start a new life after years in prison, she finds herself unwittingly aiding the man who shares her house in stealing from a vulnerable and paranoid elderly neighbour whose home is filled with antiques and memories. “Extinctions” focuses on middle-

aged Grace's return to her family home at Easter only to remember childhood abuse she suffered at the hands of a neighbour who recently became a priest. The family in "Extinctions" reappears in the 1992 story, "Fault Lines," which takes place following the death of Grace's husband and her move to Oakland with her two young sons (both of whom are obsessed with endangered or extinct species of animal).¹⁴ While in "Extinctions," Grace drives herself and her boys back to safety in the form of family life with Randall, "Fault Lines" imagines an alternative future in which Grace's husband is killed in an industrial accident and she tries to forge a new life in the West. In "Jump-Up Day," a young girl named Jericha is left to live in a St Lucian convent when her mother dies and her doctor father contracts Bilharzia. The story follows Jericha in her adventures with a local medicine man and explores the importance of local knowledge. Eleven-year-old Georgeann lives in a small Southern town and befriends the eponymous heroine in the collection's penultimate story, "Rose-Johnny," despite violence and intimidation from the local community, as she struggles to find her place within a society preoccupied with exclusion and oppression. Vicki Morales faces corporate victimization in "Why I am a Danger to the Public" as she details her experiences of a strike which leaves her imprisoned and her home and family under threat.¹⁵

The narrative perspectives alternate between first- and third-person throughout *Homeland and Other Stories*, with the first-person narratives providing a strong frame for a shifting subject identity, particularly in "Homeland," "Rose-Johnny" and "Why I am a Danger to the Public." Great Mam's ethnic subject identity in "Homeland" makes her

¹⁴ "Fault Lines" does not appear in *Homeland and Other Stories* but was published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1992): 182-189.

¹⁵ Further discussion of "Why I am a Danger to the Public" can be found in Chapter Three. There are interesting parallels between the western settings, labour histories and female characters in *Animal Dreams*. Similarly, the 1991 story "My Father's Africa," which tells of a missionary family in the Congo was developed into 1998's bestselling novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, which is analysed in more depth in Chapter Four. "My Father's Africa," *McCall's* (August 1991): 115-123.

an outsider to her white family and their proprietary attitude to the land contrasts with hers. Kingsolver makes Rose Johnny a foreign body in the South in terms of her ambiguous gender and race while Vicki Morales is also deemed “foreign” for espousing her radical politics in “Why I am a Danger to the Public.” Exposing the pressures of inclusion and exclusion suggested by the essentialising tendencies of reductive forms of regionalism and community allows Kingsolver to draw such apparent outsiders into her web of representation. Kingsolver brings them to voice, even if in Rose Johnny’s case this only occurs through a sympathetic narrator. Kingsolver allows her “outsiders” to be free in art and form if not substantively in content, as all are ultimately punished: Great Mam’s Native American identity is subjugated even on her gravestone, which “is marked Ruth,” her given “Christian name” (4); Vicki is imprisoned for her political beliefs; and Rose Johnny is presumed dead. “Rose-Johnny” and “Why I am a Danger to the Public” were also the first short stories Kingsolver wrote after “Homeland,” and are among five in the collection published before appearing in *Homeland and Other Stories*.¹⁶ As such, these stories reflect the genesis of the collection’s conceptualisation and the author’s return to multiple, often marginalised, perspectives.

Kingsolver’s preoccupation with representing voices which are largely unheard in society to a popular readership indicates her faith in the power of language to effect political change.¹⁷ In “Rose-Johnny,” for example, Georgeann confesses to the reader that she is “thrilled” with the power of her “first important lie” (210), in a statement which reflects Kingsolver’s suggestion that “words could have more power over people

¹⁶ “Why I am a Danger to the Public” was Kingsolver’s first published short story and appeared in *New Times* in January 1986. “Rose-Johnny” first appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in Winter 1987.

¹⁷ On seeing her article about women in the Arizona Mine strikes of 1983 appear in *The Progressive*, Kingsolver says it gave her “some sense of the possibilities and of the power of this kind of writing.” Epstein, 35.

than any sort of physical object.”¹⁸ As I suggest in my Introduction, Kingsolver often discusses her desire to record “not just the past, but specifically, the voices of those who’ve had their voices taken away from them.”¹⁹ It might also be argued that, in turn, Kingsolver herself “takes the words away” from the people on whom she eavesdrops and with whom she interacts, even if she does so in order to represent their views to her readers. However, instead of being criticized for disenfranchising her subjects, Kingsolver is lauded by critics for her ability to speak to “people’s hunger for the acknowledgement of the political in their lives.”²⁰

In naming the collection *Homeland*, Kingsolver mobilizes an emotive search for belonging based on a sense of home and place-based identity. The stories address the idea of belonging in terms of property and ownership, a search for personal identity grounded in place, and through various interpretations of what constitutes a “home.” Belonging is sometimes used as a kind of shorthand to combine all three nuances of meaning, as in the title story when narrator Gloria notes that her “great-grandmother belonged to the Bird Clan” (1). Indeed, Kingsolver’s choice of protagonists suggests that home is a gendered construct, in this way, apparently conforming to essentialist ecofeminist constructions of land as female.²¹ Eleven of the stories in the collection have female narrators or protagonists.²² The single male protagonist (in “Covered Bridges”) is never named, and his story is not even ostensibly “about” him, but his wife Lena. Gendered narration emphasizes Kingsolver’s obsession with finding an authentic voice as much as it suggests any gendered vision of defining home. When asked why she writes mainly about women, Kingsolver answers “For the same reason I write mostly

¹⁸ Beattie, 152.

¹⁹ Elisabeth L. Beattie, “Barbara Kingsolver Interview,” in *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*, edited by Elisabeth L. Beattie (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 157.

²⁰ Robin Epstein, “The Progressive Interview: Barbara Kingsolver,” *The Progressive* (February 1996): 36.

²¹ The ecofeminist aspects of Kingsolver’s fiction are explored further in Chapter 5.

²² Russell Banks’ analysis of the collection also highlights this gender bias, arguing that Kingsolver’s “most memorable characters are women or girls becoming women.” Banks’ review, like this chapter, also posits “Homeland” as the collection’s representative and “best” story. “Distant as a Cherokee Childhood.” *New York Times* (June 11, 1989): A16.

about people who live in the US, who must work for a living, who have functional eyes, ears, and limbs, who speak English, who are raising children, who face imbalances of power in their relationships and lives.” Stepping back from propounding an overtly feminist agenda, Kingsolver returns to her own “authentic” ear for the voices of characters she knows intuitively and claims that if she hopes to “arrive at any convincing answers,” she must “begin with characters whose details I know by heart.”²³

The role of women in defining home is further developed through Kingsolver’s continual emphasis on the importance of naming women throughout the collection. The use of naming to exclude and include, for example, is particularly evident in “Rose-Johnny” when Georgeann is told by Rose Johnny that when she sees the black children in town, she speaks to them “By *name*. I don’t care who is watching” (214). Georgeann’s choice whether or not to speak to the children has the power to confirm or deny their status, suggesting that its ability to determine belonging is a strength rather than a limitation of language. The idea of naming as identity is unpacked in “Survival Zones,” with the suggestion that marriage is basically “families swallowing other families” and “gobbling up little dots of women.” Despite losing their “maiden” names, these women “don’t disappear, they only rearrange” (114), suggesting that rather than being consumed by patrilineal family genealogy, it is women who adapt to ensure the family’s survival. This feminine adaptability is similarly made clear in the characters of Lusa and Nannie in *Prodigal Summer* as they adjust their lives to take account of changing familial and environmental circumstances. In turn, it is the masculine lack of recognition of women’s continual compromises which leaves Orleanna “about adapted out” in “My Father’s Africa.”²⁴

²³ Harper Collins, “FAQs,” *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*, <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question24> (accessed December 12, 2004).

²⁴ Kingsolver, “My Father’s Africa,” 121.

The naming of women also emerges explicitly in “Homeland” when Gloria describes how her great grandmother was renamed Ruth by her husband after being taken from her Native American family as a young woman. The abandoning of her original name of Green Leaf accompanies a rewriting of her history, with the family inventing Ruth not only in name but in every detail: “We even had to invent a date and year of birth for her since these things were unknown.”⁽⁴⁾ Nothing written on her gravestone at the story’s end (and her life’s end) is therefore true. Despite this literal obscuring of the details of Great Mam’s life by the demands of white society, she remains true in the stories she passes on to her original name of Green Leaf with its sense of hope in environmental renewal.²⁵ By sustaining her identity through retelling stories about the environment, Great Mam uses her memories in a dynamic way, adapting them to apply to changed circumstances. Just as Great Mam holds her lost identity within herself, so she holds the roots of belonging and home which she constantly reimagines in order to interpret new experiences. By telling the story of her childhood and recalling her perceptions of her great grandmother, Gloria too incorporates the knowledge afforded her by hindsight. This is particularly clear in her description of General Winfield Scott’s role in the ‘Trail of Tears’ removal of Cherokee peoples, with her adult knowledge of historical trauma transposed onto her childhood understanding.

The Cherokee “Forest people” (1), as Kingsolver describes them, base their identity on the assumption that they come from the earth and will return to it. However much they were moved off their traditional lands during the Trail of Tears, their identity remained intact because they “carried the truth of themselves in a sheltered place inside

²⁵ Also in “Homeland,” Gloria’s statement that “like most people I’ve been called many things,” (2) implies that naming does not change a person but indicates the idea of balancing an internalized identity with a performed one which I develop later in this chapter. Being named as a wife or mother can be an accurate representation of a shift in identity wrought by the physical acts of marriage or childbirth, as long as this is tempered by recognition of alternative sources of identity.

the flesh” (2). However, when outside influences impose upon this cherished link between memory, place and identity, Kingsolver’s story suggests that there is a need to remind the heart of the history. An artificial realigning of balance is needed to preserve this sense of home and the very act of writing a story like “Homeland” implies that we may need to be more conscious of our memories by regularly reappraising them in order to keep them alive. While Great Mam reassures Gloria that “if it’s important, your heart remembers” (6), Kingsolver links a conscious reverence of memory and of the land that shapes it with her choice of profession, suggesting that writing is one way of achieving such remembrance.²⁶

Kingsolver’s representation of the vulnerability of oral storytelling to the fracturing of memory highlights her own impulse toward scribal storytelling while emphasizing the value derived from combining different memories as stories, as emphasized particularly in the multiple narrators of her novels. A desire for coherence of recorded and shared memories recalls Alison Landsberg’s assertion that people who acquire memories in this way “are led to feel a connection to the past but, all the while, to remember their position in the contemporary moment.”²⁷ Kingsolver’s emphasis on the importance of memory in oral storytelling is textured throughout “Homeland,” where Great Mam’s tradition of passing on values, memories and stories narrows the generational divide and offers a fluid and flexible continuity to her cultural identity. However, the story’s existence also indicates that Gloria deems it necessary to write it down, suggesting both that people forget and that through writing, people *choose* to “forget” certain details in favor of others. Kingsolver’s conscious return to memory, to

²⁶ It is worth noting the contrary suggestion of some folklorists that literacy is an impediment to the survival of oral traditions.

²⁷ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9.

reinterpret the past in terms of contemporary experience, allows her to (re-)construct coherent origins within shifting contexts.²⁸

Like Kingsolver, the character of Great Mam in “Homeland” defines her origins and identity through the creative power of telling stories. For Great Mam, this is her way of making meaning and defining culture, as a counter to white America’s perceptions of Native Americans. The creative power of oral traditions is highlighted in her story of the waterbug “who volunteered to go exploring” (19) and brought back the mud which became the earth. Just as the waterbug’s curiosity created the world, so the storyteller creates community memories over which she has control of meaning.²⁹ The oral tradition therefore strengthens the sense that renewal of memory, culture and the environment is made possible by the retelling of particular and selected stories.

The importance of language is obvious to any writer, but Kingsolver uses the voices of her characters to define communities, land and individual identities, from the playwright eavesdropper in “Quality Time” to Lena in “Covered Bridges” who “knows about the roots of words” (50) and uses her knowledge in her job of diagnosing poisons. This example suggests that understanding and preserving the individuality of “local” and regional language is as redemptive an act as saving people from poisoning. Kingsolver emphasizes the importance of preserving language and memories which risk being lost even as oral traditions seek to conserve them, in the written word. For example, the teenaged daughter Julie in “Stone Dreams” embodies this belief in her ambition to be a linguist. Julie absorbs and analyses southern dialects during her annual

²⁸ Chapter 3 assesses Kingsolver’s use of memory further, through its reading of *Animal Dreams*.

²⁹ The flexibility of oral tradition means this can be interpreted as a literal creation story (in conflict with Christian creationism and evolution), or viewed as an allegory about the need to investigate and experience the world in order to make meaning for yourself. Great Mam chooses to emphasise a Native interrelatedness with the environment when she speaks of “certain animals as if they were relatives” (5) and insists that “A flower is your cousin” (11) and flowers should not be picked but “left where they stand” (11).

visit to her Kentucky grandmother, returning West with reams of notes on idioms and a Southern inflection to her speech.³⁰

Julie's favourite phrase, "*Varoom nicht?*" (80), a phonetic transcription of the German "Warum nicht?" meaning "Why not?" contains within it the reminder that southern speech will not be only that and the sense of possibility which shapes the story. This challenging phrase also suggests that another character should follow her heart and end a loveless marriage. When the same challenge is directed at the homogenization of linguistic habits, it asks instead; why not learn from your heritage and celebrate the differences in regional language? In representing someone as young as Julie, eager to extend the supposed limits of language used by specific regional groups, "Stone Dreams" suggests that there is a living future for evolving linguistic and regional cultures. Even within the context of her reverential attitude towards language, Kingsolver highlights her awareness of its limitations and exclusions. She argues that "the way people say things can be just as important, or more important, than what they're saying."³¹ Communication is not only words; it is tone, inflection, ambience, the very components that Kingsolver emphasizes through her various narrators.

Just as choosing which details to be included or neglected is a necessary component in the construction of a story, so "forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory."³² Kingsolver claims that her early drafts of "Homeland" were "too autobiographical" to be successful narratives, suggesting that the "hardest thing to do is write your own history because you're inclined to include all this stuff just because it

³⁰ Julie exclaims "My Stars!" when something surprises her in homage to her grandmother's expression. She studies these idioms during her trips to Kentucky because "they show how the language changes" (91).

³¹ Beattie, 155.

³² Sturken, 7.

really happened, not because it adds anything to the story.”³³ Writers like Kingsolver and storytellers like Great Mam recognize that “the past must be articulated to become memory.”³⁴ By untangling the past from individual narrative strands of memory, Kingsolver’s stories allow a glimpse of limited truths as details and alternative truths are often lost in the narrative choices necessary for effective articulation. I suggest that Kingsolver’s short stories advance the idea that memory is a narrative rather than a “replica of an experience.”³⁵ As particularly evidenced in “Homeland” and “Extinctions,” that which is reconstructed through the reimagining of memory is as important to the formation of identity as the “facts” that may lie behind that memory. Through their strategic appeal to a popular readership, Kingsolver’s short stories raise awareness of this political dimension to what is represented and remembered of the past.

Many of Kingsolver’s stories conform to the idea, posited by Marita Sturken, that memory “takes the form not of recollection but of cultural reenactment that serves important needs for catharsis and healing.”³⁶ In “Extinctions,” Grace returns to the family home for Easter and is reminded of traumatic childhood abuse as a result of vivid storytelling and being surrounded by the same characters who so tormented her in youth. Hers are suppressed memories which may otherwise have remained submerged, but confrontation through reenactment allows Grace the strength to leave again, and head “for the light” (181). In contrast, “Homeland” suggests that reenactments of the past do not necessarily heal the wounds of history but may exacerbate the rupture between past and present. When Great Mam is returned to the homeland of her youth, she is forced to recognize its destruction. Great Mam’s healing, in contrast, evolves out

³³ Perry, 158.

³⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2-3.

³⁵ Sturken, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

of the reconstruction of her cultural identity through stories which underpin her memories and values. These stories may not be factually accurate but contain within them the origins of her identity, an identity made vulnerable through exposure to the reality of the present in the land of her past.

Gloria's memory and her hindsight in constructing a personal narrative of political import in "Homeland" appear to bear out aspects of Alison Landsberg's "prosthetic memory" thesis. Landsberg suggests that through immersion in mass culture, people adopt personal memories of a past through which they did not live. Gloria describes how Great Mam rarely speaks of personal things, "favoring instead the legendary and the historic," (3) as if she were similarly forging her contemporary identity from a mosaic of communal memory expressed through the Native American oral tradition rather than mass cultural forms.³⁷ Landsberg suggests that these un-lived yet identifying memories are "forged in response to modernity's ruptures,"³⁸ as people seek ways to transmit historically and culturally specific memories now that traditional "links between individual persons and community – kinship ties – [have been] broken."³⁹ The breakdown of community and family ties explored by Kingsolver similarly explains her emphasis on the need for a continuous reinterpretation of both history and memory. Great Mam desperately clings to the oral tradition, passing on to Gloria "memories" of experiences which she herself did not experience. The familial and cultural stream of memory is already fractured, with Gloria's brothers dismissing Great Mam's stories and Gloria worrying that she will forget to pass them on because they are so alien to her own experience. Gloria confesses, "I might not remember...it's too hard" (6).

³⁷ Gloria's mother, Florence Ann, in contrast to Great Mam's musings on legend and shared memory, instead "spoke loudly and often of events of which she disapproved, and rarely of those that might have been ordinary or redemptive." (3) Kingsolver, through the narrator Gloria and her recollection of Great Mam's stories, counters this by exploring the ordinary details which underpin identity and spark memory.

³⁸ Landsberg, 2.

³⁹ Ibid, 2.

Marita Sturken argues that the immune system is “considered to establish the uniqueness of the individual” and is described “in science as a depository of bodily memory, the system that remembers what has traveled through the body.”⁴⁰ “Covered Bridges” may also be said to explore this perception of the body “as a receptacle of memory, from the memory of bodily movement, such as walking, to the memory of past events in physical scars, to the memory of one’s genetic history in every cell.”⁴¹ Lena’s body represents a memorial to the past while toddler Melissa in learning to walk applies the function of that genetic memory in forging a future. Lena is an especially symbolic character in this regard because she is fatally allergic to many native species of her Indiana home and in this way, the effect of her bodily memory literally determines her future as well as her identity. As nature writer Rick Bass notes, “things are always tied together, as the future is linked, like an anchor, to the past.”⁴² Lena’s immune system means that she is rejected by her Indiana environment although she actually embraces her home state to the extent that even studying its poisons brings her joy. Lena’s husband also professes his sense of belonging to the locality, and despite the danger that nature imposes on his wife, he confides, “I belonged in this place, among these fields and rivers and covered bridges” (51).

Lena’s allergy means that she needs the vaccine to survive, a vaccine which works by conjuring memories for the immune system that did not occur in order to build antibodies that can fight what her body perceives to be an infection. Sturken argues that like the “fake” histories that nations often write for themselves, such vaccines “conjure for the immune system...a kind of mediated memory production.”⁴³ Lena’s acceptance of the panacea of a vaccine mirrors a recurring image in Kingsolver’s

⁴⁰ Sturken, 221.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

⁴² Rick Bass, “Fiber,” in *Off the Beaten Path: Stories of Place*, eds. Joseph Barato and Lisa Weinerman Horak of The Nature Conservancy (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 206.

⁴³ Sturken, 243.

stories of people accepting, embracing and ultimately appreciating the apparent limitations of rural and family life.⁴⁴ As Lena's husband suggests, "To my mind, a life spent among burgeoning fields is not always, is not *necessarily*, a life of limitation" (51). By recognizing and adapting to the apparent limitations of their rural home state and to Lena's allergies, they are able to re-empower themselves. Witnessing the toddler Melissa reacting naturally to her body's genetic memory of movement when she starts to walk also forces them to recognize that their child would need to take vaccines and be fed with false biological memories in order to survive. By deciding against having children, they refuse to pass on such mediated memory production of "fake" history to any future progeny.

Physical and emotional inheritance is a recurring theme for Kingsolver, making a notable impact in stories including "Extinctions" and "Covered Bridges" wherein Lena's allergy to insect bites informs her response to other people's grief, as she also lost her sister to allergies at a young age. In "Blueprints," Lydia ponders her relationship with Whitman and the burgeoning sense of individualism which threatens their union. She notes that it may be inspired by the pioneering stereotype of rugged individualism so central to the American myth of the frontier, describing how they had "struck out so boldly as a couple, but the minute they lost their bearings they'd homed in on terra firma."⁴⁵ Lydia's focus on inheritance also emphasises the emotional legacy of her partner Whitman's upbringing as she tries to understand his increasingly distant behaviour. Kingsolver emphasises the need for personal responsibility, alongside

⁴⁴ Kingsolver constantly rails against these apparent limitations, arguing that her novels "are about the things women think about, like keeping our children fed, and how to manage on not very much income, I think it's important to do that, because it's not traditionally been the main stuff of literature. And it needs to be." Epstein, 34.

⁴⁵ The reference to terra firma emphasises Kingsolver's linking of physical land with a sense of home and belonging. While they "struck out boldly" in a pioneering fashion, in times of difficulty, it is firm ground that they turn to for safety and survival. Home therefore becomes synonymous with the land, and tellingly, it is the rudimentary communication which they are forced to develop by the impact of nature on their lives that saves their relationship. Whitman's inappropriate bridge is literally washed away by the storm, forcing them to build linguistic bridges appropriate to their environment, emphasising Kingsolver's focus on the interaction between environment and humanity (29).

inherited traits over which her characters seem to be powerless. Just because children may inherit behaviour, emotional baggage and physical difference from their parents and their upbringing, does not absolve them of responsibility for their own lives in Kingsolver's stories. This idea parallels her representation of attitudes towards the environment: that there is a certain level of environmental degradation inherited from previous generations does not mean these patterns should be perpetuated.

Throughout her short stories, Kingsolver explores inherited patterns. She returns to the way siblings with the same upbringing grow up to be so different, for example the characters of Codi and Hallie in *Animal Dreams*. The skills and personality traits of siblings and pairings of people are represented as complementary; together, siblings can supply the balance necessary to make one "whole" person, as in the case of Adah and Leah in *The Poisonwood Bible*.⁴⁶ In her characters, this is made clear in the balance between vulnerability and strength, courage and caution, or craving community and preserving individuality. These humanistic traits also tally with Kingsolver's broader emphasis on the balance between the respective essentialist dualities of nature/wilderness/woman and culture/civilisation/man. Kingsolver's ambiguous position as both insider (she is the author who creates these worlds and characters and they therefore belong to her as much as she does to them) and outsider (she often speaks of knowing "what it's like to be a minority"⁴⁷) is explored through the recurring tropes of pairings and siblings. It is also exemplified by Roberta's recognition in "Survival Zones," for example, that "a mother had the power to make two people one, or vice versa" (113) and in neighbours Sulie and Gilbert in "Bereaved Apartments" who, "between the two of them together maybe they'd make a decent whole person" (154). Similarly, while Diana in "Stone Dreams" is a part-time art teacher and mother,

⁴⁶ The relationship between these siblings is explored further in Chapter 4.

⁴⁷ Epstein, 34.

her younger sister Eva “works as a reporter for Japanese TV” (80).⁴⁸ Diana muses, in a phrasing reminiscent of Codi’s thoughts about sister Hallie in *Animal Dreams*; “I’m not sure how Eva got from here to there...Eva has gone so far in her life whereas I have only traveled” (81). The appeal and the danger of this “balance” motif is its inbuilt assumption that everybody is in some way lacking, which is appropriately humble for someone with Kingsolver’s reverential attitude to nature. In pursuing balance, however, inherent value judgments emerge as to which traits are positive (and need to be shared) and which are negative (and need to be balanced out).

This tension between the traits which need to be shared and those which need to be balanced out also emerges in Kingsolver’s uneven representation of environmentally-grounded identities which draw upon idealized and commercialized Native American stereotypes and selective aspects of agrarian rhetoric. In exploring the representation of these ecological identity-markers in Kingsolver’s short stories, this section recognizes the environmental issues which are prevalent in the author’s popular fiction. In “Homeland,” for example, Gloria’s description of Great Mam’s origins highlights an identity dependent on the land. Gloria tells how one of Great Mam’s ancestors traveled to England where he caught smallpox, indicating the potentially negative consequences of abandoning one’s homeland. When he returned home, his family tried the customary cure of plunging him into an icy stream, which promptly killed him. This allegorical aside implies that although you may always return home to belong, if your identity and connection with the local environment is lost, an imbalance may result. Given that the incubation period for smallpox is a maximum of seventeen days and that it would have

⁴⁸ While this may seem to suggest merely a difference in chosen careers, it exemplifies the sisters’ larger differences. Diana feels trapped and overwhelmed by her successful but cold husband and their dramatic house and unremarkable life; she jealously imagines her sister Eva to be carefree and successful, living abroad, experiencing life to the full.

taken up to three months to travel back from Europe, the experience of Great Mam's ancestor is presented metaphorically rather than accurately to mobilise the idea of the Native American experience of disease warfare.

Great Mam's ancestor's experience is a dramatic inversion of Great Mam's own experiences upon returning to Cherokee. As the returning local, Great Mam has not lost her identity (as her ancestor did) but those who remain appear to be little more than commodified stereotypes (unlike the community who were unable to save her ancestor from his foreign disease).⁴⁹ In colonial terms, smallpox is inscribed with historical relevance in the Native American context and it is no coincidence that Kingsolver uses this particular disease to highlight the damage wrought by abandoning (or being forced to abandon) one's home. The infamous accounts of American soldiers deliberately infecting Native groups with smallpox are controversial but nonetheless central to discussions of the effects of colonisation on native populations.⁵⁰ Kingsolver mobilises not only the rhetoric of colonisation but also the suggestion that losing one's roots can turn someone into a "foreign body" in their own homeland. The creeping vines in "Homeland" representing the earth moving "to repossess its losses" (2) suggests that, on the other hand, a sense of belonging can be restored through nature, or a return to the earth.⁵¹ As such, it becomes necessary to look beyond Kingsolver's possible mythification of Native American relations with the environment in order to address

⁴⁹ This contrast raises the problem of imposing privileged concepts of "authenticity" onto contemporary Native American communities. Their commodification can be seen as a sign of adaptability and survival within the framework of American capitalism, exploiting the very stereotypes it uses in order to make money for the tribe.

⁵⁰ Army journals contain confessions such as: "Out of our regard to them [the Native people] we gave them two Blankets and an Handkerchief out of the Small Pox Hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect." William Trent, "Excerpt from Journal of William Trent, 1763," in *Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania*, ed. John W. Harpster (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1938), 103.

⁵¹ This return to the earth occurs either through death (in the case of Great Mam's ancestor) or from the recognition of interrelatedness and the limitations imposed by an insider/outsider duality (as in the case of Lena in "Covered Bridges" whose allergic reaction to the species of her home region renders her a foreign body within her homeland).

her representation of an environmental identity as inherent, rather than a socially constructed performance.

Kingsolver uses environmental stereotypes to reclaim and promote environmentalism, in other words, as a “how-to” guide to gaining an apparently “authentic” national identity. As Diana Brydon notes, “to criticize ideas of authenticity is problematic when they have been used as recuperative weapons by colonized peoples.”⁵² Feminist geographer Catherine Nash expands on this postcolonial reclamation of the indigenous relationship to place that was dislocated by the colonizing power, suggesting that authenticity can be used as a redemptive weapon by colonized peoples.⁵³ Such strategies may help to explain Kingsolver’s commercial popularity, as readers can empathise with her indignation at the patterns of colonization which oppressed Native American groups while simultaneously reclaiming these same groups as idealized environmental role models. Readers can buy into “positive” stereotypes of Native American groups without guilt, assuming that Native Americans benefit from and contribute to such representations. However, by offering readers ways to claim a holistic and authentic national identity, such representations of Native American environmentalism compound the very stereotypes used to justify the American colonialism that Kingsolver so resolutely condemns.

Despite her self-consciously liberal intentions, Kingsolver has been criticised for her essentialist representation of Native American groups as “idealised, exotic characters.”⁵⁴ Idealisation of Native American tribal groups by environmentalists and well-intentioned writers is often criticised for sidestepping accuracy in order to present

⁵² Diana Brydon, “The White Inuit Speak: Contamination as Literary Strategy,” in *Past the Last Post: Theorising Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, eds. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 195.

⁵³ Catherine Nash, “Remapping the Body/Land: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender, and Landscape in Ireland,” in *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, eds. Alison Blunt & Gillian Rose (New York & London: The Guilford Press, 1994), 234.

⁵⁴ For example, Meredith Sue Willis, “Barbara Kingsolver: Moving On,” *Appalachian Journal* 22, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 82.

holistic examples of human interrelatedness with nature. While cultural critics have condemned the tendency to use Native American groups as exotic backdrops to didactic literature, anthropologists suggest that associating native groups with their environment effectively imprisons them within a limited context. By locating native groups as specifically regionalised and environmentally defined, they can come to be represented not only as “persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places,” but also “somehow incarcerated, or confined, in those places.”⁵⁵ And while, as Liisa Malkki argues, “spatial incarceration of the native” may offer a “highly valued rooting” of peoples and cultures for North Americans desperate for a sense of belonging to the land,⁵⁶ it is a dangerously limiting representation of Native American peoples.⁵⁷ Kingsolver’s awareness of these interpretations allows her work to explore the way different groups (for example, isolated white farming communities) experience a similar feeling of entrapment within their region and circumstances. Being trapped is not an exclusively racialised predicament and Kingsolver’s exploration of limitations (often discussing her youthful desire to escape her rural upbringing) also offers a glimpse of the problems as well as the possibilities of a place- and environmentally-based identity.⁵⁸

Kingsolver is involved in a delicate balancing act. She may idealise tribal groups’ links to nature but she also espouses the pragmatic assertion of indigenous environmentalists that man and nature are “intimately co-operant and mutually dependent.”⁵⁹ Mythifying tribal groups may lead to assuming that Native Americans offer an exclusive example of environmental identity that effectively animalises tribal

⁵⁵ Arjun Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in its Place” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1: 37.

⁵⁶ Malkki, 30.

⁵⁷ Native American scholars talk at length about how non-Indians, “frantic to discover a means of establishing roots in the alien soil of North America, seek out American Indians hoping to discover an easy formula...which will ground them in a sense of permanence and meaning.” Vine Deloria Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 130.

⁵⁸ The parallels she draws between her self-indulgent feelings of exclusion and the government-planned enforced migration and alleged genocide of Native Americans are problematic to say the least, raising the question of who has the right to speak of exclusion.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

groups but Kingsolver attempts to distance herself from such effects, arguing that “the decision to attend to the health of one’s habitat and food chain is a spiritual choice. It’s also a political choice, [and] a scientific one.”⁶⁰ By defining environmental awareness as a spiritual, political and scientific choice, Kingsolver claims the attention of a variety of readers and posits the environment as a practical source of identity for a range of disparate groups.

Despite her professed emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of an environmental identity, however, Kingsolver does idealise indigenous relations with nature as emblematic even as she paints a satirical portrait of such environmentally sound lifestyles in “Blueprints” with her descriptions of Lydia and Whitman’s friend Tofu. As Native activist Jace Weaver notes, it is “one of the ironies of the colonial relationship [that] even as Native lands and peoples are destroyed, they are also idolized and idealized,”⁶¹ just as the idea of nature itself. For example, the idealisation of Native Americans as convenient symbols of ecological harmony seems to support colonial assertions that America was uncultivated, virgin land upon “first contact.” Historian Christopher Vecsey describes how “Indians who both revere and represent the laws and substances of the environment” are imagined to “exist in the universe without appreciably changing it.”⁶² Native Americans did use and cultivate the land, albeit with a different attitude from the pioneers, whose rhetoric of domination and conquest is well documented.

Kingsolver’s focus on Native American interrelatedness with the environment is drawn not only from stereotypes of Native American environmentalism, but also from

⁶⁰ Barbara Kingsolver, “Foreword,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), xvii.

⁶¹ Jace Weaver, ed., *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 3.

⁶² Christopher Vecsey, “American Indian Environmental Religions,” in *American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History*, eds. Christopher Vecsey and Robert W. Venables (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1980), 4.

her self-proclaimed agrarian agenda. In her foreword to *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, Kingsolver discusses her “agrarian childhood” and “agrarian education” as factors which shape her “agrarian frame of mind” and inspire her to change the way her family lives.⁶³ Kingsolver’s emphasis on the need to be “mindful of the distance between ourselves and our sustenance”⁶⁴ breathes agrarian resonance into Great Mam’s explanation to Gloria of the practical and respectful ways to treat the environment: Sometimes “a person has got to take a life, like a chicken’s or a hog’s when you need it” but flowers should not be picked so they can “make a seed for next year” (11). In his discussion of Native American religion, environmental historian Christopher Vecsey details the paternalistic opinion that “primitive societies live in an exact equilibrium with nature and are thus prehistoric or nonhistoric because they have yet to establish a dialectic with the world.”⁶⁵ While Agrarianism is historically underlined as nostalgic and often impractical, Kingsolver makes her form of agrarianism explicitly political, claiming that her writing “strays into that muddy territory where humans are forced to own up to our dependency on the land.”⁶⁶ In such statements, Kingsolver joins environmentalist writers such as Norman Wirzba, Wendell Berry and Vandana Shiva in refuting the idea that agrarianism is unrealistic and outmoded.

Kingsolver draws parallels between Native American environmental rhetoric and agrarianism. Her focus on their interrelatedness is similarly emphasised by Native American scholars such as Dale Ann Frye Sherman who states “we are made of this continent,”⁶⁷ and agrarian Wendell Berry who argues that “our land passes in and out of

⁶³ Kingsolver, in Wirzba, xiii, xv and xvii. The effects of this change are later documented in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

⁶⁴ Kingsolver, in Wirzba, xvii.

⁶⁵ Vecsey, 8.

⁶⁶ Kingsolver, in Wirzba, xi.

⁶⁷ Dale Ann Frye Sherman, “North American Native Workshop on Environmental Justice,” Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Co. (March 18, 1995).

our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land.”⁶⁸ In *Homeland and Other Stories*, Kingsolver combines these related ideologies and “Homeland” in particular contributes to the long-standing recognition of the value of Native American environmental values to proponents of environmental awareness. As Vine Deloria Jr. suggests, such values “may provide the larger society with conceptual tools to rescue itself from its own destruction.”⁶⁹ In turn, Norman Wirzba argues that America’s national search for an “authentic” identity invariably turns to the margins, as the “cultural paradigm that causes or abets the crisis is unlikely to find a solution.”⁷⁰ This realisation requires the insights of people “operating with a set of assumptions different from the prevailing order” in order to address any such crisis of identity.⁷¹ It is precisely these people that Kingsolver purports to represent in her fiction; Native Americans, Mexican American female miners, single parents, isolated agricultural communities and reformed criminals create a tapestry of contemporary American life. The lessons of interrelatedness that Great Mam teaches Gloria are only one example.

The commodification of certain geographical, racial or gendered identities recurs throughout *Homeland and Other Stories*: rural tastes in furniture in “Blueprints,” “traditional” Native American dance in “Homeland” and the contrast between a family led by a single mother and the Disney channel family in “Quality Time” (72). In “Quality Time,” Miriam worries that her family does not fit the nuclear family stereotype and that her daughter Rennie will feel like an outsider because of her absent father Lute, and Miriam’s long, irregular working hours. Commodified images of family harmony emerge through examples such as buying your children treats from Ice Cream

⁶⁸ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 22.

⁶⁹ Deloria Jr., 250.

⁷⁰ Wirzba, 4.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² As mother Miranda notes of her daughter, “It is only lately, since she’s learnt to count, that Lute’s absence matters to Rennie. On the Disney Channel parents come in even numbers” (68).

Heaven, driving a big Saab like Lute's successful cousin, and eating together at table rather than in front of the TV. Kingsolver highlights these apparent signifiers of a "normal" family and then quietly pulls them apart. Rennie's friends at nursery give her the vouchers she needs for a free banana split at Ice Cream Heaven, suggesting that friends are a healthy supplement to family. In turn, the fragility of the aspirational family model is emphasized when Lute's cousin and her boyfriend die tragically in their Saab, the sturdy design of which should have protected them from harm. A mother and daughter eat together in a restaurant confirming the successful family stereotype yet the mother is actually using this quintessentially "family" time to tell her daughter that she is divorcing her father. Miriam and Rennie, on the other hand, happily choose to eat microwaveable pot pies rather than home cooked food, yet communicate openly about issues such as death, separation, and their day at work and school.

In "Blueprints," carpenter Whitman makes bespoke furniture using wooden pegs instead of nails, and has a very successful trade in Sacramento. However, when he moves out to a log cabin in the California countryside, he finds that "people's tastes run more along the lines of velveteen and easy-care Formica. They drive an hour to Sacramento to make their purchases in places like the Bargain Heaven Direct-2-U Warehouse" and he is forced to pile his pieces onto the truck and make the same drive, "to show them on consignment in the Country Home Gallery" (25). In buying Whitman's old-fashioned handmade furniture, the Sacramento urbanites appear to be buying into an apparently "authentic" rural American identity – one which uses local resources and skills to create items of rustic individuality instead of relying on modern styles and methods of production. That Whitman's furniture can only be bought from an independent gallery indicates its status as an artform to be displayed as much as a practical item for use. In turn, the people in the rural community of Blind Gap buy into another identity – one which trumpets the joys of progress and modernity with easy-to-

care-for furniture in sleekly uniform styles. Even the way they shop – relying on out-of-town warehouse mass purchasing – emphasizes the rejection of individual “mom and pop” stores in favour of efficient economies of scale. In doing so, these residents of rural California affirm their status as “modern” Americans, just as Sacramento’s furniture-buyers are drawn to Whitman’s apparently “authentic” rustic creations.

While the example of the furniture divide depicts the rural and urban communities as homogenous market forces, Kingsolver raises the idea of buying into a more specific identity in “Blueprints” through Lydia’s bemused reaction to her partner changing his name: “he’s changing his name: it’s Walter Whitman Smith, and he’s legally dropping the Walter.” (30) His given name’s resonance with that of poet Walt Whitman, along with Whitman’s decision to name himself, indicates his desire to proclaim autonomy from this family inheritance, and the blueprints for his life which were handed down through his parents’ choice of name. Lydia suggests that “when the going gets rough,” people tend to “fall back on whatever awful thing you grew up with” (29). Changing his name offers a way for Whitman to try to defy any such “awful” imprinting and forge a new identity through which he can learn to communicate with Lydia again. This renaming is both a step *away* from his past, and a step *towards* a new, self-chosen identity.

With Whitman’s old name, there was the suggestion of performance, of having to live up to the legacy of such a famously American name. Lydia even points out that it was only “when things were going well,” when everybody was telling Whitman “how evolved he was” that his parents’ lives were reduced to the status of “a quaint old photograph you’d hang on the wall” (29). This suggests that the rest of the time, his past had been a burden which his name made it impossible to forget. The lack of space in their new one-bedroom home also underlines the need for territories where you belong and know your place. In the cabin there is no opportunity to avoid the quaint old

photograph of Whitman's parents' influence. The territorializing of the small cabin is highlighted by the way "Whitman and Lydia reassigned the names" of their old home's eleven rooms "to eleven different areas of the new place" in order for their dog David to know where to go when ordered (25). Without the large group of sycophantic Sacramento friends to admire Whitman, he comes to recognize his need to choose an identity consciously rather than accept one which is bestowed upon him by others.⁷³ Just like his dog, Whitman needs to identify the parameters of his new environment. This is reflected in his desire to choose an identity which grounds him in his new life and by the story's end (the day after the papers come through finalizing the name change), Whitman and Lydia are communicating in a new way that is completely separate from anything imprinted on them by childhood. Lydia realizes that "they are using a sign language unknown to humankind, making it up as they go along" (41). Their unique language derives from understanding each other in place, in much the same way as Gary Snyder suggests that people learn about themselves best by building conscious relationships with their local environment.⁷⁴

This conscious environmental engagement is also explored in the stories' preoccupation with the mapping of regional history and personal identity, both on the land and on the body.⁷⁵ When Gloria's describes her grandmother in "Homeland," she conflates appearance with identity and equates the idea that "She does so look like an Indian"

⁷³ Lydia cannily remarks of this shift in Whitman, "Without an audience the performance is pointless" (33).

⁷⁴ "You really should know what the complete natural world of your region is and know what all its interactions are and how you are interacting with yourself. This is just part of the work of becoming who you are, where you are." Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*, ed. Scott McLean (New York: New Directions, 1980), 16.

⁷⁵ The parallel treatment of marginalised peoples and environments which I examine further in Chapters Four and Five is explored in detail by Graham Huggan's analysis of the map as "as a dual paradigm for the phallogocentric discourse which inscribes woman, and the rationalistic discourse which inscribes the land, as 'Other.'" *Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction*. PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1989, 16.

with the statement that “She is one” (14). Gloria knows that despite tanning so easily because of her Indian genes, she is not herself Indian. The children at school do not mention Gloria’s Indian heritage, instead suggesting that she go sit in the “negro” classroom, demonstrating that the duality of inclusion and exclusion in the South is regularly divided along white/black lines. Native people do not figure, except in the childhood games of Cowboys and Indians and as “authentic” guides to an environmental ideal.

The emphasis on the perception rather than the performance of identity highlights Kingsolver’s representation of the physical manifestation of history on the body. “Homeland” explores the traditionally Southern idea of the burden of history as writ large on the body, with John Murray’s guilt at his inheritance made explicit through a description of his hands, “crisscrossed with fine black lines of coal dust” and likened to “a map themselves” (8). There is the sense here again of people as history, containing knowledge of their origins. Just as the wrinkles on John’s hands mirror the lines on the map in an explicit conflation of land with humanity, so the emotional burden of memory is also written on the body, with Gloria describing how Great Mam appears as though “at any moment prepared to stoop and lift a burden of great bulk or weight” (4). Kingsolver suggests that landscape and memory define a sense of belonging despite, rather than because of, the fact that they are occasionally manifested in performance.

This “mapping” of memory and history onto the body is explored by anthropologist Liisa Malkki, who suggests that there are two different kinds of map: the natural, and the national order of things, the latter usually also passing as “the normal or natural order of things.”⁷⁶ Kingsolver’s characters in “Homeland” may be read as embodying these different approaches with each family member reading the map differently on their road trip. While John Murray uses his road map and Gloria counts

⁷⁶ Malkki, 26.

off state boundaries, Great Mam looks for rivers and natural borders and does not understand why a state line would be represented on a map: “Now why would they put that on the map? You can’t see it” (8). To Great Mam, imposed borders and markers are neither tangible nor defining of homeland when compared to the natural borders of cultural and topographical markings. The act of mapping thereby reflects the power of representation and the plurality of perspectives on specific localities, emphasizing how the world is controlled and categorized.⁷⁷

Representational control of the land is conflated with the colonization of Native peoples through Kingsolver’s representation of the different cartographical approaches in “Homeland.” By relying on the national map, John Murray indicates that he is working within the assumptions and boundaries of what Donna Haraway has described as “the master subject.”⁷⁸ This involves John defining his sense of self against the “othered” Great Mam. The matriarch meanwhile rejects his belief in rigid national boundaries in favour of a topographical understanding, emphasizing the danger of slippage towards the conflation of Native American environmentalism with outmoded perceptions of the land as a wilderness set outside of modernity.

The shifting perspectives contained within such cartographical approaches mirror the multiple viewpoints contained within Kingsolver’s collection. While the structuring principles of *Homeland and Other Stories* are informed by ideas of “new” Souths and multiple, overlapping identities, the stories problematise “authentic” origins while recognizing the inherent appeal of such constructs. Malkki argues that “people are chronically mobile and routinely displaced, and invent homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases.”⁷⁹ She goes on to suggest that this invention of

⁷⁷ Catherine Nash explores the controlling aspects of cartography in some detail in her essay, “Remapping the Body/Land,” 234.

⁷⁸ D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 183-201.

⁷⁹ Malkki, 24.

homelands is achieved “through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit.”⁸⁰ Kingsolver’s collection mirrors this anthropological premise, representing homelands and cultural roots “existing in soil,”⁸¹ while simultaneously using reimagined memories, and multiple, contradictory viewpoints to explore the challenges of such environmentally grounded identification.⁸²

Such problematising of the idea of origins in “Homeland” stems in part from the central theme of migration. Its associated rupturing of generational inheritance is highlighted by Great Mam’s desperate attempts to pass on her world view to her great grandchildren through traditional Native American stories of creation and parables of environmental value. Kingsolver’s representations of migration across the story collection play with stereotypes of the “savage” open West and antiquated European civilizing traditions of the East. She critiques both extremes while exploring the uses and abuses of the traditional ideas of individual freedom in the West. In “Homeland,” Kingsolver may be said to revise the American Dream to privilege a dream of belonging to the land, as much as to nation, over the established emphasis on individual freedom. Unlike Richard Slotkin’s suggestion that the dream of regeneration can only be realized through violence, as seen in the history of westward expansion, Kingsolver’s fiction suggests that “regeneration comes not through violence but through reintegration” into “family and community.”⁸³ Kingsolver creates communities which define themselves by

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 29.

⁸² The idea that culture is rooted in the soil is central to Kingsolver’s various interpretations of belonging in “Homeland” but also recurs in her other fiction. In *Animal Dreams*, schoolteacher Codi wants to train the local kids to “have a cultural memory” and “be custodians of the earth.” Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 332. This idea is developed further in Chapter Three.

⁸³ Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 101. See also Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

belonging to a particular place, rather than frontier societies constantly on the move away from the past as much as towards an individualistic future.⁸⁴

The characteristics of Kingsolver's environmentally-rooted communities are defined through those of the landscape, with stories such as "Why I am a Danger to the Public" locating communities as a part of the landscape. Such representations echo Native American assertions that family and community are each "functioning parts of the landscape."⁸⁵ It is an idea that is constantly evolving and updating, as in Liisa Malkki's concept of sedentary metaphysics, according to which people "think of themselves as being rooted in place and as deriving identity from that rootedness."⁸⁶ When characters such as Vicki Morales and Great Mam leave their territorial homelands, they are uprooted from their culture. This form of migration recurs throughout the collection, emerging in six of the twelve stories, namely "Homeland," "Blueprints," "Islands on the Moon," "Bereaved Apartments," "Extinctions" and "Jump-Up Day." Contemporary life is represented in constant flux, movement and migration, suggesting that when her characters live away from their "homelands," they are in some ways exiled from their "roots."

The primary concern in *Homeland and Other Stories* is the overriding and overarching connections between a character's identity and her memory as linked to her environment. The title story distils these preoccupations and frames this chapter. In attempting to redress the imbalance wrought by displacing Native people like Great Mam from their homeland, and to overcome the guilt associated with her personal and political inheritance, John Murray's naïve mission forces Great Mam to confront the disparity between her memories of her origins and the distorted "reality" which she faces in Cherokee. The idea that home is found within the self suggests that Great

⁸⁴ This is emphasized by Kingsolver's representation in "Bereaved Apartments" and "Stone Dreams" of the experience of people moving west as displaced refugees fleeing the past.

⁸⁵ Deloria Jr., 253.

⁸⁶ Malkki, 27.

Mam's identity is undermined by the rupture between the memory of home which sustained her identity in exile, and the experience of its literal destruction when she is taken back "home" as an old woman. The loss is therefore not immediately experienced when she is removed from her family as a young girl, but later in life when she is finally made to face the distortion of her Native identity in the late twentieth century. In forcing Great Mam to face this loss, John exposes a national tragedy through an individual experience. Great Mam's homeland was stolen; there is no longer anything recognisable for her to return to. Just as she was removed forcibly from her lands, so the land which sustained the community was destroyed. Great Mam's cultural heritage seems outdated and irrelevant to Gloria and her brothers, to the extent that it "had never occurred" to Gloria "that the place where Great Mam had been a child was still on this earth" (10). Ironically, as far as Great Mam is concerned, however, this place no longer exists for her either. Her childhood and culture exist as memories and she neither needs nor wants to be confronted with a commercialized carnival sideshow based on her past. Indeed, when Gloria asks her grandmother how it feels to be home, Great Mam responds by saying "I've never been here before" (18).

Kingsolver's emphasis on the importance of memory and history in *Homeland and Other Stories* is central to her construction of alternative homelands and sources of belonging, whether from territorial and cultural origins, the bonds of motherhood, region and environment, or, indeed, the ruptures and departures which also shape experience. She explores and espouses the maintenance of identity through a continual reinterpretation and reappraisal of memory in characters such as Gloria and highlights the need for a compromise between a historically burdened South and seemingly oblivious nation. The power of memory (and the language used to confer it) defines the identity of

Kingsolver's characters and mobilises a trope that will recur across this author's work; the search for belonging. The varied representations afforded by the twelve stories that comprise *Homeland and Other Stories* indicate that while finding any universal truth about "home" may be impossible, the creation of meaning is itself a kind of truth. Marita Sturken's memory work begins to express this approach, whereby "memory is redefined as a social and individual practice that integrates elements of remembrance, fantasy and invention."⁸⁷ In this way, memory, and fictional representations of memory, can begin to "shift from the problematic role of standing for the truth to a new role as an active, engaging practice of creating meaning."⁸⁸ Kingsolver's representation of memory as a shifting personal experience underpins her strategy of courting popular readership and allows her to touch on the larger political themes that animate her novels.

⁸⁷ Sturken, 259.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

**“Hogs go deaf at harvest time”: Tropes and Tensions
in the Adoption Narratives of *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven***

Listening to housemate Lou Ann run herself down over her failed marriage, Taylor Greer, the feisty Kentucky heroine of *The Bean Trees* (1988) and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), is reminded of one of her mother’s favourite sayings: “Hogs go deaf at harvest time.” As Taylor explains, it means that people “only hear what they wanted to hear.”¹ Fittingly, given the novels’ preoccupation with alternative notions of family and motherhood, Taylor credits this aphorism with the authority not only of maternal wisdom but of “authentic” first-hand experience. Even Taylor’s casual noting that “Mama was raised on a hog farm” (BT 87) as justification for citing “one of her mama’s sayings,” indicates Kingsolver’s representation of family as a fundamental marker of identity which can be created and consolidated through stories. This aphorism resonates with Kingsolver’s investment into her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, of a plethora of tropes which go on to shape all of her later fiction: female protagonists, voices marginalised by gender, ethnicity and locale, community as family, and environmental and personal/political interrelatedness. This chapter will map the tropes which are introduced in this novel’s adoption narrative and dominate her later fiction, while exploring the techniques which Kingsolver uses to emphasise her political authority, in keeping with her strategy of raising awareness of her chosen issues through an appeal to popular readership.²

The chapter’s titular quotation serves two metaphorical functions, both of which shape my analysis of *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*. Firstly, Kingsolver’s suggestion that fiction “creates empathy, and empathy is the antidote to meanness of spirit,”

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 87. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text as BT.

² This central strategy is even highlighted in journalism focusing on these paired novels, with Sarah Lyall of the New York Times noting the commercial imperative behind Kingsolver’s political narratives. “Barbara Kingsolver: Termites are Interesting but Books Sell Better.” *New York Times* (September 1, 1993): C1.

intimates what she sees as the political function of reading a novel, whereby “you become the character” and upon returning to your own life, “something inside you has maybe shifted a little.”³ While Alice Greer’s hogs are deaf to the slaughter of their comrades, the representation of politically and legally marginalised Native American, Guatemalan, and poor white characters in this pairing of Kingsolver novels indicates their attempts to overcome such “mean spirited” obliviousness. Secondly, like the overwhelming evidence of slaughter which so deafens the hogs, I address the way in which the proliferation of issues in these novels risks desensitising the reader to the author’s proclaimed agenda of political engagement.

The Bean Trees details Taylor’s experiences as she leaves Kentucky, “adopts” a Native American girl who is left in her car in Oklahoma, and drives west in search of a new life for them both. Settling in Tucson, Taylor creates a new family for herself and daughter Turtle, together with the single mothers, refugees, and elderly ladies who live in her neighbourhood. The sequel, *Pigs in Heaven*, far from being a planned return to beloved characters and themes, was apparently written to rectify oversights in the first novel. Kingsolver claims to have realized “with embarrassment” that she had “completely neglected a whole moral area when I wrote about this Native American kid being swept off the reservation and raised by a very loving white mother. It was something I hadn’t thought about, and I felt I needed to make that right in another book.”⁴ That a novelist should proclaim her thinking in these terms is evidence of the political commitment underpinning her fictions.

Pigs in Heaven was published five years after *The Bean Trees* and three years after Kingsolver’s second southwestern novel, *Animal Dreams*. The novel charts Taylor and Turtle’s first holiday together and the spiralling events which follow when Turtle saves a

³ Laura Shapiro, “Interview: A Science to Her Fiction.” *Newsweek* 122, Issue 2 (July 12, 1993): 61.

⁴ Donna Perry, “Interview with Barbara Kingsolver,” in *Back Talk: Women Writers Speak Out*, edited by Donna Perry (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 165.

man's life at Niagara Falls. Turtle's story is featured on a special edition of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* which is watched by Native American lawyer Annawake Fourkiller, who becomes curious about the legality of the girl's adoption. The novel's thirty-three chapters are divided between the third-person narrations of Taylor and her divorced mother Alice, and organised according to the seasons of Spring, Summer and Fall. These narrative subdivisions, presented in both Latin and Cherokee scripts, exemplify a Kingsolverian tendency to structure novels with titles which indicate the themes and intertexts of each section – as seen most dramatically in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Even the third-person narratives of Alice and Taylor in *Pigs in Heaven* emphasise their female perspective, while the bilingual seasonal sections highlight both the centrality of Native American culture, and fundamental human awareness of the environment's seasonal variations.

The Bean Trees offers an insight into Kingsolver's myriad thematic interests, while *Pigs in Heaven* offers a more focused, self-consciously "balanced" representation of Native American adoption.⁵ There is a marked shift away from *The Bean Trees'* privileging of Taylor's first-person narrative of her adoption of Turtle in *Pigs in Heaven*.⁶ The later novel considers the same adoption through a third-person narrative which encompasses the tribe's view, the legal precedents, and the representation of such adoptions in the arena of the television talk show. The alternative families and politically-engaged communities in both novels conform to Kingsolver's proclaimed desire to answer political questions in an engaging way. However, the shift of narration across the two novels from majority first to third person, and the multiple perspectives

⁵ Kathleen Godfrey interrogates the challenges facing such representation of Native American issues and her analysis informs my reading of the limitations of "balance" in *Pigs in Heaven* which this chapter explores as it concludes. "Barbara Kingsolver's Cherokee Nation: Problems of Representation in *Pigs in Heaven*." *Western American Literature* 36.3 (2001): 259-77.

⁶ While Taylor's first-person narrative dominates fifteen of the novel's chapters, there are two short chapters written in the third person, both of which focus on Lou Ann, whose shared heritage with Taylor is contrasted by their different adult choices and temperaments. Both Kentucky women, however, live in Tucson with their young children. Lou Ann, in the short third-person chapters, offers a glimpse of what could have been Taylor's alternative future of "natural" motherhood.

on Turtle's adoption that *Pigs in Heaven* achieves, indicate that each text employs subtly different narrative techniques to achieve the same authorial agenda of raising political awareness.

With its benign, humorous representation of contemporary issues, *The Bean Trees* became an immediate bestseller upon publication in 1988. The novel won the American Library Association Award in 1988, has been published in more than sixty-five countries worldwide and was released in a mass-market edition in 1998. Kingsolver's success, while undoubtedly due in part to the promotional backing of her publishers at Harper, and her appealingly "normal" yet aspirational characters, also highlights the currency of particular issues in popular culture. Attention is drawn to issues including the rights of adoptive parents and the US's treatment of refugees, which contributes in turn to heightening popular awareness of those issues Kingsolver promotes in her fictions.

Literary critic Maureen Ryan points out that "we may not like learning of Nicaraguan Contras and child abuse, but we know it's good for us."⁷ Ryan's statement highlights the tension so prevalent in Kingsolver's fiction between didactic legitimacy, for example the legal parallels which bring factual cases into a fictional narrative, and the commercial imperative for her message to reach as wide a readership as possible. Nevertheless, critics are divided about the narrative effect of Kingsolver's issues-based approach. Some, such as Merrill Gerber of the *Los Angeles Times*, note that the subject of the second Greer novel "coincides with what brings high ratings to talk shows: adoption, ethnicity, child abuse, single motherhood (you name it, *Pigs in Heaven* has it)."⁸ This suggests that Kingsolver's focus on these issues is a cynical ploy for popularity. Although Kingsolver is hardly the first novelist to deal with such themes – aspects of her subject matter finds commonality with that of authors including Toni Morrison,

⁷ Maureen Ryan, "Barbara Kingsolver's Low Fat Fiction," *Journal of American Culture* 18.4 (1995): 77-82.

⁸ Merrill Joan Gerber, "Those Ideas in the Air," *Los Angeles Times* (October 31, 1993): 10.

Kaye Gibbons, and Anne Tyler – the effect of exploring such a wide range of issues cannot be overlooked.

The review of *Pigs in Heaven* in the *New York Times Book Review* spells out what it perceives as a carelessness in including a “tick list” of issues without fully developing them, noting that “Kingsolver has *tossed* into this novel several other topical concerns for us to look at,” ranging from “the scourge of eating disorders” to “the inevitable breakdown of the American family.”⁹ The risk of including such a wide spectrum of politically and emotionally loaded issues as family breakdown, poverty, and the legalities of transracial adoption, is that readers may be overwhelmed rather than engaged or limit their enjoyment of the novel to its representation of the more comfortable theme of the relationship between mother and child. While literary tension between commercial and artistic or political imperatives is hardly a unique revelation, I suggest that Kingsolver embraces this tension by combining key tropes of popular culture, particularly the talk show in this context, with legal and historical intertexts which emphasise the political authority of her narratives, in order to raise awareness of issues such as Native American adoption.

Reviewers who praise *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* tend not to deny the range of issues they include, but suggest that the novels touch upon “many contemporary issues – poverty, interracial adoption, the rights of American Indians...without preaching.”¹⁰ Antonya Nelson of the *New York Times Book Review* is critical but also states that, “The premise of this novel is wonderfully timely, drawing on two issues that have recently compelled America: the rights of adoptive parents as opposed to biological ones, and the rights of jurisprudence in tribal matters especially

⁹ Antonya Nelson, “Heaven in Oklahoma,” *The New York Times Book Review* (July 4, 1993): 2. Italics are my emphasis.

¹⁰ Jennifer Pinkerton, “Whose Little Girl is This?” *Washington Times* (June 27, 1993).

those concerning children adopted off reservation.”¹¹ The popular reception of *Pigs in Heaven* seems to bear out Nelson’s reading, with the novel nominated for an American Booksellers Book of the Year Award (ABBY), winning the American Library Association Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Prize, and the Cowboy Hall of Fame Western Fiction Award, evidence of its political as well as commercial credentials.

Fundamental to both novels’ commercial appeal is their representation of empathetic protagonist Taylor Greer. *The Bean Trees* introduces the first of Kingsolver’s Southern, in this case Kentucky-born, female characters who relocate to the Southwest. Protagonist Taylor leaves Kentucky to escape unwanted pregnancy, but maintains a defiant identification with the place, while her housemate Lou Ann Ruiz who also lives in Tucson considers herself “just an ordinary Kentuckian a long way from home” (BT 24). Like subsequent Kingsolver protagonists such as Lusa Landowski in *Prodigal Summer*, Taylor describes her state through local details as disparate as the school Four H club and the prevalence of farms for thoroughbred racehorses. As Taylor tells a fellow waitress at her new job in Tucson, “In the part of Kentucky I come from people don’t own Thoroughbreds.” Instead, her neighbours just “wish they could live like [the horses]” which are provided with their own swimming pools while Taylor’s “whole county didn’t even have a swimming pool” (BT 50).

The Kentucky accent and its association with home – for author as well as protagonist – determines Taylor’s identity and her relationships. Upon meeting Lou Ann, Taylor feels comfortable immediately, telling her new roommate, “You talk just like me” (BT 76). Taylor’s boyfriend Jax in *Pigs in Heaven* longs to offer her a home and “drawls on purpose, sounding more southern than he needs to” in an attempt to imitate

¹¹ Nelson, 2.

“the hard-soft angular music of her Kentucky hills.”¹² Cultural markers such as language and storytelling highlight the affiliative relationships at the basis of individual freedom and identity. Rather than positioning individual and collective rights in conflict, political philosopher Will Kymlicka argues that the US is comprised of multiple societal cultures, each reliant on “shared memories,” “values,” and “common institutions and practices.”¹³ Taylor’s happiness and Turtle’s future security are underpinned by the need to build relationships between these societal cultures, drawing upon the values of the Cherokee nation, Taylor’s Kentucky upbringing, and the legal practices surrounding adoption. Taylor’s identity is reliant upon these connections with other people and practices, conforming to Kymlicka’s assertion that “individual choice is dependent on the presence of a societal culture.”¹⁴

In representing politicised characters whose individual sense of identity is bound to their chosen ethnic and national identities, Kingsolver’s novels find particular resonance with the work of Harvard sociologist Mary Waters. Waters subscribes to the multiculturalist belief that ethnicity is “increasingly a personal choice” which “stems from two contradictory desires in the American character: a quest for community on the one hand and the desire for individuality on the other.”¹⁵ Kingsolver’s female protagonists conform to Waters’ idea of “symbolic ethnicity” as a construct which unites the age-old duality of individual and community, with Taylor’s defiantly individualistic exodus from Kentucky giving way to recognition of the importance of community as she gathers together an alternative family for herself and Turtle. In this

¹² Barbara Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 37. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text as PH.

¹³ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 147.

way, Kingsolver may be said to “test the boundaries” of family while representing it as strangers and social misfits coming together.¹⁶

The idea of ethnicity as an individual choice was developed by Werner Sollors in his exploration of the tension between identities marked by “consent” and “descent,” the former as self-made and emphasising people’s ability to make choices about their destinies and political systems. In contrast, identity based on descent positions people as heirs to ancestral fortunes, with families narrowly defined as relations of “substance,” that is, “by blood or nature.”¹⁷ Consent relations can be described as those of “law” or “marriage,”¹⁸ indicating the possibility of choosing and extending family beyond ethnic lines, as exhibited by Taylor’s legal adoption of Turtle and Alice’s impending marriage to Cash in *Pigs in Heaven*. Taylor’s consensual identity is nuanced by Annawake’s emphasis on the importance of ancestral ties which shape inherited identities and Alice’s cousin Sugar propounds the idea of ethnic identity as a conscious choice, telling Taylor’s mother that “Being Cherokee is more or less a mind-set” (PH 275). In keeping with the tension between consent and descent mapped by Sollors, a Cherokee mind-set within the novel’s framework requires engagement with both the self-made “consent” characteristics, and the inherited connections which shape “descent” identity.

Taylor’s description of her own dislocation from certain myths of America indicates her commitment to a holistic identity based upon interrelatedness with other cultures and the multicultural idea of citizenship. During a discussion with refugee Estevan, for example, she explains her dislocation:

You think you’re the foreigner here, and I’m the American, and I just look the other way while the President or somebody sends down this and that, shiploads of telephones to torture people with. But nobody asked my permission, okay?

¹⁶ Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁷ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Sometimes I feel like I'm a foreigner too. I come from a place that's so different from here you would think you'd stepped right off the map into some other country where they use dirt for decoration and the national pastime is having babies. People don't look the same, talk the same, nothing. Half the time I have no idea what's going on around here. (BT 135)

Taylor's adoption of Turtle and her friendships with refugees fuel her political awakening to articulate her sense of alienation and alternative idea of citizenship. In *The Bean Trees*, marginalised characters are represented through Taylor's narrative as fellow members of the invisible underclass of America. Estevan, for example, works as a dishwasher even though he is a trained teacher, just as Taylor works in a fast food restaurant upon arriving in Tucson despite her medical experience. Kingsolver does not simplistically correlate Taylor's tales of poverty and childhood family breakdown with Esperanza and Estevan's horrific experiences of torture, oppression and the loss of their child. Nonetheless, shared factors inform the shared political values which underpin Taylor's friendships.¹⁹

Even when her custody of Turtle is threatened by the Cherokee community's claim to the child, Taylor recognises the importance of multicultural understanding as she admits that keeping Turtle from her people is "hurting her" (PH 321). This recognition underpins Taylor's realisation that if she "gets separated from the others now, she'll never know how her life is going to come out" (PH 342). Inherent in this belief is what Judith Lichtenberg deems the assertion of "the need for some kind of communal belonging to individual well-being" and Monteith suggests is the

¹⁹ The only exception to these shared values is the character of Mrs Parsons whose racism emerges during a dinner party and serves to strengthen the political alliances between the other members of Taylor's group. Mrs Parsons argues that "the whole world will be here jibbering and jabbering till we won't know it's America" (BT 106), and suggests that immigrants "ought to stay put in their own dirt, not come here taking up jobs" (BT 107). Ironically, given this diatribe on "outsiders," it is Mrs Parsons who makes herself the outsider at Taylor's dinner table.

representation of women's friendship in contemporary American women's fiction as "cementing the political bonds of community" outside of patriarchal structures.²⁰

Crusading protagonists Taylor and Annawake embody these liberal-humanist principles, and their compromise over Turtle's custody represents a pluralistic hope for future understanding in their increased awareness of each other's lives. In this way, their co-operation harnesses the basic elements of liberal thought: "first, a certain conception of the equality of human beings; and second, an emphasis on individual freedom or autonomy." Lichtenberg summarises that other values will be inferred from these basic elements, including "tolerance, respect for individual rights, and pluralism."²¹ Exemplifying liberal nationalism as an ideology, and propounding that "many cultures and ways of life are better than one,"²² Kingsolver's characters in *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* are infused with this open, pluralistic belief on which to base their choices and their actions.

By choosing to forge allegiances with ethnic and political groups, characters in both novels emphasise the need for awareness of global political, social and environmental interrelatedness. They also, however, exhibit the perils of what might be called a populist form of "identity shopping." The character of Barbie in *Pigs in Heaven*, for example, aspires to look like the eponymous doll and resorts to dieting and even theft in order to fit into her chosen "mind-set." The shoppers who buy the trinkets from the Native American craft shop where Cash works in *Pigs in Heaven* also represent the logical conclusion of inclusive rhetoric when taken to extremes: people can pick and choose aspects of ethnic and national identity to try on to suit. These extreme examples also highlight the centrality of media-generated and media-represented issues ensuring

²⁰ Judith Lichtenberg, "How Liberal Can Nationalism Be?" *Philosophical Forum* 28 (1996-97): 11-12. Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?*, 3-18. Kingsolver creates groups of women friends to form these community bonds.

²¹ Lichtenberg, 2-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

political or social awareness. The worrying role models available to young girls, the idealisation of Native Americans as poster children for new age holistic communities, and the social cachet of shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, circle the narratives.

In *Pigs in Heaven*, Taylor and Turtle's fictionalised appearance on the show ultimately forces Taylor to confront her illegal adoption of Turtle. Representing the pair's "real life" experience of saving a man's life, the Oprah show explores the "facts" of their story and positions itself as a transparent purveyor of everyday truths. That the show has showcased the "real life" stories of thousands of Americans underlines its status as a democratic institution. While it is Native American lawyer Annawake Fourkiller who actually challenges Turtle's adoption, the show's role as a forum for confession and revelation precipitates action. *Pigs in Heaven* exposes the strengths and some of the weaknesses of TV talk shows. When Turtle is invited to appear on a show dedicated to children who have saved people's lives, the wardrobe people don't want her to wear her usual overalls. Instead, they lend her an oversized dress that will be pinned to fit. The "secret of TV," Turtle is told, is that "you only have to worry about what shows up front" (PH, 45). However, Annawake recognises the power of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as an informative medium and a catalyst for action that exceeds such shallow implications. Despite her disdain for talk shows in general, Annawake admits that it is Oprah who alerts her to Turtle's illegal adoption.²³ Kingsolver's representation of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in *Pigs in Heaven* posits television as a marketing and promotional medium (from which *The Poisonwood Bible* would later benefit), but also as a source of revelation, action and change.

In writing these popular and commercially successful novels, Kingsolver subverts the polarised (and polarising) representation of "popular issues" to explore the reasons why the public imagination is captured by particular stories, ideas and identities.

²³ Annawake dismisses talk show host Sally Jesse Raphael as "the blonde Puerto Rican" (PH 49).

Kingsolver's characters are defined by the stories and myths of their national and ethnic groups, highlighting the importance of political narratives in the way that Jonathan Culler describes: "We still do not appreciate as fully as we ought the importance of narrative schemes and models in all aspects of our lives."²⁴ While it might seem rather self-aggrandising for a writer to propound the idea of the spectrum of character identities based upon stories, it is a nonetheless pervasive cultural argument. These two novels represent both the trope of the individualistic Western pioneer, through Taylor's westering narrative, and the Native American oral tradition, revealed by Annawake's story of the six pigs in heaven (PH 87). It is not only Kingsolver imagining the stories which define the Native American tribes and Guatemalan refugees in these novels, but also the reader's awareness of popular representations of such groups, which encourages recognition of the parallels with their own political and cultural identity.

The political and cultural experiences of characters such as underground refugee "railroad" co-ordinator Mattie awaken them to the possibility of transracial national identities and transnational political identities. The term transnational is used here to refer specifically to shared political and social empathies across national boundaries. In *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*, transnational themes are explored through the relationships between Estevan and Esperanza and Taylor and Mattie, and the emerging interrelated interests of the Cherokee Nation and the Greer family. These fictional examples of transnational (and transracial) associations offer an optimistic representation of characters who respect the identities of Native Americans and political refugees, while also recognising common political and cultural ground. In a sentiment which neatly underpins Kingsolver's representative politics, Navajo Chief Justice Robert Yazzie states, "If we do not understand each other, if we do not know the culture or the

²⁴ Jonathan Culler, quoted in Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?*, 18.

history of each other, it is difficult to see the value and dignity of each other's societies."²⁵

This pair of novels is underpinned by feminist conceptions of community. In her survey of women's psychological development, Carol Gilligan flags the tendency for women "to think that if only they know others, they will come to know themselves"²⁶ and both *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* seem to bear out this axiom, with Taylor's identity determined in the original novel by her relationships with Turtle and the Tucson community, and in the later novel by her realization of Turtle's need for her tribal family. Nancy Chodorow develops the idea of self-knowledge in her exploration of family configurations, suggesting that the "feminine personality" comes to define itself "in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does."²⁷ This recognition of the value of personal interrelatedness is passed on to Turtle, both by Taylor and by her Native American ancestors who are consistently represented as community-oriented. Community-based individual identity is not distinctive to Kingsolver's fiction, but helps to position her within a Southern tradition, prevalent both in the work of canonical authors including William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, who represent individuals within regional/family communities, and in contemporary contexts in a range of women writers discussed in, for example, Linda Tate's *A Southern Weave of Women: Fiction of the Contemporary South* (1994) and Sharon Monteith's *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (2001). The particular sense of identity that Kingsolver grounds in community is determined not only by Taylor's relationship with Turtle and the Cherokee tribe, but also through her Southern birthplace, with Taylor making reference to her (errant) father being "named after

²⁵ Chief Justice Robert Yazzie, Navajo Nation Supreme Court. Quoted in Lisa Driscoll, *Tribal Courts: New Mexico's Third Judiciary*, 32 N.M.B. Bull. (February 18, 1993): A5.

²⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), xx.

²⁷ Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 43-44.

Stephen Foster,” the man who wrote the Kentucky state song, “My Old Kentucky Home” (BT 5).

Songs, newspaper clippings and other media ephemera are deployed by Kingsolver as prompts towards political awareness from her very first novel and they recur in *Pigs in Heaven*, *Animal Dreams* and *The Poisonwood Bible*. In *The Bean Trees*, Lou Ann feels that she can “prove her point about Mexicans” being valued members of the community in Tucson by sending her Kentucky relatives “clippings from the newspaper when they were promoted to company vice presidents and such” (PH 28). The importance of these clippings as links between characters suggests that family relationships are no longer strong enough to guarantee a shared political or cultural understanding. Instead, there is a need for external media to maintain and build relationships, whether through newspapers, photographs, TV talk shows, or storytelling in all its cultural forms. Adah maintains her relationship with sister Leah in *The Poisonwood Bible* through newspaper clippings which also highlight misconceptions about the Congo. In *Animal Dreams*, the press reporting of the Grace women’s fundraising to fight the pollution of their valley is cited proudly in Codi’s letters to sister Hallie, while in *Pigs in Heaven*, Alice is reunited with her cousin Sugar when she sees her picture in a clipping from *Time Magazine*, thus re-establishing links between their estranged families. This family connection proves fundamental in the custody of Alice’s granddaughter Turtle and allows both Taylor and Alice to live in the Cherokee community of Heaven. However, unlike the newspaper clippings collected by Adah, Codi and Alice, which confirm relationships and shared knowledge, Lou Ann’s clippings in *The Bean Trees* highlight the gulf between her cultural knowledge and stereotypical assumptions made by her family back home. While Kingsolver’s use of news clippings indicates the significance of cultural markers in the formulation of family identity, the trope of maintaining relationships through narrative texts which emerges in *The Bean Trees* is

conveyed more effectively in later novels such as *The Poisonwood Bible*, which elucidates its political message without belittling the understanding of marginalised groups.

In *Pigs in Heaven*, Taylor gains fresh insight into her daughter's character through her photographs, introducing what becomes a motif in Kingsolver's fiction: the manipulated photograph. The narrator describes that Turtle's photos "tend to come out fairly hopeless in terms of composition: cut-off legs or all sky, or sometimes something Taylor never even saw at the time" (10). This use of media to open up a character's awareness within the novels also illuminates character traits for the reader. Like Homer in *Animal Dreams*, Turtle is predominantly a silent figure, central to the plot and emotional motivations of protagonists Codi Noline and Taylor respectively. Homer and Turtle's odd photographs encourage the viewer to reconsider what an image portrays, emphasising the silent central characters who are effective presences in Kingsolver's novels. Kingsolver's claims to be motivated to write in voices and about issues which have been misrepresented or marginalised confirms this dynamic of absent presences, as reflected by her characters. But while the experiences of Native Americans or of Latin American refugees purportedly act as catalysts for Kingsolver's fiction, in representing Turtle and Esperanza as passive or silent, these characters are only illuminated by the white protagonists' actions. Even in politicised fiction it is difficult to avoid the fact that liberal criticism and fictional deconstruction of oppression inevitably reinforces the centrality of the (white and mainstream) author.

The centrality of the author is also confirmed by the legal parallels which Kingsolver's novel draws upon in order to fuse fact and fiction for political and narrative ends. By foregrounding these legal parallels, Kingsolver highlights the political authority of her texts in keeping with her strategy of raising awareness of her chosen issues amongst her

broad readership.²⁸ In the acknowledgments to *Pigs in Heaven*, Kingsolver notes that, “The legal dispute described in *Pigs in Heaven* is not based on a single case history, but was constructed from the materials of existing law and historical fact, insofar as I understand them.” Against the backdrop of the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act (hereafter referred to as ICWA), there are five pivotal parallel cases which *Pigs in Heaven* explores and which must inevitably have formed part of Kingsolver’s research into Native American adoption, while others occurred after the novels’ publication, seeming, therefore, to illustrate the “accuracy” of her interpretations of the ICWA. In order to examine the effectiveness of Kingsolver’s technique of grounding her fiction in factual historical and legal contexts, it is useful to outline the intersections between the ICWA and *Pigs in Heaven*.

The ICWA was introduced to try to protect tribes from the unwanted removal of Indian children by state and federal agencies, in reaction to studies undertaken by the Association on American Indian Affairs in 1969 and 1974 which showed that approximately 25-35 per cent of all Indian children were “separated from their families and placed in foster homes, adoptive homes, or institutions.”²⁹ It sought to help preserve tribal integrity and culture by ensuring tribal governments a strong voice in child custody proceedings, irrespective of whether they occurred on reservations.

Opening with a quotation from *Pigs in Heaven* which asks whether “skin colour talk[s] louder than words?”³⁰ Cynthia Hawkins-León’s article about the ICWA details the ways it has been circumvented. The “existing Indian family exception” is particularly relevant in Turtle’s case, which highlights both the legal position and Taylor’s non-biological, maternal connection to Turtle. While the resolution of Kingsolver’s adoption

²⁸ Even short, popular reviews of the novel gesture towards this legal interaction. For example, see Sabrina Eaton, “Adoption Caught Up in Tribal Rights,” *The Plain Dealer* (July 2, 1995): 1A.

²⁹ William Byler, “The Destruction of American Indian Families,” in *The Destruction of American Indian Families*, ed. Steven Ungar (New York: Association on American Indian Affairs, 1977), 1.

³⁰ Cynthia G. Hawkins-León, “The Indian Child Welfare Act and the African American Tribe: Facing the Adoption Crisis,” *Brandeis Journal of Family Law* 36 (Spring 1997): 201.

narrative seems to hinge on such emotional and moral connections, the legal exceptions outlined by Hawkins-León offer the factual basis for Annawake's compromise solution to Turtle's custody. Under the existing family exception, "the ICWA has been held to apply only to family situations where the child is removed from existing Native American family, home, or culture."³¹ This exception applies to Turtle, who is not directly removed from her Native American home. Turtle's case also conforms to the other successful exceptions, showing that "(1) the child is in the custody of a non-Native American mother; (2) the child is not being removed from the custody of a Native American parent" and in sharing custody between Taylor and her grandfather on the reservation, "(3) the child is not being removed from a Native American cultural environment."³² In this way Kingsolver may be seen to follow closely ICWA standards and expectations.

The Supreme Court of South Dakota first embraced the "existing Indian family doctrine" in the 1987 case of *Claymore v. Serr*, requiring that significant Indian cultural ties be shown to exist between the family and the Indian tribe before the ICWA is applied.³³ The court ruled that "the jurisdictional provisions require a finding that the child subject to the custody proceeding is a member of an existing Indian family."³⁴ Later cases, like the 1990 case of *In re Crystal K* contrastingly rejected the existing Indian family exception.³⁵ The contradictory applications of the ICWA highlight the legal ambiguity in applying the act which allows both the Cherokee Nation and Taylor to have a genuine legal claim to Turtle in Kingsolver's fictionalisation of a custody case.

Legal scholars have recommended that tribal recognition procedures need to be shortened to enhance the powers of the ICWA; a claim that applies not only to the

³¹ Ibid., 206.

³² Ibid. See also *In re Adoption of D.M.J.*, 741 P.2d 1386, 1389 (Okla. 1985).

³³ State of South Dakota Office of the Governor, "Indian Child Welfare Act Commission Report," State of South Dakota, <http://www.state.sd.us/oia/files/report.pdf> (accessed December 30, 2006).

³⁴ *In re Claymore v. Serr*, 405 N.W.2d 650 (S.D. 1987)

³⁵ *In re Crystal K*, 226 Cal. App. 655, 276 Cal. Rptr. 619 (1990).

number of tribes recognised by the courts, but also to the enrolment of people within these tribes.³⁶ That Taylor and Alice both turn out to have a claim to Cherokee heritage works conveniently in the Greers' claim to custody of Turtle: residing with Taylor she may still be deemed to be within the tribe. Alice's reluctance to exploit this legal loophole when she has previously had no cultural link with the Cherokee tribe is conveniently overcome by her genuine respect for and involvement in the Native American community of Heaven. By shaping her fiction to mirror the vagaries of legal discourse, Kingsolver highlights the research which underpins the novel, and the respect for its subject matter implied by such detailed contextual parallels.

In the 1989 case of the *Mississippi Band of Choctaw v. Holyfield*, the Supreme Court articulated five principles governing domicile determinations, including the principle that "a tribal member cannot waive a tribe's jurisdiction by giving birth and executing a consent for adoption off the reservation."³⁷ In the novel, Annawake calls upon this same principle, which prioritises the tribe's wishes over that of the individual mother, in initially arguing against the legality of Taylor's adoption of Turtle. In keeping with Annawake's pursuit of Turtle's custody case on behalf of the Cherokee, the 2002 *Matter of Adoption of Holloway* similarly enacted the jurisdictional provisions of ICWA. It ruled that, "Congress intended that as a general principle, Indian tribes should have authority to determine custody issues involving Indian children."³⁸ In my reading,

³⁶ "Without tribal recognition a tribe has no rights in the California Court system. Without those rights there is no tribal enrolment so there is no 'Indian child' as defined in the ICWA. In order for this act to come to the full benefits that Congress meant it to have, the tribal recognition procedures will have to be shortened and more tribes that have not existed for hundreds of years will have to be allowed to be tribes again" Vicki O'Brian, "The Indian Child Welfare Act and How It Affects Dependency Proceedings in the State of California," *Palomar College Scholarship Essays* (Spring 2003) <http://www.palomar.edu/legal/scholar.htm> (accessed December 30, 2006).

³⁷ This is the defined outcome in *Mississippi Band of Choctaw v. Holyfield*, 490 U.S. 30 (1989), according to the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, "Indian Child Welfare Manual - Definitions," Washington State Department, http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/ca/pubs/manuals_ICWDefs.asp (accessed December 30, 2006)

³⁸ The *Matter of Adoption of Holloway*, as cited in the court records for South Dakota Supreme Court South Dakota Unified Judicial System, "In Interest of J.L., Minor Child 2002 SD 144," Unified Judicial System,

Kingsolver deploys this legal material to underline the legitimacy of her novel as a political text and the accuracy of her representations of Native American characters.

The American Academy of Adoption Attorneys argues that “it is unreasonable to remedy any purported breach of a biological parent’s rights by curtailing the fundamental rights of the child.”³⁹ The AAAA cite *In re Bridget R*’s ruling that in situations where “children’s and parents’ rights conflict,” the legal system “traditionally protects the child.”⁴⁰ They also note that, “The California court ruled that some kind of custody or guardianship hearing even may be constitutionally compelled in the wake of a failed adoption,” just as Annawake insists in Turtle’s case in *Pigs in Heaven*. *In re Bridget R* also ruled that the child’s interests, having been deemed paramount, include

maintaining familial ties with prospective adoptive families with whom they have been previously placed...[and] protection against precipitous or traumatic removal from an existing custodial environment without inquiry into whether the removal would be detrimental to the child, whether some less detrimental alternative is available, and whether removal and “return” to a birth parent is justified by a competing and equally compelling constitutional interest.⁴¹

Attempting to be inclusive by representing the voice of the tribe in a debate which is often imagined in popular culture only in terms of the adoptive mother, certain passages of heavy-handed didacticism in *Pigs in Heaven* sometimes fail to convince. Annawake and Taylor’s initial meeting, for example, reveals their opposing perspectives, with a cornered Taylor asking how taking her daughter away can possibly be in her “best interest” to which the lawyer responds, “How can you think it’s good for a tribe to lose its children!” (PH 76). This showdown and Annawake’s subsequent discussion with an abandoned Jax, however, offer a more effective articulation of the complexities of

<http://www.sjudicial.com/index.asp?category=opinions&nav=53711&year=2002&month=11&record=1051> (accessed November 11, 2006).

³⁹ American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, “Children’s Rights,” AAAA, http://www.adoptionattorneys.org/information/children_rights.htm (accessed November 11, 2008).

⁴⁰ *In re Bridget R* 49 Cal.Rptr.2d 507 (Cal. App. 1996), review denied Cal. Sup. Ct. (1996), as cited by AAAA, http://www.adoptionattorneys.org/information/children_rights.htm (accessed November 11, 2008).

⁴¹ Ibid.

Native American adoption than the contrived compromise which concludes the novel. With Cash and Taylor agreeing to joint custody, even Turtle's name is democratically shared as she keeps the forename Turtle from the Greer side, and adopts the surname Stillwater from her Native American family. The unwieldy and implausible union of opposing viewpoints is made manifest when Kingsolver's characters end up sharing Turtle's custody because of the perceived best interests of the child. Ironically, the best interests of the child are a legal premise that the ICWA actually sought to overturn in favour of tribal integrity. As such, even though Annawake argues for the cultural role of the community as a basis for individual Native American identity, the convenient resolution of Turtle's custody on the grounds of the child's best interests benefits the individual, Taylor, and the community only by proxy.

In addition to this selective inclusion of the tribal point of view in the novel, the prioritising of the individual is also emphasised by the personal stake of tribal representative Annawake Fourkiller in Turtle's case, bringing the discussion back to the more comfortable clash of individual interests. While Annawake is presented as an attorney, her Native American status and "personal stake in the issue" are foregrounded as motivating her battle to revisit the case of Turtle's legal custody.⁴² Annawake's firsthand experience of the workings of the legal system combines with her personal experience of the loss incurred by Native American communities through adoption, making her an authoritative figure. Not only does she embody Kingsolver's fusion of the political with the personal, but her actions are the catalyst for both Taylor and Alice's narratives.

The personalising of Annawake's legal pursuit of Taylor, with her emotive references to her twin brother Gabriel who was "stolen from the family" through adoption (PH 60), justifies her pro-community position in individualistic terms. This

⁴² Shapiro, 61.

balancing act between “authentic” personal detail and “authentic” tribal status suggests that it is possible to accommodate both community and individual viewpoints in the novel. Annawake’s emerging desire to find a compromise which allows Taylor to remain as Turtle’s mother marks Kingsolver’s suggestion that a harmonious solution to such custody battles is possible – and not only in the socially symbolic world of the novel.

Pigs in Heaven does not only draw upon twentieth-century legal precedents, but also makes reference to the historical treatment of Native Americans by the US government. The novel refers specifically to the paternal and economic justification for adopting Native American children off reservation and the Indian Removal Act of 1830. In justifying the tribe’s need for children such as Turtle, for example, Annawake likens events such as the Trail of Tears to the Holocaust, arguing for a parallel need to “keep what’s left of our family together” (PH 281). As Christine Meteer notes in her legal analysis of the novel, Annawake “explains the need to keep the Cherokee child, Turtle, with the tribe by recounting the history of abuse particular to the Cherokees.”⁴³ While Annawake’s crusade to reclaim Turtle for the tribe is thus allied to cultural instinct and the rectifying of historical wrongs, Taylor’s claim on the child refers to legal exceptions to the ICWA and to her biological instinct.

Meteer’s analysis of *Pigs in Heaven* reduces the novel to a binary exploration of the individual versus the tribe, suggesting that “Kingsolver’s central metaphor” for “Indian-ness” is “the stomp dance.” Meteer posits that this ceremony teaches Alice, and by extension the reader, the difference “between the Indian and white world views” and the “sense of the tribe as community that underlies each member’s individual perspective.”⁴⁴ While the stomp dance and Alice’s awakening to the powerful feeling of belonging are important motifs in Kingsolver’s representation of Native Americans,

⁴³ Christine Meteer, “*Pigs in Heaven*: A Parable of Native American Adoption under the Indian Child Welfare Act,” *Arizona State Law Journal* 28.2 (1996): 596.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 614.

instead of teaching Alice and the reader that Indian and white world views are “necessarily different,” rather *Pigs in Heaven* contrives the possibility of uniting tribal and individual interests by highlighting the individual’s biological commitment to community and family.

In a telling scene while watching a coyote destroy a bird’s nest to eat the eggs, Taylor notes that, “The predator seems to be doing only what she has to do. In natural systems there is no guilt or virtue, only success or failure, measured by survival and nothing more” (PH 180). It is a parable which justifies her own flight from Annawake as a way of securing her family’s survival. Using an ecological metaphor to explain her character’s behaviour reflects Kingsolver’s own scientific background and her representation of Taylor as biologically compelled to act in Turtle’s best interest despite being the adoptive mother.⁴⁵ Representing Taylor’s actions as maternal instinct and anchoring the tribal viewpoint in Annawake’s personal story helps to explain how *Pigs in Heaven* reaches a broad readership; Kingsolver draws attention to debates surrounding Native American adoption but also those which define and discuss family.

In her analysis of American adoption, Barbara Melosh charts the history of “transracial adoption,” defined as “adoption across racial boundaries,”⁴⁶ and details how some white adopters “saw in their interracial families a hopeful harbinger of an imagined future” which came to be viewed by critics as “galling examples of white arrogance.”⁴⁷ *The Bean Trees* could be seen to exhibit just such arrogance, with its representation of Taylor as the white saviour to an abused Native American child. Melosh notes the shift in

⁴⁵ Kingsolver often uses coyotes in her fiction as the basis of political and emotional metaphors. The chapters on *Prodigal Summer* and *Animal Dreams* analyse the effect of this technique.

⁴⁶ Barbara Melosh, *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 158.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 159. My understanding of the debate surrounding transracial adoption in the US has also been informed by Peter Hayes, “The Ideological Attack on Transracial Adoption in the USA and Britain,” *International Journal of Law and the Family* 9 (1995): 1-22.

emphasis in Kingsolver's second Taylor Greer novel, confirmed by the author's claim of rectifying her earlier naïve representation. Melosh offers a reading of *Pigs in Heaven* alongside *Losing Isaiah* by Seth Margolis and *Indian Killer* by Sherman Alexie. Despite criticizing Kingsolver for "shamelessly" resorting to the "classic ending of a comedy: a marriage"⁴⁸ in order to contrive a balanced ending, Melosh suggests that these three novels all "refuse the prevailing media frame that poses transracial adoption as a struggle between colorblind individualism and a communally minded nationalism."⁴⁹ Kingsolver makes it clear that she writes against this media frame as she claims always to write about how to "*balance* community and autonomy."⁵⁰

The issue of adoption is particularly suited to Kingsolver's agenda of writing about difference by advocating political and cultural interrelatedness. Kingsolver's attempt to represent something of the diversity of American society in her fiction resonates with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s advocating amidst the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s of "a conversation among different voices."⁵¹ It also parallels the attempts noted by literary critic Marianne Novy of "many transcultural adopters" to "learn from and celebrate the culture of their child's birth parents."⁵² In agreeing to share custody of Turtle, Kingsolver's Taylor appears to have learnt what Annawake proclaims to be a central tenet of Cherokee culture; "Our children are our future" (PH 338).

Novy's analysis of the effects of adoption on individual identity formation offers an interesting insight into Kingsolver's two narratives of adoption and the idea in the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 190.

⁵⁰ Elisabeth L. Beattie, "Barbara Kingsolver Interview," in *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*, edited by Elisabeth L. Beattie (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 170. For detailed analysis of adoption narratives, focusing on trauma and identity rather than on the legal implications as this chapter does, see Margaret Homans, "Adoption Narratives, Trauma and Origins," *Narrative* 14.1 (2006): 4-26.

⁵¹ Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 175.

⁵² Marianne Novy, ed. *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 8.

intervening text, *Animal Dreams*, of reclaiming a lost familial past and reconnecting with family for the future. Novy notes that such reclamation is “not unique to adoptees.”⁵³ *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* confirm this, with Taylor’s own family connections shaping her identity. Both novels also embrace the possibility of exploring alternative notions of family afforded by the representation of adoption, with both novels including affiliative notions of family. Novy argues that representing adoption is “a way of thinking about the family, exploring what a family is,” while also “thinking about the self” and “exploring distance from the family.”⁵⁴ Such representations emerge through Taylor’s creation of an alternative with her politically like-minded friends in *The Bean Trees* to the traditional notion of biological family, and through the balancing of tribal and individual viewpoints authenticated by legal parallels in *Pigs in Heaven*.

The standard of living which makes a person fit to raise a child is central to debates surrounding the adoption of Native American children outside the tribe. *The Bean Trees* exposes a parallel prejudice against white and Native American poverty, with Lou Ann’s Kentucky grandmother accusing the young mother of “persuadin’ the baby” to look down on his roots (BT 57). In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor’s community of friends are babysitters, medical advisors, and confidants, and obscure the relative financial poverty of her situation. Taylor’s realisation that she cannot bring up a child alone indicates that a community is needed to raise a child, rather than a nuclear family.

It is only in *Pigs in Heaven*, when the reader sees Taylor’s home through Annawake’s eyes, that the social view of her economic status is highlighted in reference to her child-rearing ability. In this second novel, the necessity of community is again signalled as the antidote to criticism of parental poverty, in direct reference to one of the reasons why the ICWA was deemed necessary. Prior to 1978, adoption law judged poor Native American parents by a white middle-class standard which failed to account for

⁵³ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2.

the community's contribution to raising a child. In *Pigs in Heaven*, Taylor's own experience of poverty when she goes into hiding is highlighted by Annawake as helpful to the tribe's case to reclaim the child. The Cherokee lawyer notices that "the house is truly run-down by social service standards, worse than some things she's seen in the Cherokee nation, and accepts that this could be used to her advantage" (PH 80). In representing Taylor's poverty as a possible drawback in her claim for custody of Turtle, even as Taylor is depicted as a loving mother figure, Kingsolver exposes the limitations of a socio-cultural system which judges parenting skills by economic status.

Unlike the poverty Annawake describes in the Cherokee Nation, Taylor *chooses* to leave a good job and stable life in Kentucky to settle in Tucson in *The Bean Trees* – just as she chooses to leave her self-made community in *Pigs in Heaven* to live a desperately poor life on the road, marginalised by mainstream society in her attempt to keep Turtle. Her narrative is directly contrasted with Alice's, which describes the ways in which the *unchosen* economic poverty of the Native American residents of Heaven is eased by their strong sense of community. The Native American tribe as the epitome of community is exemplified by both the experiences of Codi in *Animal Dreams* and of Alice in *Pigs in Heaven*, who are each invited to watch and participate in tribal rituals. Attending a Stomp Dance at the invitation of her cousin Sugar, Alice feels "completely included" (PH 271). This representation of a cultural ceremony of inclusion encourages reader empathy with Native American communities and underpins the novel's commercial appeal.

In representing the heroic in the seemingly mundane lives of working mothers, these paired novels augment the depictions of Taylor's economically and socially marginalised existence through her association with broader issues of foreign policy and cultural oppression. In *The Bean Trees*, for example, Mattie's underground refugee "railroad" offers asylum to victims of political persecution both in their South American homes and in opposition to US immigration laws when they prove unfair. Images of US

foreign policy recur in Kingsolver's work, with *Animal Dreams* detailing Hallie's experiences of US influence in Nicaragua, and *The Poisonwood Bible* exploring the Price women's immersion in the tangled colonialism of a Congo in transition. While *The Bean Trees* makes reference to South American political oppression, however, it overlooks oppression closer to home, presenting Taylor's illegal adoption of Turtle as a victory rather than also a morally ambiguous act.

At the end of *The Bean Trees*, Taylor asks Estevan and Esperanza to pretend to be Turtle's parents in order to secure an adoption certificate, an act which highlights popular perceptions of transracial adoption. The colour of Esperanza's skin ensures the effectiveness of her performance as Turtle's "mother," distraught at giving up her daughter to Taylor but apparently convinced that she cannot afford to care for her. This symbolic performance for the benefit of the adoption office exploits popular conceptions of the economic unsuitability of Native American parents. Estevan and Esperanza's skin colour makes them look "natural" with Turtle even while the scene's transracial adoption is deemed to be in the girl's best interests. In representing the scheme as a charitable act to save a Native American child from want, however, Kingsolver's novel may also be said to parallel the paternal rhetoric which formed the basis for US annexation of Native American communities.

Annawake and Taylor's discussions about the custody of Turtle encourage the reader to recognise that adoption establishes a parental relationship that is not genetic and which Novy argues "forces either a redefinition of parenthood or the definition of adoption as a pretense or fiction."⁵⁵ Albeit for different reasons, Annawake and Taylor agree with the need for social and cultural "families" as well as biological relationships when raising a child, in keeping with the Omaha tribe idea that "It takes a whole village

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

to raise a child.”⁵⁶ Both women conceive of these social and cultural families differently, but both of their conceptions function outside the nuclear family of two parents. Annawake argues on behalf of the tribe that family “has always been our highest value” (PH 227), while Taylor’s disastrous experiences on the run with Turtle encourage her to recognise the importance of the home she has made with Jax and her friends in Tucson.

Pigs in Heaven deals explicitly with the colonizing dimensions of adoption, a political nuance flagged by Marianne Novy in her work on the representation of adoption in literature.⁵⁷ Annawake and Taylor’s opposing visions of Turtle’s future facilitate a discussion of the devastating effects of Native American adoption on communities and tribes. The resulting compromise over Turtle’s custody suggests that transracial adoption can consider both the tribe and the adopter and, in so doing, ensure that the adoptee is neither a colonized figure, nor is she lost to the heritage of her biological community. Annawake teaches Taylor that identity is contested; while it emerges from an awareness of context, community and biological origins, it also surpasses all of these factors. Conceding that while Taylor seems to “care about her a lot,” Annawake reminds Taylor that Turtle still “needs her tribe” as there are a lot of things that the white woman cannot provide, including “big things” like “who she is” and “little things, like milk, for instance. I’ll bet she won’t drink milk” (PH 77).

In her redemptive representation of transracial adoption, Kingsolver also shows Taylor and Alice’s “adoption” into the Native American community as awakening a mutual understanding of Turtle’s needs. As Kristina Fagan notes in her analysis of adoption as a national fantasy in Kingsolver’s novel, “One of the most powerful ways to

⁵⁶ Guy A. Zona, *The Soul Would Have No Rainbow If the Eyes Had No Tears, and Other Native American Proverbs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 55. This axiomatic claim is attributed to many other tribes and signifies across different national contexts too.

⁵⁷ Novy, *Imagining Adoption*, 8.

“go Indian” is to be adopted by Native people.”⁵⁸ In portraying the mutual adoption of child and parent, Kingsolver’s novels propose an alternative to the polarization of adoption as “a making of one set of connections and the denial of another set.”⁵⁹ And while *Pigs in Heaven* proposes what Melosh dubs the kind of “creative compromise” that public policy has yet to enact, it also indicates the prospect of transracial families which recognize difference without being limited by it.⁶⁰

Kingsolver subverts the way that adoption has been associated with a “rewriting of history”⁶¹ by contrasting the rewriting of Annawake’s brother Gabriel’s past to exclude him from both his tribal family and his cultural heritage, with the way Turtle’s past is rewritten. In Turtle’s case, this rewriting is presented as potentially positive, specifically as a way to overcome her early trauma of sexual abuse and abandonment. In both cases, Gabriel and Turtle are fantasy spaces upon and through which political and social agendas are projected and explored. Gabriel, while absent from the narrative and denied his own voice, is represented through his sister’s loss. He is a blank canvas, a person lost in a system, and although Annawake talks as though he is dead and says she misses him, she doesn’t visit him in prison. Annawake’s attitude posits Gabriel as effectively lost to the tribe, corrupted by white society.

This is a reversal of the popular western trope which represents Native Americans as the corrupting embodiments of the wilderness. Such a representation is iconically captured in the film *The Searchers* when white girl Debbie is kidnapped by Indians and then condemned by her uncle for having been assimilated and supposedly

⁵⁸ It is just this kind of equivalency which prompted criticism of the novel, with the stakes for adoption being far higher for the Native American adoptee and tribe than for the white characters. Kristina Fagan, “Adoption as National Fantasy in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Pigs in Heaven* and Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*” in *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. Marianne Novy (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 251.

⁵⁹ Novy, *Imagining Adoption*, 10.

⁶⁰ Melosh, 191.

⁶¹ Novy, *Imagining Adoption*, 10.

lost to “savagery.”⁶² Turtle, conversely, embodies a fantasy space for racial reconciliation. Kingsolver’s representation of the happy white adoption of a Cherokee child allows her to reconcile white guilt with a murky history of Native adoption. By manipulating a plot to allow for both tribe and white adoptive mother in Turtle’s life, the girl becomes emblematic of a hopeful transracial national future. Turtle is notably silent; most of the words she utters in *The Bean Trees* are the names of vegetables, limiting her within the imagined realm of earthy Native environmentalism. The naming of plants and vines – Turtle’s vocalization of components of the ecosystem – serves as a trite metaphor for an apparent desire for all the components of her “ecosystem” to be named and present. Collectively, the vegetables and plants Turtle names represent her Southwestern environment, while the family members who populate the narrative (and Turtle’s limited speech) represent her familial environment.

The relationships between the Greer family and the Native American community of Heaven which comprise Turtle’s familial environment find a telling parallel in Eric Kaufmann’s article “Ethnic America.” Kaufmann’s article was written in response to the publication of *Who Are We?: America’s Great Debate* by Harvard politics professor Samuel Huntington, which explores the supposed “threats” to American identity posed by regionally concentrated immigration from Mexico.⁶³ Echoing Kingsolver’s representative self-reflection, Kaufmann suggests that Huntington’s analysis “places the Wasp at the moral centre of the multicultural project, at once the “bland” Other to be transcended and the backdrop against which exotic ethnics can identify themselves.”⁶⁴ In a conclusion which could apply as accurately to Kingsolver’s representation of minorities, Kaufmann argues that, “The notion that the majority should be cosmopolitan while minorities should retain their culture is a patronising elite

⁶² *The Searchers*, dir. John Ford (1959).

⁶³ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We?: America’s Great Debate* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

⁶⁴ Eric Kaufmann, “Ethnic America,” *Prospect Magazine* 100 (July 2004) http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=6167 (accessed September 23, 2007)

Wasp fallacy.”⁶⁵ Kingsolver’s twinned novels do not pose minority cultural influence as a threat to American identity but as a challenge to white American assumptions.

Reviews of *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* explore this challenge to white American assumptions through seemingly disparate metaphors – bean vines, talk shows, the town of Heaven itself – which the critics posit as “central” to the novels’ trajectory and authorial message. Each novel seems to act as a nexus for whichever image or issue interests individual reviewers. Kingsolver’s representation of bean vines as a metaphor for community is recognised in novelist Carolyn See’s review of *The Bean Trees*, which suggests that the supposedly “unimportant” people “might form a sort of counterculture so that...the Bean Trees of America, so to say, might somehow blossom and thrive.”⁶⁶ Christine Metteer links Kingsolver’s construction of a community of “unimportant people” directly to the representation of Native Americans, noting that both novels determine being Indian as “a sense of belonging and a sense of roots” which is “important for a person’s identity and self esteem. It’s who they are.”⁶⁷ These reviews fail, however, to elucidate the key aspect of the bean vines metaphor as a reflection of both community and family as organic, evolving concepts which both define and are defined by the individuals of which they are comprised. The reviewers’ rootsy examples limit the novel’s representation of community to individuals with shared political (and ecological) values, even as they acknowledge Kingsolver’s redefining of family beyond its nuclear borders.

Foregrounding liberal individuals as the basis for communities, families and alternative national identities, *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* adapt the metaphor of the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Carolyn See, “What’s Bad in the World,” *Los Angeles Times* (April 4, 1988): 4.

⁶⁷ Metteer, 622.

rhizobia which sustains the bean vines to refer to the interrelatedness of human characters. Taylor notices that, “There’s a whole invisible system for helping out the plant that you’d never guess was there” and suggests that it is “just the same as with people” (BT 227). Taylor’s political activism and Turtle’s vegetable word games indicate that Kingsolver’s political adherence to community applies from the level of microorganisms to geopolitical relationships.

According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the rhizome is “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system” characterised by connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania.⁶⁸ As they proclaim in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in a sentiment which resonates particularly strongly with the character of Taylor, “Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don’t sow, grow offshoots!”⁶⁹ Rather than choosing biological motherhood, Taylor “grows an offshoot” instead, drawing Turtle into her family. Rather than plant roots, she makes connections wherever she finds herself, whether in Tucson faced with a flat tyre and an empty wallet, or in Heaven faced with an illegitimate adoption. She conforms to the heterogeneity and “decalcomania” prescribed by Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome, connecting with people as different as Barbie and Cash through her associative family, and constantly adapting her life through different alternatives to deal with the threat of losing Turtle.

The rhizome metaphor, however, only goes so far. There is a fundamental disconnect between Deleuze and Guattari’s overarching proposition that heterogeneous connections render individual connections expendable, and Kingsolver’s representation of interdependent individuals rooted in communities. Far from being expendable, the empathetic individual character of Taylor underpins the success of the novels and the transracial connections which shape them. Even the title *The Bean Trees* and the

⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

verification of Turtle's custody afforded by the legal system in *Pigs in Heaven*, emphasises the reliance of both novels on arboreal, hierarchical, connections.

On a different metaphorical tack, citing talk shows as the central metaphor of *Pigs in Heaven*, Merrill Joan Gerber suggests that, "Talk shows have recently made their way to the center of our culture" as both a "reflection of our times" and "a public forum, a judge, a hanging jury." In Gerber's view, the talk show dynamic becomes "a metaphor for the book's structure. On a talk show, people with Big Problems get to tell their stories straight from the heart."⁷⁰ While Taylor's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* posits her as someone with "Big Problems" telling her story "from the heart," her appearance on the show invites Annawake's judgement of Turtle's adoption, and confirms the right to judge of people's personal lives as encouraged by such media. In her discussion of the therapeutic effect of daytime talk shows, Jane M. Shattuc notes the ways that not only the audience but the TV guests themselves are invited to judge their problems and administer "no-nonsense" solutions.⁷¹

Pigs in Heaven makes explicit reference to the cultural prominence of talk shows, with the intersection between the Cherokee Nation and the Greer family initially forged by Turtle's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. And while the novel suggests that talk shows are a reflection of the times, this is not configured as entirely positive. The Greer appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, while apparently indicative of the excesses of democracy and the supposed transparency wrought by visual cultural forms, also exemplifies the polarising and personalising of the political without any thought for the consequences and effects upon either the individual or the culture in question. In talking about her adoption of Turtle on national television, Taylor does not consider the effect on her claim to custody of the child, yet she is later forced to deal with the

⁷⁰ Gerber, 10.

⁷¹ Jane M. Shattuc, *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 116-117.

consequences of her actions. In this way, Kingsolver's readers are privy to the "fallout" of the revelatory talk show format in a way which the talk show itself is not. The novel's "central metaphor" is therefore not the talk show itself, but the role of popular culture in both defining and being defined by particular debates.

Turtle's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in *Pigs in Heaven* is the catalyst for the rest of the narrative and determines to some extent the child's future. The talk show's glorification of the personal as political also echoes Kingsolver's commercially successful narrative exploration of the political as it figures in people's personal lives. However, while the talk show elevates the cultural significance of personal experiences by making claims to its democratic cultural role, Kingsolver's novels glorify the political aspects of her characterisations. It is unrealistic to suggest that the talk show offers a straightforward metaphor for the use of cultural forms as political debating forums, especially given the suggestion by critics such as Shattuc that "the public sphere is set in opposition to the private sphere and therefore produces a not-so-subtle division between masculine and feminine realms" which, in turn, divides the discussion of "serious" politics from the typically "trivial" issues which dominate daytime talk shows.⁷² Kingsolver's novels, however, refuse to conform to the division of serious politics from feminine or private realms and Taylor's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* indicates the possibility of fostering understanding through commercially-popular and politically-driven narratives.

In contrast to Gerber's foregrounding of the talk show, Christine Metteer argues that the "central metaphor" of *Pigs in Heaven* "involves the different views of "Heaven" held by whites and Indians."⁷³ Neither the Oklahoma town of Heaven, nor the imagined redemptive paradise heaven, are represented in religious terms. The name, however, immediately evokes a place of harmony and intersection between different cultures.

⁷² Shattuc, 90.

⁷³ Metteer, 606. See also *Pigs in Heaven*, 155.

Both *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* include eponymous chapters as well as a chapter containing the word Heaven. Each refers back to their own guiding analogy and creation myth, while the overarching metaphor of Heaven is found in both. The Indian story detailed in the eponymous chapter in *Pigs in Heaven* emphasises Kingsolver's appropriation of the Native American oral storytelling tradition, with Annawake telling Taylor the story of six naughty boys who were turned into pigs and sent to the heavens by their mother. The story's contemporary resonance is highlighted by Annawake asking her uncle to tell an updated tale about a "little lost girl whose mother is prepared to give her away, rather than go through any more hassle with Annawake Fourkiller" (PH 330).

Kingsolver's metaphor of Heaven as community is further underlined in the chapter of *The Bean Trees* that is entitled "How They Eat in Heaven." In this chapter, Estevan tells Turtle a "wild *Indian* tale" about people in hell who are dying of starvation because they "only have spoons with very long handles" and cannot "put the food in their mouths" (BT 107-8). He goes on to describe heaven as "a room just like the first one" but filled with people who are "all happy and fat" because they feed each other with these same long handled spoons, illustrating that people can only survive when they work together (BT 108). This parable parallels Kingsolver's later representation of the community of Heaven as a site of collaborative survival in *Pigs in Heaven*.

Metteer's reading of *Pigs in Heaven* suggests that Kingsolver "shows the tribe and its members as an extended family" who all "seem to be related" whether "through marriage or some catastrophe, or frequently both."⁷⁴ This assertion exemplifies the trope of interrelatedness, which recurs in the representation of a community connected through family and environment in *Prodigal Summer*. Kingsolver's novels refute reductive ideas of family by propounding "a new American system" in which "the significance of work in kinship will increase" and genealogy is "only one way of constructing

⁷⁴ Metteer, 615. See also *Pigs in Heaven*, 193.

parenthood.”⁷⁵ While *Pigs in Heaven* seems to elucidate conflict between community and individuals, Turtle’s shared guardianship and the novel’s various metaphors of interdependence privilege a community-based definition for family. In his study of contemporary fiction, Jay Clayton argued for “more tolerance of diverse arrangements for nurturance and mutual aid,”⁷⁶ and Kingsolver not only represents such diverse arrangements in *Pigs in Heaven* but also in the ecologically-grounded communities which recognise the interrelatedness of predators and prey in her later fiction.⁷⁷

Kristina Fagan suggests that Kingsolver’s harmonious conclusion to *Pigs in Heaven*, which sees custody of Turtle being shared by her white and Native American families, enacts the desire to see a nation “that combines and reconciles white and Native peoples.”⁷⁸ In keeping with Kingsolver’s proclamation that she “really wanted to give absolutely equal weight and moral authority to both Taylor’s point of view and the tribe’s,”⁷⁹ Taylor’s potential father in law – Cash Stillwater – is revealed to be Turtle’s grandfather. It is this familial “coincidence” which allows Annawake to unite the needs of the individual with those of the Native American community. The fragility of this harmonious outcome, and its reliance on the good intentions of all parties, is emphasised by the chapter’s title “The Gambling Agenda” (PH 334), which could equally be applied to contrived connections which risk undermining reader empathy. Kingsolver’s commitment to representing families and communities which transcend racial difference is evidenced by her risking even the most unrealistic narrative choices.

⁷⁵ Novy, 11. See also Judith Modell, *Kinship with Strangers: Adoption and Interpretation of Kinship in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 229, 238.

⁷⁶ Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145.

⁷⁷ This tendency is analysed more closely in Chapter 5.

⁷⁸ Fagan, 251.

⁷⁹ Beattie, 170.

It is important to note that these unrealistic narrative choices have not gone unchallenged. Novelist Sherman Alexie claims to have made an impassioned phone call to Kingsolver after reading *Pigs in Heaven*, reminding her, “When you finish writing about Indians, you get up from your typewriter and you’re still white. When I finish, I have to go out and buy groceries, as an Indian.”⁸⁰ Alexie’s outcry touches upon an important slippage in Kingsolver’s novels between the value of research and the possible meanings of ethnic “authenticity.” It is problematic to assume that research affords one the ability to write in another’s voice authentically, particularly when profiting from the evocation of this voice. It is this aspect of Kingsolver’s writing to which Alexie objects, believing Kingsolver benefits “from all things Indian without experiencing any of the pain.”⁸¹ This is not to suggest that authors should only write from within their own lived experience, or that transracial or cross-gender imagination is not possible. Rather, it is important to note how the author’s own identity functions in relation to the voices in which they write. Using a white character to gain empathy for a political shift which benefits Native American communities may be pragmatic, but it risks making questionable claims for equivalent marginal status. *Pigs in Heaven* equates Taylor’s fear of losing Turtle with the experiences of Native Americans who lost their children through their enforced removal. In much the same way, Kingsolver parallels the segregation of African American children defacto if not de jure at her Kentucky school with her own problem of “physically not blending in” as a tall bookish white teenager, which apparently confirmed her identity as “an outcast.”⁸²

When the critical reactions of Native American writers such as Sherman Alexie encouraged Kingsolver to re-examine her representation of Native American adoption in *The Bean Trees*, she claims to have written *Pigs in Heaven* in response. She told an

⁸⁰ Timothy Egan, “An Indian Without Reservations,” *The New York Times Magazine* (January 18, 1998): 18.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Robin Epstein, “The Progressive Interview: Barbara Kingsolver,” *The Progressive* (February 1996): 34.

interviewer that she had an “obligation” to “deal with the issue” of representing the tribe’s point of view “because the moral question was completely ignored in the first book.”⁸³ Suggesting that she was compelled to write by and with a sense of civic responsibility to recognise cultures, voices and communities other than her own, Kingsolver can nonetheless only show what *she* understands by balance and inclusivity. In a statement which seems designed to pre-empt future accusations of cultural ignorance, Kingsolver posits that, “Other people would tell this story differently, and none of them would be wrong” (PH, Acknowledgments). While such a proviso indicates the author’s understanding of the necessary multiplicity of viewpoints on a subject, it cannot absolve Kingsolver of responsibility for the narrative she creates.

In writing about the treatment of the environment or Native American tribes, Kingsolver’s political message is the focus, and her characters are the symbolic figures in her parables. As feminist critic Elizabeth Spelman suggests, “Those of us with privilege may find it very handy to parlay our embarrassment at having it into a prodigious preoccupation with revealing and exterminating it...We make our sins the most interesting and pressing thing to talk about: so we are still center stage.”⁸⁴ Or, as the Hopi tribe might state in pithily axiomatic terms, “The one who tells the stories rules the world.”⁸⁵ Kingsolver, a white, middle-class author, “rules the world” of her novels, and at times marginalises the very voices she claims to want to represent. A.LaVonne Brown Ruoff sums up this common frustration with Kingsolver when she suggests that she “sees Indians as objects, as backdrop. They’re there for local color...But they’re not real people.”⁸⁶ Alexie too, in an echo of Spelman, asserts that certain white novelists

⁸³ Lynn Karpen, “The Role of Poverty,” *The New York Times* (June 27, 1993): A9.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: The Women’s Press, 1990), 5.

⁸⁵ Zona, 90.

⁸⁶ Sarah Kerr, “The Novel as Indictment,” *New York Times Magazine* (October 11, 1998): 52.

“somehow believe that their art lifts them above the politics of their race.”⁸⁷ A firm spokesman for recognising the history of ethnic and racial difference in the US, Alexie suggests that Kingsolver’s texts could end up embodying “the expert by proxy” for liberals wishing to learn about Native Americans.⁸⁸

Combined with her use of real cultural figures such as Oprah Winfrey and legal facts including the details of the Indian Child and Welfare Act, which lend an air of “authenticity” to her narratives, *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* exemplify the tropes and tensions that will go on to shape Kingsolver’s later fiction. Their depictions of community and family prefigure Kingsolver’s emerging strategy of engaging reader empathy by grounding individuals within the context of community and history. The self-consciously proclaimed differences between *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* indicate that Kingsolver is writing her way towards answers, not only in terms of fostering popular understanding of political issues she believes matter, but also in determining the intention and effect of her own political agenda. As the Sauk proverb states, and Kingsolver’s subsequent development of her own didactic style affirms, “Teachers not only teach, but they also learn.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Cynthia Oi, “Man and Myth: Acclaimed author Sherman Alexie aims to kill the myths surrounding Native Americans,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* (January 18, 2000), <http://starbulletin.com/2000/01/18/features/story1.html> (accessed April 21, 2007)

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Zona, 120.

CHAPTER 3

Locating “Ground Orientation” in *Animal Dreams*

In *Animal Dreams*, Codi Noline confides: “I was getting a dim comprehension of the difference between Hallie and me. It wasn’t a matter of courage or dreams, but something a whole lot simpler. A pilot would call it ground orientation. I’d spent a long time circling above the clouds, looking for life, while Hallie was living it.”¹ Codi’s realisation that her sister Hallie’s active political engagement secures the “ground orientation” which she herself craves exemplifies the political values at the heart of Kingsolver’s 1990 novel *Animal Dreams*. In Codi’s descriptions, Hallie is loved by all who meet her; she has a clear memory of her past, and is an asset to the translocal communities of which she is a member. She houses political refugees in Tucson, works on a farm in Nicaragua, and her letters make her a constant presence in Codi’s Arizona life. For a self-confessed “home-ignorant” Codi (AD 77), Hallie’s “ground orientation” is a sense of belonging to a political, environmental, and cultural community.²

Developing this thesis’ analysis of Kingsolver’s political strategy of appealing to a popular readership in order to raise awareness of her chosen issues, this chapter explores the author’s translation of abstract political rhetoric into beguiling prose and the voices of “ordinary” characters such as schoolteacher Codi and the various communities that mark her work: liberal, feminist, and environmentalist. Exploring the representation of community, memory and belonging in *Animal Dreams* in the light of Kingsolver’s professed compulsion to write her way towards answering political

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 1. Subsequent references to *Animal Dreams* in this chapter will appear in parentheses as AD.

² While this chapter details various environmental themes alongside political and cultural factors in its discussion of Kingsolver’s concept of “ground orientation,” Henry Aay reads *Animal Dreams* primarily as a work of ecofiction. “Environmental Themes in Ecofiction: *In the Center of the Nation* and *Animal Dreams*.” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 14.2 (1994): 65-85.

questions, this chapter analyses the novel's narrative technique and tropes as indicated by her non-fiction book *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*.

Kingsolver's non-fiction is mirrored and complemented by her politically-nuanced fiction. Her political values are evident across all of her fiction, but this interchange is especially evident in Arizona-set *Holding the Line* and *Animal Dreams*. *Holding the Line* was Kingsolver's first book, emerging out of her journalistic coverage of female strikers involved in the Phelps Dodge conflict between 1983-4. Charting the events of this bitter industrial dispute through the stories of the female residents of Clifton, Morenci, Ajo and Douglas, *Holding the Line* opens with an epigraph by union organiser Mother (Mary Harris) Jones, which proclaims, "No nation is greater than its women."³ Jones' statement is a fitting opening for a work which represents the experiences of ordinary women as changed by a national political wake-up call.⁴

Animal Dreams revisits the same Arizona mining country with its depiction of the fictional town of Grace, as it faces the economic and environmental threat posed by an unnamed mining corporation in 1985-6. The novel's perspective alternates between that of returning local Codi and the third-person narrative of her ailing father Homer. Taking a job teaching biology at her former high school, Codi moves into a small house in her old friend Emelina's back yard and re-immerses herself in the community while facing up to uncomfortable memories of a teenage miscarriage and her mother's death. Together with a group of local women, Codi helps Grace fight the pollution of its water supply. Codi's community loyalty and political awakening to environmentalism coincides

³ Barbara Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), v. Subsequent references to *Holding the Line* in this chapter will appear in parentheses as HTL.

⁴ S. Keith Graham highlights this political role for Kingsolver's fiction in "Eco-feminist' Author Relishes Political Role." *Atlanta Journal Constitution* (September 21, 1990): C1, C6. Patti Capel Swartz also considers the political dimensions of the novel, going so far as to suggest that Kingsolver's fiction is "subversive" and comparing her to writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman who call for social change. "Saving Grace': Political and Environmental Issues and the Role of Connections in Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*." *Isle* 1.1 (Spring 1993): 65-79.

with her romantic involvement with Loyd Peregrina, a Native American environmentalist and her high school sweetheart.⁵

While these plot facts dominate the marketing of a book which Kingsolver's website describes as a "suspenseful love story" and a "moving exploration of life's largest commitments,"⁶ such details fail to reveal fully the central themes and dynamics which shape the novel. *Animal Dreams*' interrelated and sometimes absent characters draw parallels with other novels, as well as the non-fiction book *Holding the Line*. Unpacking the links between Kingsolver's fiction and self-authored factual intertexts is fundamental to understanding not only *Animal Dreams* but Kingsolver's broader literary approach. This chapter's investigation of "ground orientation" will therefore address *Animal Dreams*' thematic exploration of belonging through community and memory while examining the defining structural and intertextual techniques which shape her narrative style. Kingsolver's interpellation of *Holding the Line* in *Animal Dreams* speaks to her negotiation of history and memory through the distinctive preoccupation with "ground orientation."

The novel marks the emergence of Kingsolver's trademark blurring of fact and fiction, inter- and intra-textual narratives, and interrelated characters. In *Animal Dreams*, these techniques direct Codi's political and environmental search for "ground orientation," and re-emerge in all of Kingsolver's subsequent fictions, marking the author's political agenda. Central to "ground orientation" is the idea of interrelatedness, explored in the introduction to this study and emphasised in Chapter One, and based on

⁵ While I suggest that Loyd is a romanticised figure who elicits reader engagement with his environmentalist rhetoric, Greta Gaard analyses this tendency to romanticise Native American culture as specifically ecofeminist. See "Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures: Pushing the Limits of Cultural Imperialism," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 295-314.

⁶ Harper Collins. "Biography." *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*. http://www.kingsolver.com/bookshelf/animal_dreams.asp (accessed December 12, 2004).

an awareness of the past, of contemporary global concerns – and the ground beneath our feet.⁷

This chapter employs a historicist perspective which, as Fredric Jameson suggests, makes our readings of the past “vitally dependent on our experience of the present.”⁸ In keeping with Jameson’s recognition of the importance of the contemporary in our understanding and representation of the past, Kingsolver’s post-1992 fiction informs my analysis of *Animal Dreams*, much as Codi’s adult experiences shape her representation of childhood memories. This thesis suggests that Kingsolver’s work not only embraces but also itself represents Jameson’s emphasis on contemporary context, inscribing readings of the past with the politics of the present. *Holding the Line* and *Animal Dreams* both developed out of Kingsolver’s journalistic assignment to cover the Phelps Dodge strike in 1983, and are shaped by the political context in which they were written. Just as my reading of Kingsolver’s work is informed by the contemporary academic and political context, so Kingsolver’s representations of 1980s Arizona cannot be divorced from the moment in which they were written. While the context of Kingsolver’s writing informs her representations of the past, her work also incorporates a chronological emphasis on past events shaping actions and perceptions in the present. Her representation of the political struggles facing mining communities over twenty years ago is not only shaped by the present, but also informs new readers about the history that underpins current struggles. While this symbiotic relationship between past and present is particularly evident in *Holding the Line* and *Animal Dreams*, it also contributes to the maxim of interrelatedness that this thesis posits as fundamental to the

⁷ Vicky Newman’s reading of *Animal Dreams* details the necessity of critically reading our histories with the agenda of revealing the importance of the role of teacher, which I only address in terms of Codi’s activism and Kingsolver’s didacticism rather than broader educational policy, as Newman does. “Compelling Ties: Landscape, Community, and Sense of Place.” *Peabody Journal of Education* 70.4 (1995): 105-119.

⁸ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1981), 11.

ability of Kingsolver's political and popular fiction to raise awareness of the author's chosen issues.

The continuities between Kingsolver's political stance in *Holding the Line* and in *Animal Dreams* are many and varied and I will unpack these parallels in this section. Key themes overlap, including the so-called "ordinary" lives of women, isolated communities, sibling relationships, and personal narratives of broader political conflicts. *Holding the Line* uses personal stories and industrial history to explore a precise political moment and *Animal Dreams* similarly uses personal stories to gesture towards political issues. In both works, Kingsolver focuses on the community-affirming possibilities of political action – whether striking against working conditions and for better pay, or mobilising public opinion to fight pollution. Both narratives may be read as railing against representative blindspots in public knowledge. Codi tries to educate the people she meets about issues as diverse as American intervention in Nicaragua, and the pollution of Grace's water supply. In *Holding the Line*, Kingsolver's agenda is more specific, exposing the domination of community in a company town by exploring a single incident in women's labour history.

Each new chapter of *Holding the Line* takes its title from a quotation in the final paragraph of the previous chapter. This suggests that although the chapters explore distinct ideas and stories, they build cumulatively and are held together by both the structure of the book and the community. Such explicit linking of chapters, and therefore of issues and characters, is developed further in *Animal Dreams*, which weaves chapters together through Codi and Homer's shared memories and experiences. Chapters and characters are anchored to the past and to each other through the novel's

exploration of “ground orientation,” as echoed in Kingsolver’s twinned text. *Holding the Line* and *Animal Dreams* exhibit alternative approaches to the context of their shared origins, in much the same way as sisters Codi and Hallie.

Codi suggests that the distance of a pilot from earth is an analogy for the “ground orientation” needed to locate a community within its environmental, as well as political and familial, contexts. The word “orientation” itself suggests a process of continual negotiation, reappraisal and analysis, rather than a fixed acceptance of how community is defined. Codi’s search for “ground orientation” is structured by memories and predicated on an understanding of self and community. While Hallie leaves her comfortable life in Tucson for a Nicaraguan farm and Codi leaves her boyfriend Carlo to return to Grace, Codi suggests that by immersing themselves in translocal communities, the sisters are “both headed home” (8). This dual awareness of self and community is further exemplified in the chapter entitled “Ground Orientation,” which contains Codi’s idealised description of Loyd’s environmental awareness and of his family’s participation in the traditions of their Pueblo community. Community is reliant upon the bonds of family in both *Animal Dreams* and *Holding the Line*. The closeness of Kingsolver’s pairs of siblings includes a biological instinct to protect each other and, as with her twinned texts, relationships are strengthened by shared experiences. Loyd says that he and Leander were “One boy in two skins,” to which Codi replies, “Hallie and I feel that way sometimes” (AD 207). Parallel sibling relationships mirror the macropolitical elements of the plot. Leander’s alcoholism and his dislocation from family following his parents’ separation gesture towards some of the larger social problems facing Native American communities. More effectively, Codi’s love for Loyd necessitates her understanding of Pueblo traditions and Hallie’s letters from a collective farm in Nicaragua expand her sister Codi’s awareness of international politics.

The value of the individual as part of a wider community is elevated in both Kingsolver's fiction and non-fiction. No individual endeavour is presented in isolation from its effect on the wider group, and vice versa. Codi's water project with her biology pupils, for example, reveals pollution which affects the whole valley and results in a community campaign. In turn, the Grace women's publicizing of the need to save the water supply allows Codi to learn the truth about her mother's death and her own family's connections to the town. The limitations and possible strengths of the novel's interwoven thematic and structural imperative of "ground orientation" are revealed by Codi and Homer's contrasting yet interdependent narratives, which explore their individual and collective identities through a combination of memories, some of which are more grounded in the characters' reality than others. Memories are juxtaposed to reveal not only the importance of recollections – even incomplete or contradictory ones – as they inform the characters' personal and political present, but also the limitations of personal memory. Somewhere between Codi and Homer's narratives lies the history of the Noline and of Grace. It is only by putting their memories together and revealing their inconsistencies that a broader community and history begins to be revealed.

The Author's Note to *Animal Dreams* blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction even as it attempts to differentiate between the two. Kingsolver asserts that "Grace, Arizona, and its railroad depot are imaginary, as is Santa Rosalia Pueblo, although it resembles the *Keresan* pueblos of northern New Mexico. Other places, and crises, in the book are actual."⁹ There is a realist strain of assumption here; it is the parallels with the "actual" which underpin the "authenticity" of the political concerns of

⁹ For example, Kinishba ruins, where Loyd and Codi make love for the first time (127-133), is a real place and one that is unlikely ever to be as empty as Kingsolver's couple find it on their sunny afternoon trip. It is open from 9am until 5pm every day of the week and paid entry is required. In terms of the plot, this would have been a far less romantic environment, although the impressiveness of the 600 year-old ruins requires no fictionalising. While innocuous in this case, the blurring of fact and fiction can nonetheless be dangerous, with Kingsolver's casual fictional use of an "actual" site such as Kinishba tapping into wider debates about the exploitation of Native American heritage for commercial gain.

the characters. While she does not make direct reference to *Holding the Line*, the “actual” crises to which Kingsolver refers include those addressed in that book: women in isolated mining communities struggling against corporate and environmental oppression. *Animal Dreams* fictionalises elements of the female strikers’ stories in *Holding the Line* and showcases other “actual” crises that fit within Kingsolver’s self-imposed remit of issues in a glocal context, such as the destruction of agricultural communities in Nicaragua, Native American reservation environments and local water supplies affected by mining pollution.

There is, however, a constant tension in *Animal Dreams* between maintaining reader interest and eliciting political engagement.¹⁰ The tension between a didactic political agenda and an engaging narrative is also exhibited in *Holding the Line*, which faced criticism when read as a work of journalism for its emotive prose style and incorporation of a personal narrative. Kingsolver argues in the book’s 1996 introduction that bearing witness is “not so straightforward a thing as we narrators would have you believe,” noting that “Seven or seventy witnesses can come away from the same event with seven or seventy stories, and generally do” (HTL xvii). In positioning even her non-fiction work as one “story” among many possible representations of events, it is possible to see *Animal Dreams*, published only one year later, as offering a more effective format for Kingsolver’s personalized political stories of women’s lives.

While the women’s activism in *Animal Dreams* secures the valley’s future, it is most usefully read within the context of a novel which consistently emphasizes the importance of families and communities. *Animal Dreams* privileges protagonist Codi and the female members of the community. Kingsolver’s justification for this parallel

¹⁰ Kingsolver’s latest book, the non-fiction *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, exemplifies her didactic environmental agenda. While classed as non-fiction, the book’s advocacy of eating and living locally is nonetheless structured by a linear narrative and characterisation of Kingsolver’s own family so as create a “plot”: one family struggles to live sustainably and to make a new life in Appalachia over the course of a single year.

emphasis in *Holding the Line* also rings true for the novel: “Women scrapping tooth and nail for survival, however commonplace, still don’t get much dignified exposure in our culture” (HTL xvi). Both *Animal Dreams* and *Holding the Line* represent the author’s attempt to redress this perceived absence. In *Animal Dreams*, female characters are significant in saving the town from the poisoned water, just as the women keep the Phelps Dodge strike going in *Holding the Line*. It is, however, a political rather than solely a gender issue which characterizes the struggle of a small town against a politically powerful bureaucratic corporation.

Through familiar female voices such as *Animal Dreams*’ matriarch Doña Althea, with her call for less television and more family time, Kingsolver’s women challenge political and social hierarchies, fighting injustice in their local communities. In *Holding the Line*, striker Diane McCormick emphasizes the powerful effect of familiar female voices, describing the achievements of the Women’s Auxiliary as those of “just a bunch of ladies” (HTL 174). Women offer alternative ways of approaching old problems, often through seemingly small actions such as crafting a traditional piñata or turning out on a (traditionally masculine) picket line each day. Female characters such as Doña Althea and Diane face their past in order to construct hopeful futures on both a personal and a broader political level. Diane admits that in the past, “the best thing” they could do for their children was to “get them a job with the company” but she is resolute with newly-found confidence when she states, “We don’t do that anymore.” Instead, union wives look forward to a future in which companies like Phelps Dodge will be “on their way out” and “formerly alienated groups of people” will be “on their way in” (HTL 174).

The experiences of female protagonists as depicted in *Holding the Line* underpin both the structure and theme of *Animal Dreams*. Both books alternate between different people’s stories according to chapter, on the central theme of families struggling to survive. Details from the non-fiction book that reappear in its companion novel include

the official street names which are “totally ignored” (AD 65) and never called by their “actual name” (HTL 18). Instead of naming their streets, the communities of Grace and Clifton identify their environment in relation to landmarks, suggesting an environmentally grounded sense of identity. Kingsolver describes how “whole lives” in Clifton “are lived in relation to these things,” to “dry stream beds” and “bends in the road” (HTL 22). The exploitation of the environments of Grace and Clifton is all the more tragic in the context of such grounded communities. In *Holding the Line*, Kingsolver notes that cemeteries were buried as Phelps Dodge “rearranged the earth in search of copper” (69), while in *Animal Dreams*, Codi describes settlements “torn up when [fictional mining company] Black Mountain chased a vein of copper,” and claims that “not even the graveyards were sacred” (161). *Holding the Line* details pollution from the mine’s “leaching process” that created mounds of waste, “saturated with a sulphuric acid solution,” which were then dumped in the river (69), while in *Animal Dreams* the old men discuss the pollution of Grace’s orchards by the mine’s “leaching operation” (63).

It is not only the tropes of environmental damage and isolated communities that are shared by the novel and its non-fictional counterpart, but also the international web of connections. Hallie’s move to Nicaragua and Kingsolver’s emphasis on glocal interrelatedness may be read as originating in striker Anna O’Leary’s statement in *Holding the Line*: “Sooner or later things do affect you. Some people understood that about Vietnam, and the people stopped that war. Now we’re seeing the same thing start over in Nicaragua. You think, ‘It doesn’t affect me, I’m comfortable here’” (179). In writing *Holding the Line*, and through the character of Codi in *Animal Dreams*, Kingsolver criticises such complacency. Codi and the striking women of Arizona remind readers that apparently distant and discrete events *do* affect them and *are* their problem.

The events of *Animal Dreams* suggest that activism can be effective, with Codi achieving both political justice (the mine’s leaching operation is stopped) and a personal

sense of belonging (she decides to make her home in Grace). In contrast, the activism in *Holding the Line* is not wholly successful for the strikers, who make enormous sacrifices (losing jobs and homes and suffering failed marriages) in order to achieve piecemeal successes, sporadic compensation and only partial job retention.¹¹ The medium of fiction enables Kingsolver to imagine, and possibly even begin to effect change in a way that is not possible in her non-fiction. In her introduction to *Holding the Line*, Kingsolver defends her didacticism and subjectivity, asserting that “objectivity may only be possible for those who do not care in the least what happens next” and suggesting that readers place their trust “in those who have intentions” (xvii). Unlike her fictional characters, which can be moulded to effect the change encouraged by such “intentions,” the women in *Holding the Line* are not Kingsolver’s inventions. Their fight for justice, community and environment, however, is representative of the political issues at the heart of the author’s subsequent fiction.

In interviews, Kingsolver flags the particular combination of factors that she wants to emphasise as influences. In an interview with Donna Perry, for example, she claims that growing up in “an impoverished, rural place,” with its resulting strong sense of community, is what encourages her to “celebrate dependency” in fiction.¹² In *Animal Dreams*, Hallie’s ability to see the ways in which she is dependent upon a larger environmental community underpins her decision to put her life in danger in Nicaragua, in a political gesture of solidarity. It is this dual awareness that secures her “ground orientation.” Hallie epitomizes the novel’s key idea and Codi approaches it; her negotiation is the reader’s way in to the issues, at once more conflicted and more tentative than Hallie’s.

¹¹ Page Stegner notes this limited success for the women strikers in her review of *Holding the Line*. “Both Sides Lost.” *New York Times* (January 7, 1990): A31.

¹² Donna Perry, “Interview with Barbara Kingsolver,” in *Back Talk: Women Writers Speak Out*, edited by Donna Perry (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 145-146.

In keeping with this spirit of interdependency, *Animal Dreams* represents multiple, overlapping communities of characters, variously identified by race, gender, class, and local environment. These micro-communities include the young men working on the railroad, the women sneaking food into Homer's fridge by way of thanks for his years of medical service, and the piñata-making Stitch and Bitch club. They intersect with groups of MTV-obsessed teenagers at Codi's school and Loyd's Pueblo family. Each group is distinct, yet interrelated through the water supply and the threat posed by the mining company. Like the "ordinary" people that Kingsolver claims to write for and represent in her short stories and subsequently in the more developed novels, they share common community interests including the health of their environment.

Kingsolver's non-fictional account of the 1983 mining strike does diverge from *Animal Dreams* in its emphasis on the Arizona communities' isolation. Unlike the women of Ajo and Morenci, the Grace women are imaginatively linked to the wider world. They visit Tucson to spread the story of pollution in Grace and their message reaches the rest of America through TV coverage. Codi's links to Hallie in Nicaragua represent further translocal connections between seemingly distant communities. This discontinuity between the relative isolation of parallel communities in fiction and in non-fiction mirrors the differences in readership between these two forms. The limited community of readers for *Holding the Line* reflects the isolation of its female protagonists while the comparatively large, international readership for the novel finds common ground with Codi and Hallie's globetrotting search for community. In Kingsolver's fiction, the tension between writing for a reader and writing for a political agenda unsurprisingly becomes more pronounced. *Animal Dreams* "teaches" a mass readership about her political message while non-fictional *Holding the Line*, despite a tacit acceptance that it won't sell as many copies as its fictional counterpart, reveals the same didactic impulse in its imaginative representation of the facts of the Arizona mine strike.

This tension between reader appeal and political didacticism is eased by Kingsolver's construct of "Ground orientation" as a perception of home based on a combination of individual and collective identifying markers, and a clear engagement with the past. Memory, either as a theoretical construct or a stylistic tool with which to characterise Codi's preoccupations, structures *Animal Dreams* and this chapter's analysis of it. As such, it is necessary to unpack my use of memory in relation to existing theoretical frameworks. There has been a vast amount of work undertaken on memory, some of which is touched on in the Introduction, but this chapter focuses on Kingsolver's use of memory to represent the "facts" of history, and the influence of the past on the present for both her characters and her readers.¹³

Central to my exploration of memory in *Animal Dreams* is the recognition of the political in representations of the past. Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson posits the political interpretation of literary texts not as "some supplementary method" but rather "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation."¹⁴ This particular aspect of Jameson's critical framework serves to illuminate the political contexts of author and characters. Kingsolver's fiction both adheres to and perpetuates such political methodology, particularly in the way it deals with memory and the past.

While *Animal Dreams* focuses on private memory, with its two narrative perspectives alternating between past and present, such personal versions of the past contain within them the seeds of public political awakening. Codi is personally attached to the topography of Grace with the river in particular featuring as a powerful image in her childhood memories. She describes recurring nightmares of losing her baby among

¹³ While my analysis of Kingsolver's use of memory in *Animal Dreams* explores its impact on community and individual identity, Sheryl Stevenson offers a reading of the novel which focuses on trauma. "Trauma and Memory in Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*." *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 11.4 (2001): 327-50.

¹⁴ Jameson, 17.

the large white boulders of the “flooded” and “roaring” creek (51), in a dream which reflects the fusion of fact and fiction within the world of the novel. Codi’s memories of burying her child in the banks of the creek are combined with the traumatic memory of being trapped by a flood while trying to save coyote puppies with Hallie. Codi’s emerging sense of the influence of her past on her present identity is summarized in her proclamation that memory “is a complicated thing, a relative to truth but not its twin” (48). She translates this emerging relationship with her memories of Grace into political action designed to reveal the truth of the river’s pollution, politicizing her biology class and inspiring the women of the Stitch and Bitch club to protest.

Similarly synchronous to Codi’s translation of historical awareness into political participation is the work of cultural historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen who counter the suggestion, “lodged by some in the cultural elite,” that “Americans are ignorant of history.”¹⁵ On the contrary, many of the fifteen hundred Americans interviewed by Rosenzweig and Thelen said they wanted “to participate in the larger past, to experience it, to reach into history by reaching outward from their own lives. They wanted to personalize the public past.”¹⁶ This trend helps to explain the popularity of Kingsolver’s work, with its emphasis on the powerful, identifying role of past history. *Animal Dreams* represents in fiction the trend revealed as historical “fact” by Rosenzweig and Thelen’s interviews; Americans emphasise the personal and familial in order to construct versions of the national past.

Kingsolver’s description of the woman Codi talks to on the bus as she leaves Grace embodies the possible limitation of such rigid uses of history. The woman knows about the town’s piñata campaign against river pollution from watching the local news, and empathises with Codi about the plight of the community. However, she is entirely

¹⁵ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

ignorant of the American actions in Nicaragua which result in Hallie's death. Codi declares, "That's the great American disease, we forget. We watch the disasters parade by on TV, and every time we say: 'Forget it. This is somebody else's problem'" (316). In this example, Kingsolver signals both the importance and the limitations of personalizing the past. Codi's personal shock at the women's ignorance of foreign policy mirrors the political reaction encouraged in the reader, emphasizing the influence of seemingly distant political conflicts upon the local, and the wider global political context of even local action. Kingsolver's emphasis on the everyday as being of future historical import is made explicit in the working title of her forthcoming novel, *Notes to a Future Historian*.¹⁷

It is also revealing to explore Kingsolver's emphasis on such selective and personal forms of memory through an awareness of Sigmund Freud's theory of "Screen Memory." Freud suggests that screen memories are "displaced memories from which the essential element has for the most part been omitted."¹⁸ Important or possibly traumatic memories are displaced into "safe" or manageable ones which, upon recollection, would seem to be unconnected to the original event. In exposing the limitations of the knowledge of the woman on the bus, Kingsolver's narrative attests that the story of the women of Grace and the situation in Nicaragua are part of the same historical moment. It also posits that such seemingly positive public memories as the triumph of Grace over corporate mining, act as a political screen memory: not to protect an individual from a traumatic childhood memory but to shield a nation from fully seeing itself.

The events in *Animal Dreams* suggest that full disclosure of the past necessitates both an admission and understanding of the positive and negative features of that past.

¹⁷ Barbara Kingsolver, *Notes to a Future Historian* (Harper Collins, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume III*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 310.

Codi engages with previously buried positive and negative memories in order to uncover the “screen memory” surrounding the death of her mother. Codi’s positive memories include the community network that cared for her while she was growing up, but are tempered by her painful recollection of the Afghan quilt used to wrap the body of her miscarried child for burial. As feminist Adrienne Rich asserts, “we can’t have a history if we want only to hear the tales of our best moments, our finest hours.”¹⁹ Like Kingsolver’s description in *Holding the Line* of the way Jessie Tellez’s “strong consciousness of history” is “not to be confused with nostalgia” (98), Codi also rails against the screen memories prevalent in nostalgia and, in the light of Rich’s argument, offers a fuller representation of the past by doing so.

Animal Dreams’ Homer, *Prodigal Summer*’s Garnett and *The Poisonwood Bible*’s Orleanna all re-envision the past to try to control the present. Homer fulfils his need for a usable past with photographs which “begin in memory” and seemingly allow him to “photograph the past” (138), but also by deceiving his daughters about their own family origins. While this could be interpreted as jeopardising their sense of belonging out of a need for control, much like Nathan Price in *The Poisonwood Bible*, it also suggests a desire to ignore the realities of history in order to reimagine the past more favourably in shaping the present. In contrast, the old women of Grace worry that Emelina’s boys are “losing touch with their past” and seem to consider it a community duty to remind them of the realities of their shared past, and by extension, their shared future too (110).

As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. proclaimed in his study of the challenges of US multiculturalism, “history is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual. As an individual deprived of memory becomes distorted and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in

¹⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life” (1983) in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (London: Virago Press, 1994), 144.

dealing with its present and its future.”²⁰ Kingsolver aligns this privileging of historical “fact” over nostalgia through characters like Codi, whose awareness of environmental interrelatedness is posited as essential to the survival of the town of Grace. Codi realizes that community members cannot continue being “amnesiacs, proceeding as if there were no other day but today” (240-241). It is a statement which emphasizes the direct association Kingsolver makes between awareness of the past and future environmental survival. In connecting the past and future of American community through a narrative of environmental interrelatedness, the collective nature of memory emerges as a pivotal trope.

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is renowned for developing the concept of collective memory, certain tenets of which inform and are, in turn, reinvigorated by Kingsolver’s fiction. Asserting that individual memory is dependent on the “frameworks of social memory,”²¹ Halbwachs’ argument finds fictional realization in Kingsolver’s representation of Codi’s identity as bound to the memory of her past, which in turn can only be unlocked by her re-engagement with the society of Grace. Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory* further informs my reading of Kingsolver’s text with the suggestion that “the present affects the way in which societies remember the past” and the idea that collective memory is “culturally specific, responding to the needs of a particular society at a particular time.”²² Doña Althea’s recounting of the collective memory of the genesis of the town of Grace, as told to a CBS news crew, offers a fictional representation of Halbwachs’ theoretical proposition.

The need for Doña Althea to tell this story is not only to fulfil the CBS News quota of “local color” and to garner national awareness of the town’s plight (164), it also

²⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 52.

²¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 182.

²² *Ibid*, 11.

meets the needs of the Grace community. Emphasising the town's shared origins and identity reinvigorates the battle for the survival of its valley environment. Codi describes how "about fifty of us packed into Doña Althea's living room" to hear the matriarch speak from her throne-like carved chair, with her braids "pinned around her head like a crown" (264). In depicting this regal figurehead with the presence and implied cultural import of a "Frida Kahlo painting" (264), Codi creates the impression of Doña Althea as a storyteller who embodies the history and future values of a whole community. Concluding her description of the scene at Doña Althea's house, she portrays Doña Althea's "Biblical" words as a "bedtime story" which, in reviving her connection with community, also fills her with the "joy of a child" (267-8).

This scene in *Animal Dreams* is further nuanced with reference to Alison Landsberg's theory of "Prosthetic Memory," the importance of which was noted in the Introduction, developed from collective memory theory. Prosthetic memory is an imagined memory which does not simply reinforce a particular group's identity by sharing memories. Instead, it "opens up those memories and identities to persons from radically different backgrounds."²³ Doña Althea's CBS appearance highlights how choosing to identify with or remember certain cultural memories helps to define people's sense of self, including, as Codi calls it, their sense of "ground orientation." Kingsolver's fictional account of the alternative transmission of memories through the written, spoken and remembered origin story of Grace, for example, aligns with the trends which underpin Landsberg's argument. Landsberg states that in the face of social change, links between "individual persons and community" or "kinship ties" are broken, creating the need for "alternative methods for the transmission and dissemination of memories."²⁴ The CBS audience and readers of the novel are encouraged to engage with what could be called the "prosthetic memories" offered by Grace's origin story. The

²³ Landsberg, 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

memory of the blue-eyed Gracela sisters who founded the town is no longer just for local people. According to both Kingsolver's fiction and Landsberg's thesis, if the town is to survive, these memories must be embraced by a wider community.

Landsberg discusses how "part of the political potential of prosthetic memory is its ability to enable ethical thinking,"²⁵ which is itself an effect that Robin Epstein suggests informs Kingsolver's popularity as an author of fiction which "speaks to people's hunger for the acknowledgement of the political in their lives."²⁶ Such claims, along with George Lipsitz's idea of popular culture as a medium for the "expression of loss and the projection of hopes for reconnection to the past,"²⁷ underpin my reading of Kingsolver's assertion of literature's importance in performing a political function, particularly with regards to history and identity. Kingsolver claims that in writing *Animal Dreams*, she sought to answer why "people make the political choices they do?"²⁸

Codi and Homer, in their respective flashbacks to Codi's childhood, highlight memory as a fluid process which is more about imagining identity than recalling concrete facts.²⁹ Intent on remembering his failings and fears, Homer refuses to lay claim to memories he didn't live, compounding his denial of community through the implicit denial of shared communal memory. Homer's chapter "The Flood" even includes the bald statement: "There is no memory because he wasn't there" (20). Conversely, Homer manages to convince Codi that she doesn't remember things that she actually did experience, including witnessing her mother's death. Codi describes how, "According to generally agreed-upon history, Hallie and I were home with a babysitter. This is my problem – I clearly remember things I haven't seen, sometimes

²⁵ Ibid., 149.

²⁶ Robin Epstein, "The Progressive Interview: Barbara Kingsolver," *The Progressive* (February 1996): 36.

²⁷ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 17.

²⁸ Perry, 144.

²⁹ For example, Codi's memories of Grace at the beginning of *Animal Dreams* focus on her ingrained "outsider" identity, with Codi describing herself in marked contrast with the other people of Grace even in her descriptions of her clothes and the way she speaks.

things that never happened. And draw a blank on the things I've lived through" (48). As the extent of Homer's deception is revealed, the reader comes to see the "things" Codi has "lived through" only by comparing father and daughter's memories with those of other characters in the community, until Codi realizes that she is remembering things that she has seen. It is with Viola's gentle help that Codi remembers that she did see her mother leave in the helicopter and did not imagine the memory after all.

Viola suggests that even what you learn and feel from imagined memories can be real because "if you remember something, then its true," and some memories are created in order to belong, because "In the long run, that's what you've got" (342). Tellingly, Codi's faith in her memory returns with her re-immersion in community, intimating that the two are necessarily interdependent. All that she believes she has imagined, from her dream of a popping flash bulb and blindness to memories of witnessing her mother's death, turn out to have been real experiences. This revelation indicates that memory is not only thematically central to the novel's preoccupation with community and interrelatedness, but is also structurally important. *Animal Dreams* ends with a return to Codi's earliest memory, which she has now reclaimed. She remembers her mother being taken into a helicopter ambulance and her realization when the helicopter fails to take off, that she must have died. In both Codi's childhood memory and her adult reclamation of this memory, she is in the same place at the edge of an alfalfa field and is accompanied by Viola (342). This return to memory highlights Kingsolver's interwoven cyclical structure, itself reliant on her other novels as intertexts.

The thematic and structural importance of memory is also highlighted by Homer's false narratives of difference, which he uses to reiterate Hallie and Codi's position as outsiders in the town, to the extent that he even fabricates his own life story and hides Codi's baby photograph, the only existing narrative which would link Codi's identity to Grace. Even the discovery of the photograph does not change Codi's mind

about her sense of identity and belonging; rather, it reflects her already changing perceptions. Memories buried and partially recovered combine with documentary evidence buried and then partially recovered to forge Codi's emerging understanding of her self. Codi's identity is thus based upon the estrangement of documentary evidence from memory in keeping with Benedict Anderson's assertion that the photograph is,

only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence...which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasises its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be 'remembered,' must be narrated.³⁰

This idea of discursively identifying the interrelated notions of home, community and self is further emphasised by the influence of Hallie's letters on Codi's journey towards locating "ground orientation." Like Anderson's discussion of documentary evidence replacing memory as the basis of identity, it is through Hallie's letters that Codi is reminded of childhood events which reinscribe forgotten links to Grace and its people. Hallie does not only remind Codi about past events but also how brave she remembers her sister being. She reminds Codi about the time they saved coyote puppies from a flood, writing, "You said we had to. I was chicken because Doc Homer would spank the shit out of us and I wanted to run for it, but you wouldn't let me" (121). Along with her recovered baby photograph, these documentary links anchor Codi's emerging sense of identity and challenge her perception of Hallie as braver.

Hallie's letters describe a sense of home which transcends the privileging of a single space while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of place-specific details to her identity. She tells her sister about the "collective death" of refugees, equating the forced removal of a "whole land-based culture" with "a body trying to move out of its skin" (88). By representing Hallie's awareness of the influence of the environment and

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 204.

community on her political and personal identity, Kingsolver focuses on the way such understanding of self and home stems from writing and speaking of it. When Doña Althea tells the story of Grace for a CBS news crew, she presents an oral history rich in personal detail and grounded in the local environment. In her description of this “Biblical” story, Codi emphasises the necessary intertwining of individuals, families and Southwestern environment, describing how Doña Althea, in her “high, sustained voice,” describes “the Genesis of Grace. And of Hallie and me” (267).

For Kingsolver’s characters, this genesis of identity is not limited to community engagement but is also reliant on family relationships, particularly those between fathers and daughters in *Animal Dreams* and *The Poisonwood Bible*. The origin story of Grace and its legendary peacocks emphasizes these relationships. As Codi describes the “local legend,” a hundred years ago, the “nine blue-eyed Gracela sisters came over from Spain to marry nine lucky miners in the gold camp, sight unseen.” The sisters “only agreed to come if they could bring the birds with them in the hold of the ship. Their legacy in Gracela Canyon was a population of blue-eyed, dark-haired descendants and a thousand wild peacocks. Their father stayed behind and got rich by proxy, for he’d literally sold his girls for a gold mine” (14). The absent father who forces his daughters to find their own way through life is later paralleled in the character of Nathan in *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Siblings Codi and Hallie in *Animal Dreams* also prefigure the family relationships depicted in *Prodigal Summer* and *The Poisonwood Bible*. Kingsolver builds her spectrum of political and personal positions with characters represented in counterpoint to other family members. Contrasting Hallie and Codi’s differing approaches to their shared political concerns with imperialist demands upon the environment and people, Hallie offers her body to the political struggle in Nicaragua. While she doesn’t affect public

opinion, her action has a direct impact on the farming community she helps to organize. Codi, meanwhile, employs her scientific and literary skills to educate her high school classes about their environment. Her choice of issues ranges from contraception to pumice stone mining and reinscribes the interrelatedness of the personal with broader political concerns. She garners media attention for the town's polluted river by trading on Grace's idealized origin story and handmade crafts, commodifying the town's culture in order to save it from extinction. This emphasizes that Kingsolver's characters' spectrum of behaviours is not only politically defined, as in the case of *The Poisonwood Bible*'s multiple narrative perspectives, but also personally determined by the differing approaches of individuals such as Codi and Hallie, even when they are trying to achieve politically synchronous effects in their translocal communities.

Codi describes her relationship with younger sister Hallie as that of "keenly mismatched Siamese twins" (8) and talks about how "somebody ought to do a study on us, if they want to know how kids in the same family can turn out totally different" (31). In a letter to Hallie, Codi even asks "Why did you turn out the way you did? You're my sister. We were baked in the same oven, with the same ingredients. Why does one cake rise and the other fall?" (199). Like the Price girls in *The Poisonwood Bible*, whose reactions to their experiences in the Congo range from colonialist racism (Rachel) to liberal assimilation (Leah), Codi notes that whatever she and Hallie suffer, they "went through together," but somehow "came out different doors, on different ground levels" (89). Codi's eventual awakening to her positive differences from her sister suggests that inequality needs to be overcome through recognition rather than denial of difference.

Codi and Hallie are just one example of Kingsolver's recurring representation of twins and close siblings, and of her exploration of the nature versus nurture debate. Hallie and Codi are comparable to Adah and Leah in *The Poisonwood Bible*, with both sets of sisters experiencing the same upbringing but reacting very differently to it. In the case

of Hallie and Codi, who are brought up as outsiders, Hallie is described as making her home wherever she is, while Codi runs from security, leaving jobs and lovers behind. Kingsolver emphasises the importance of nature as well as nurture to the characterization of each set of siblings and their contrasting senses of identity. *Animal Dreams* posits a sense of home-based identity that is not genetically inherent, but learned and valued through family and community connections. Kingsolver's characters not only embody an inclusive sense of personal growth but also make reference to the importance of nature, land and environment, as a nurturing determinant in the search for a home-based identity.

Characters' relationships with environment in *Animal Dreams* and *The Poisonwood Bible* are heavily politicized. Codi's battle to protect the river from pollution and Adah's research into curing diseases respectively reflect Kingsolver's politicization of their personal lives. The personal is posited in a resolutely political way, particularly in the dynamic between sibling characters. Adah and Leah pull in different directions as do Hallie and Codi, with each pair torn between nature and nurture. Their experiences of nurturing makes Codi believe that "Every man I'd ever loved had loved Hallie best and settled for me" (10), in much the same way as Adah believes that her father always loved her less than Leah. However, Codi and Hallie are "so attached" (8) that "No light could show where one body ends and the other begins" (3), while *Animal Dreams'* other siblings Loyd and Leander similarly think they are "one person" (207). Loyd even spells his name with one L, in contrast with the conventional spelling of Lloyd, suggesting that he is not whole without his twin brother Leander, who died as a teenager.

By fusing personal and political stories, Kingsolver elevates what is "ordinary" in the local by tying it to universal political themes and reminding readers of these overlaps

with the emphasis of her chapters, and narrative voices.³¹ Homer's focus on family and past regrets is evident even in the chapter titles that preface his sections of the story – "Crybabies" and "Mistakes" – while Codi's first-person narrative consistently interweaves the personal with the political. Her burgeoning romance with Loyd, for example, is accompanied by descriptions of Native American environmentalism, in marked contrast with the commercial Anglo mining company. However, Kingsolver emphasizes awareness (and the need for the reader to be aware) of the problems of bearing witness through Codi and Homer's contrasting narratives, which suggest that memory is malleable and unreliable, and any representation inherently flawed.

Alternating between Homer's chapters written in the third person and Codi's in the first, Homer's sections only ever amount to a single chapter whereas Codi's sections are comprised of up to six separate chapters. This structural choice emphasizes the gender bias suggested by the first-person voice afforded the female narrator. Homer has a limited third-person representation in *Animal Dreams* while Nathan in *The Poisonwood Bible* is only represented through the voices of his daughters. Nonetheless, the men's words are gospel (metaphorically in Homer's case and literally in Nathan's) to their daughters. Codi confides that she has "no idea if it was the confirmed truth or just his opinion, since Doc Homer made no distinction between the two" (67).

Animal Dreams opens with a chapter from Homer, in apparent deference to his seniority and patriarchal role. "The Night of All Souls" describes Homer's memory of his daughters' alienation from him, and his fears for their future – tragedies of which he is only now aware. The two pages of Homer's opening chapter are dominated by words associated with death and sorrow, notably "cemetery," "skull," "bodies," "corpselike," "pain," "disease," "weep," and "grave" (3-4), as he describes the sisters' closeness as a

³¹ Kingsolver's reclamation of the ordinary in the local confirms its marginalised status even as it attempting to elevate it. That the ordinary in the local should be perceived as needing elevating indicates Kingsolver's perception of a hierarchy of subjects deemed worthy of literature, as discussed in my introduction.

vulnerability which will give them pain in later life. He notes how “close together” his daughters are, “how much they have to lose,” and “how much they’ve already lost in their lives to come” (4). His fear and cold approach to parenting that results ensures that a loving father-daughter relationship is what Codi and Hallie have “already lost in their lives to come.” Codi loses her child, and both Hallie and Homer die before the novel’s end but *Animal Dreams* concludes optimistically as Codi settles happily into a relationship with Loyd in Grace.

Despite the novel’s romantic conclusion, death is a central narrative trope, and is emphasised as an inevitable and necessary part of ecology. While the novel opens with Homer firmly in place as the parent, it ends with Codi’s chapter “The Day of All Souls,” suggesting a shift towards her as the family’s authority figure and future. Homer’s increasingly confused memories and persistent denial of family is initially entangled with Codi’s isolated teenaged years and the loss of her child. However, Codi re-engages with the people of Grace and connects with her ancestry, as she comes to understand the “ground orientation” which also grounds her life in Grace.

Codi’s sense of belonging to nature is the environmental link which connects her to the society from which she has felt like an outcast. When she becomes pregnant as a teenager, her fertility makes her feel “important and similar to others,” a feeling that both “lure[s]” and “terrifie[s]” (52). But when Codi loses her child, she also loses touch with her hometown, running away with a man (Carlo) who promises but never delivers the big answers to life’s questions. Telling childhood friend Emelina that having children means “You’ve got something to show for yourself” (42), Codi’s self-imposed “outsider” status is confirmed by her association of progeny with belonging.

Codi fears she has nothing to show for her years of study and travel. Indeed, she quits medical training only months before she would have become fully qualified, following an incident with a premature baby which mirrors her own traumatic

experience. In contrast to motherhood as a marker of social value and acceptance, Codi's descriptions of her stillborn baby and of her mother's death following Hallie's birth represent childbirth and motherhood as a source of trauma. The explicit link between family and "ground orientation" is tempered by this associated risk of trauma. Such tension between desire for and fear of intimate familial connection underpins Codi's characterisation, the novel's father/daughter narrative structure, and by extension, Kingsolver's representation of home in each of her novels.

In *Animal Dreams*, the idea of "ground orientation" is reliant not only on representations of home, but also on recognition of environmental connectedness. Emelina even points out that Codi is "like that Thoreau guy that lived on Walden Pond" (76), living in her spartan cabin in the orchard and espousing environmentalist rhetoric. Land and community are configured as sources of belonging, as confirmed by Codi's realization, much like Lusa's in *Prodigal Summer*, that you "can't know somebody" until you have "followed him home" (231).³² Codi comes to equate the environment with rootedness and secure identity when all other social identifiers seem to be constantly shifting. This is unsurprisingly appealing to readers in an increasingly urbanized and migratory world.

The idea of human imitating nature is represented by Homer's assertions that "printing a photograph duplicates eyesight" and his denial of any "real invention in the modern world." Instead of invention, Homer claims that there is just a "good deal of elaboration on nature" (73). This essentialist statement highlights Kingsolver's overemphasis on nature as the source of everything from invention to a human sense of

³² Lusa's opening chapter in *Prodigal Summer* describes how her relationship with Cole shifts dramatically when she moves to his farm, and how she "never expected the strange, effete legacy that followed her here to Zebulon, where her new relatives considered her old ones to be a family of fools." Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 45. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically as PS.

belonging, albeit in such a way as to encourage the readers' sense of interrelatedness with the environment.³³ However noble a cause this may be, Homer's denial of invention is contradicted by inventive characters such as Hallie, who works for a Hotline which dispenses advice on controlling nature through gardening tips.

Visual markers are central to Homer's representation of difference and belonging, as he photographs the babies of Grace in order to capture their local identity through the evidence of their genetic appearance. Clearing his loft, Codi finds shoeboxes full of photographs of babies and, discovering one which confirms her genetic relation to the Grace community, she comes to understand both her own history and her father's apparent obsession with taking photographs of objects made to look like other, supposedly unrelated objects. For Homer, as for Walter Benjamin, "a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously permeated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man."³⁴ In his conscious exploration of the space between the appearance of objects to the camera and to the eye, Homer is able to contain his concealed identity. Homer tells his daughters that he is not from Grace and that they therefore do not belong either, in an attempt to encourage them to aspire to more sophisticated environs than small-town life. However, because he hides his daughters' genetic history and their familial links to Grace – by concealing facts as well as the all-important baby photo – Codi grows up feeling alienated, which makes her search for a grounded sense of self all the harder.

Just as her father makes photographs "of things that didn't look like what they actually were" (69), so his controlling gaze makes Codi seem like something she isn't: an outsider. From the shoes he makes her wear, to his insistence that she and Hallie are

³³ Codi preaches to her students about the natural resource of pumice that is exploited to stonewash their fashionable jeans, reminding the novel's characters and readers that even the perpetually contemporary pursuit of fashion is reliant upon the environment.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 236.

“above your peers” (259), Homer makes Grace sound “like a language I didn’t speak” (12). “Being like no one else, being alone, was the central ethic of his life” and he tries to make it theirs (69), emphasising that they “differed from [their] peers: in ambition, native ability, even physical constitution” (46). He even tells his daughters that “everyone in Grace was somehow related except us Nolines” (71), when in reality they are surrounded by family. In her search for “ground orientation,” Codi finally strikes out against such a denial of community, and stakes a claim for her local environment.

Kingsolver’s emphasis on the etymology of names creates further layers of characterization and family links. Hallie’s real name, Halimeda, means “thinking of the sea” (13), and it is unsurprising that she is a character who makes “you look for things beyond what you could see” (13). Hallie is the fictional embodiment of a didactic author encouraging people to look, read, and think beyond the literal and push towards the political, the environmental, and the universal. The etymology of names, particularly surnames, in the novel is not only shorthand for individual characteristics, but also for exploring family belonging. Codi believes that her surname secures her the teaching job, claiming that “Nothing else I put down in my wobbly writing on that application could have impressed anyone too much” (55). The idea of the Noline name as a claim to competence and authority is derailed by the revelation that Codi’s father Homer changed his surname. Kingsolver’s narrator describes Homer’s realization that “His name is gone. He understands that this is his own fault. He took a pen to paper and changed it, cancelled his ancestors” (137). Homer changed his name to Noline to escape his family and it is unsurprising that Codi is ambivalent about the Noline name.

In representing Codi’s search for self, and tapping into a multigenerational longing for identity in the face of shifting social patterns, Kingsolver highlights a social dislocation resulting from loss of language, tradition and land-based identity. The Grace community faces the prospect of the loss of its water source and of ancient family fruit

trees as a result of pollution from the old mine, as well as shifting employment patterns following the mine's closure and the way of life imposed by rail workers' timetables. In addition to these interrelated environmental and economic factors, the cultural impact of a universalizing "American" identity upon such a culturally mixed and distinctive ethnic community is also explored.

Codi describes how the "Spanish-flavoured accent of Old Grace was dying out, thanks to satellite TV" (56), as she muses on the ways the community has changed and how this compounds her sense of personal dislocation. Codi's extreme dislocation is revealed to the reader through her realization that she needs directions to her "own childhood home," and in her attempt to hide from her friend Emelina just "how badly dislocated" she feels (47). She even believes that the high school skeleton is more likely to be her relative than any of the people in Grace, suggesting that "Mrs Nash was my compatriot from the Midwest; a possible relative" (82). Codi emphasises the disjuncture between who she thinks she is (an outsider) and who she actually is (living in her hometown, surrounded by family), even stating "I don't look like who I am" (9).

Codi's preoccupation with the way other people see her reaffirms her sense of isolation from community and belonging. Her association of being recognised with belonging is further highlighted by her assertion that "Living without a lover was beginning to produce in me the odd sense that I was invisible" (57), and her repeated references to the photographs her father took of newborn babies in Grace, showing that "in the first hours after birth, the really pure specimens of Grace's gene pool have "whiteish, marblelike irises" (42). Codi's discovery of her baby photograph proves that she and Hallie share these distinctive eyes, and as such, are "as pure as anybody in Grace" (284). It is only with this realization that Codi's attitude starts to shift. She begins to overcome her need for men to guide her. Far from guiding her, despite the many alternative homes they provide, her father and long-time partner Carlo obscure

Codi's sense of self. She describes how in the long term, Carlo "declined to be the guiding star I needed. Just as my father did" (41). Codi learns to define her own sense of home through her relationships with partner Loyd, family, friends, and an environment she understands. Kingsolver's text implies that Codi's dependence on men is unwise, while dependence on community to achieve the same aim is essential.

The female protagonists of both *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Animal Dreams* catalogue their quests for belonging, implying that women shape even the male characters' sense of home. In *Animal Dreams*, this is emphasised by Codi's representation of the importance of progeny, the women saving the town through a quintessentially female task (crafting the piñatas), and the way male figures like Homer and Carlo exclude themselves from their communities. Codi describes father Homer as "the only real candidate for center of my universe," but notes that he is "content to sail his private sea and leave me on my own" (69). Carlo, like Homer, gives Codi "the full measure of love he is qualified to dispense" (142), but his movements between jobs and countries means he cannot ground her from flight. As Codi and Hallie's cultural gatekeeper to their hometown, Homer emphasises his daughters' otherness, while Carlo's transient lifestyle imposes a similarly "othered" status on Codi in their various homes. Instead of male role models, Grace becomes the centre of Codi's universe. In the town's environment and community, she finds home, and with it, the kind of love she needs.

Just as Codi realizes that there are some things you have to find out for yourself in order to gain a fuller understanding of yourself and your community, so Kingsolver's novel itself purports to offer a similar liberation for its readers. By flagging issues such as corporate pollution, the marginalization of Native American peoples, small town communities under threat of losing their local identities, and even US foreign policy in South and Central America, Kingsolver's novel does not fully map any of these conflicts. Instead, it functions as a catalyst for further political engagement and

understanding. A fuller understanding of the novel stems from an engagement with its political, linguistic and intertextual contexts. For example, Kingsolver doesn't translate Codi's Latin school motto "Causam Meam Cognoso" (79), or refer to *Holding the Line* in her Author's Note, yet the use of language and her own political non-fiction underpin a fuller understanding of *Animal Dreams*. These intertextual parallels include and represent additional absent (physical and linguistic) characters which help to locate the novel.

While unpacking the thematic strands is essential to any reading of *Animal Dreams*, absent characters are similarly fundamental to the plot and theme of the novel. Characters from other of Kingsolver's books including *Holding the Line*, and characters that are absent from narrator Codi's life appear in letters (Hallie) or memories (her mother and her miscarried baby). In *Animal Dreams*, absent characters such as Hallie, working on a Nicaraguan farm commune, are symbolically central and physically active. Even from thousands of miles away and through only sporadic letters, Hallie challenges the way Codi thinks and acts. Conversely, the ever-present character of Codi imagines herself as the passive observer, suggesting the reliance of the narrator and writer on people who are out in the world living the reality of her prose.³⁵

Kingsolver struggles to distance her authorial self from her characters, who are distinct even as they fuse with her political and personal concerns. Her reliance on active women like Emelina and Hallie, working to raise a family or plant crops, is an appealingly humble and flattering notion for readers whose own lives are thus deemed "worthy of serious literature."³⁶ Kingsolver's indication that the lives of "ordinary" people offer inspiration for her work confirms the centrality of absent characters to her fiction. These absent characters, aspirational even in their apparent everyday-ness, like

³⁵ This emphasis on the subjects of the prose over the author also occurs in Kingsolver's introduction to *Holding the Line*, where she notes "I did not invent these women; they invented themselves. What happened to them could happen to you, or me, and perhaps sometime it will. For better, or for worse, this is a story of what could become of us" (HTL xxiii).

³⁶ Elisabeth L. Beattie, "Barbara Kingsolver Interview," in *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*, edited by Elisabeth L. Beattie (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 157.

the reader, inform meaning in the text. In keeping with the apparent implication of the author as an observer rather than someone as “alive” as the characters they create, Kingsolver writes her teenaged self into this novel, intimating that even successful authors are not immune to the universal human striving for “ground orientation.”³⁷

Kingsolver’s protagonists find identity not in simply escaping the past, but in the distance from their old identities. This apparent distance from the old identity as conversely defining identity is reflected in Adrienne Rich’s assertion that it is “a very old American pattern,” wrought by the frontier, which necessitates “escape from the old identity.”³⁸ The westering impulse exhibited by Kingsolver’s characters in *Animal Dreams* and *The Bean Trees* reflects the defining national motif of the frontier in American history. Codi and Taylor Greer in *The Bean Trees* conform to a national convention of finding identity in escape. Their respective travels allow them to search for the elusive sense of self and belonging captured by the idea of “ground orientation.” As such, the absent characters which inform the narrative are not only those who are physically absent (such as Hallie and Codi’s mother), but also those who have yet to find their “ground orientation.” To this extent, the Noline sisters are equally present and absent. Codi’s lack of “ground orientation” inscribes her absence despite being the text’s narrator and a physical presence in Grace throughout the majority of the novel. Hallie, meanwhile, is physically absent but her sense of “ground orientation” is sufficiently strong that she is present in the novel not only through her letters to Codi, but also through individual and shared memory.³⁹

³⁷ Kingsolver appears in this novel as her teenaged self, “Barbara, a tall, thin, shy student (ears unpierced), whose posture tried always to atone for her height. She’d latched onto me early in the semester, as if she’s immediately sniffed out my own high-school persona” (147). Codi imagines her “wonderfully overconfident high-school kids being swallowed alive by city schools where they’d all learn to walk like Barbara, suffering for their small-town accents and inadequate toughness” (150). It is a revealing passage paralleled by Kingsolver’s own descriptions of her adjustment to life outside her small Kentucky town.

³⁸ Rich, 143.

³⁹ Like Codi who doesn’t see Hallie’s body in person but reads about her sister’s experiences in letters and is told of her death on the telephone, we are also reading the text on the pages and are encouraged to think of Hallie as a representative body. While Codi does feel Hallie’s death personally, she is also

Absent characters link Kingsolver's novels and guide the individual narratives. The parallels and departures they represent create a tapestry of meaning and character relationships. The communal effect of Kingsolver's work thus aids understanding of individual works. Characters including *Animal Dreams*' Emelina inform our understanding of Lusa and Deanna in the later novel *Prodigal Summer*, with their adoption of apparently masculine traits and capabilities.⁴⁰ Similarly, the Garden Hotline which Hallie works for in Tucson is the same service as that used by Taylor in *The Bean Trees*, highlighting Kingsolver's pragmatic ecological concerns, firmly grounded in everyday existence. An *a posteriori* reading of *Animal Dreams* finds further parallels between Kingsolver's characters and concerns across the novels. For example, Hallie tells Codi "I see microwave ovens and exercise machines and grocery-store shelves with thirty brands of shampoo...and I think, 'What is all this for? What is the hunger that drives this need?'" (300) This realization leads Hallie to realize that she will not return to the US from Nicaragua. *The Poisonwood Bible*'s Leah similarly describes how, in the grocery store, "surrounded in one aisle by more kinds of food than will ever be known in a Congolese lifetime, there was nothing on the air but a vague, disinfected emptiness" (PB, 530). In turn, she realizes that her home is in the Congo, not the US.

Border concerns and the plight of Central American refugees which feature in *The Bean Trees* are also central in *Animal Dreams*. Hallie befriends people who run a "safehouse" for Central American refugees in Tucson (35), and leaves for Nicaragua to offer practical help soon after. While the absent and silent refugees emphasise the interrelated concerns that texture Kingsolver's fiction, uncomfortable assumptions also emerge. Hallie and Taylor identify themselves as migrants, having left their respective homes in search of a better life. This nomadic impulse, however politicized it may be for

representative of the wider political context, even for a grieving sister. As such, Hallie is an intensely symbolic figure even within the world of the novel.

⁴⁰ Codi says she "was amazed by the muscle definition in [Emelina's] upper arms and her easy command of an axe" (29), in a description paralleled by descriptions of Lusa's biceps in *Prodigal Summer* (PS 411).

Hallie, and however much of an escape from the limitations of gendered assumptions for Taylor, is nonetheless a *choice* for these relatively privileged white women. The Central American refugees who find reference if not place in Kingsolver's fiction do not choose to leave their homes.

Highlighting similarities between refugees and the protagonists undoubtedly heightens reader empathy for the personalized experiences of such contentious issues as illegal immigration and racial discrimination. However, there is a slippage between political exiles and those who choose to leave their home communities. The exploration of identity, values and relative concepts of freedom highlighted by the refugees' presence recurs in *Pigs in Heaven* and *Prodigal Summer*. This is a concern throughout my analysis of Kingsolver's fiction. Parallels are drawn which elicit political empathy and encourage reader engagement with often complex political and social problems, but worrying conclusions can be drawn from such slippery comparisons, thus undermining their effect. That said, these tropes both denote Kingsolver's central themes and indicate an interrelated approach within and between her novels.

No character does more to elicit political empathy and reader engagement in the novel than Loyd, who suggests an alternative model for a relationship with the environment which does not rely on gender distinction. Both Loyd and Codi cast off their inheritance from their fathers with Loyd giving up cockfighting, despite the fact that his "old man didn't have one damn thing to give him but cockfighting" (103), and Codi shrugging off her father's insistence that she is "an outsider not only by belief but by flesh and bone" (291). This discarding of paternal legacies mirrors Kingsolver's larger symbolic rejection of patriarchal environmental domination in favour of a balanced gendered vision.

For Loyd, the land offers a sense of belonging. Loyd would die for “the land” but “not property” (122), and in this way is made representative of a male relationship with the environment that does not conform to the exploitative aspects of patriarchal “ownership” and mastery. Loyd contrasts the Pueblo commitment to “keeping things in balance” and trying to be “good guests” (239), with the “Anglo” belief that “God put the earth here for us to use, westward-ho. Like a special little playground” (240). This idea of the local environment as a “playground” to be used by “Anglo” communities mirrors the global political influence of imperialism and covert colonialism. While the US extends its sphere of authority in a modern political attitude of Manifest Destiny shaped by the pioneers’ domination of the land, Phelps Dodge and even the people of Grace use their land without thinking that its natural resources could one day run out.

The political imperative of interrelatedness is further exemplified by Codi’s anger. She rails furiously against her students’ belief that “if all the trees die and this land goes to hell,” they can “just go somewhere else” (255). In trying to make the teenagers realize that “the wilderness is used up” (255), Codi’s impassioned lesson is made to correlate with Kingsolver’s own politicisation of environmental awareness. In her first essay collection, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays From Now or Never*, Kingsolver describes her move from downtown Tucson to a rural desert home as part of her desire, inspired by Thoreau, to “live deliberately.”⁴¹ For Kingsolver, as for Codi, this deliberate environmental engagement necessitates her dispensing with “lordship” in favour of “territoriality” (HTT 32).

Codi’s picturesque descriptions of the Santa Rosalia Pueblo as a village “built on a mesa and blended perfectly with the landscape” (227), privilege Native American harmony with the land. They also represent Kingsolver’s sense of what a community should be and highlight factors which differentiate such communities from mainstream

⁴¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 23. Subsequent references to *High Tide in Tucson* in this chapter will be appear in parentheses as HTT.

American societies. By blending with the landscape, a Pueblo village can be oppressed or ignored in the same way that nature has been, either under the guise of civilizing paternalism or with the expectation that it can and will tolerate abuse.⁴²

Throughout *Animal Dreams*, Kingsolver blurs rigid distinctions between land and humanity, and “civilisation” and environment, and highlights the importance of respecting their interrelatedness. Codi describes how Grace is “made of things that erode too slowly to be noticed” (8). The houses are part of the landscape and nature is humanized through descriptions of “arthritic mesquite trees” and lonely carob trees searching for a mate (8). Kingsolver undermines the binaries which limit perceptions of the environment but in so doing, exacerbates those binaries which underpin perceptions of cultural difference. Codi describes Pueblo architecture as organic, “like something alive that just grew here” rather than something planned and built by man (129). In a sentiment reminiscent of arguments for colonial settlement of native lands, Codi repeatedly parallels Native American culture and architecture with nature. In the rhetoric of the manifest destiny of a pioneering civilization, nature is to be tamed, controlled and used. Codi describes how there is “something familiar” in the arrangement of the stones of the houses, and realises that they look “just like cells under the microscope” (129). While this example lauds the Pueblo architecture for its adaptive fitness (arguably a sign of a developed community), it also draws uncomfortably close to polarising nature and civilization.

Codi describes how Grace’s houses are appropriate to their canyon environment, clinging to the steep rocky hillsides and adapting over the years to the changes wrought by human intervention. In contrast, Kinishba and Santa Rosalia have only survived by being isolated from this same intervention. Kingsolver risks limiting her representation of Native American culture within Codi’s essentialist descriptions,

⁴² These theoretical ecocritical frameworks, in particular the idea of “Mother Earth,” are developed in Chapter 4.

although it could be argued that such parallels with nature are self-consciously located in order to draw attention to the insidious ways in which actions may be justified. This aspect of *Animal Dreams*' representation of Pueblo heritage risks being self-defeating, particularly given Kingsolver's self-professed hope that her writing will help daughter Camille shed the idea that Native Americans are "people that lived a long time ago."⁴³

The Pueblo community is repeatedly referred to as matrilineal ("the land down here stays with the women," 214), implying that a feminised hierarchy offers more hope of balance. The men of Grace traditionally "labored underground to rob the canyon of its wealth," while "the women up above had been paying it back in kind" (277), attempting to rectify the balance which a matrilineal society achieves without counteraction. Kingsolver highlights the need for a balance to be struck between the rigid dichotomy according to which land has to be either mastered or conserved. While masculinity is traditionally associated with the task of subduing the land, Codi's narrative does not condemn the men of Grace to this historical pattern. Even the mining company polluting the river does not so much represent maleness as it does capitalism. Helping to decorate the town's graveyard on All Souls' Day, Codi notes that the Grace community divides their time equally "between the maternal and paternal lines" (162).

The women's fund- and awareness-raising efforts nonetheless harness a positive, empowering model of the feminised role of homemaker. All of their work is for "home," if not physically located within it, and their letters to politicians and journalists save not only their own homes but also the local environment. That the men call the mining company "the Mountain," making it "sound like something natural you can't ever move" (162), suggests gendered attitudes towards possible courses of action, but not towards the environment itself. The whole community, male and female, is concerned by the pollution of their river. The women's localized, environmental sense

⁴³ Epstein, 33.

of home is complemented by Hallie's more global vision of environments under threat. Grace is a microcosm of a world under threat from outside aggression, whether environmental or military (as in the case of Hallie's Nicaraguan community), with Codi's biology students' terrarium acting "like a time capsule" in which everybody tries to "save little bits of Grace" (148).

Kingsolver's sense of environmental responsibility is evident in the civic responsibility exhibited by Emelina's neighbour who buys excess roof tiles for a future he may not see. This trope recurs in *Prodigal Summer*, with Garnett Walker buying enough shingles to repair his farmhouse roof even after his death, suggesting that he thinks beyond his own generation.⁴⁴ Codi wants to teach the local children to "have a cultural memory" and to be "custodians of the earth" for future generations (332), just as *Prodigal Summer's* Deanna pledges to ensure that her child understands ecological interconnection. To compensate for having no children of her own, Codi exhibits her investment in the future of the community through her work. She likens her job teaching the local children to being on her own "in the Garden of Eden," where she is "expected to teach the entire living world to these kids" (109). Codi's knowledge of science, her righteous anger about pollution, and her personal mission to teach about birth control, represent her interpretation of home. In Kingsolver's fiction, "home" is reliant upon the land, and environmental pollution signals the dangerous lack of knowledge or ability to think about the future. These concerns emerge as Codi rants at her biology class; "You kids think this pollution shit is not your problem, right? Somebody will clean up the mess. It's not your fault. Well, your attitude stinks...People can forget, and forget, and forget, but the land has a memory" (254-255). This focus on political and ecological awareness complements Codi's biological instinct for survival.

⁴⁴ The neighbour describes how "I bought two hundred extras when I put this roof on" (AD 275).

Kingsolver uses coyotes as symbols of her characters' instinct for survival and ecologically sound "ground orientation" in both *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer*. Coyotes represent the ability to carry home within themselves, rather than in possessions. As Loyd suggests, "We're like coyotes...Get to a good place, turn around three times in the grass, and you're home. Once you know how, you can always do that, no matter what. You won't forget" (235). For Loyd, as for Kingsolver's coyotes, the ability to make a home overrides the idea that there may be a single place where home exists. In Loyd's words, "The important thing isn't the house. It's the ability to make it. You carry that...wherever you go" (235), as he explains why he believes women are so central to Pueblo communities. Examples such as these frame Loyd as an idealized male representative for Kingsolver's ideas and risk undermining the plausibility of his character. Kingsolver's realistic dialogue is threatened by the politically correct, masculine, tender, and desperately representative holistic Native American Loyd.

While Loyd's apparent perfection may be unconvincing at times, his lengthy monologues speak directly to both Codi and the reader, elucidating her search for belonging. Like coyotes who just turn in the grass to settle, Hallie also belongs "wherever she was" (30). Kingsolver's short story "Homeland" further elucidates this idea in its description of Native Americans carrying "the truth of themselves in a sheltered place inside the flesh" in order to maintain their identity.⁴⁵ Codi conversely tries to lose her sense of ego in order to fit in, arguing that if she kept "trying to be what everybody wanted," she would "soon be insipid enough to fit in everywhere" (201). Hallie's ability to fit is not due to a dilution of her self, but an engagement with her environment, and it is this realization that brings Codi back to Grace at the novel's end.

By voicing nature through her female characters and marginalized groups, Kingsolver offers an alternative idea of home as the ecological web in which we are all

⁴⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Homeland and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 2.

embroiled. She is not alone in representing Native Americans as the embodiment of this recognition of ecological interrelatedness. That Loyd's surname is Peregrina draws parallels with the birds of prey so symbolically important to Pueblo rituals during which "the eagle carries people's thoughts to the spirits in the sky. Animal messengers for the small, human hope" (242). By allying nature with the "other" in a hopeful way, Kingsolver suggests that those outside of patriarchy are better equipped to achieve belonging within the environment.

Animal Dreams was published one year after Kingsolver's non-fiction account of the 1983 Arizona mining strike, *Holding the Line*, and two years after her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, which focused on Native American adoption. It marks the consolidation of a thematic and narrative approach which has structured all of Kingsolver's subsequent work. It is her first novel to use multiple points of view, although this is clearly inspired by the plethora of women's voices in her self-authored intertext, *Holding the Line*, and she has employed this technique in every subsequent novel. Having explored Kingsolver's emerging narrative reliance on multiple perspectives and absent characters both within and across her texts, this chapter suggests that these techniques exemplify her attempt at offering the reader a tapestry of representation from which to choose (or be given the illusion of choosing) the story which most engages them.

The importance of memory has been analysed as a narrative tool allowing the reader to contextualize even Codi's first-person narrative, and as a thematic device through which to address the influence of the past on the political future of individuals and communities. These techniques and the related focus on memory offer a framework for reading which predicates the search for "ground orientation" on the need to challenge identity in order to discover it fully. Kingsolver notes that "It's very hard to

criticize this country, our domestic or our foreign policy...or our Americanism,” and claims that “given the chance to do that,” she is compelled to do so.⁴⁶ I suggest that Codi’s personal political awakening reflects Kingsolver’s proclaimed compulsion to effect political change through fiction. Codi is aware of her weaknesses as well as her strengths, and comes to terms with her childhood and community legacy, much as Kingsolver positions the critical intention of her work as a way of coming to terms with the legacy of her “Americanism.” Codi’s story culminates in the apparent location of her long-sought “ground orientation” through her engagement with community.

While this thesis argues that Kingsolver chooses her subjects just as she creates her characters, in order to fit with her own didactic political agenda, there is a tension between the political efficacy and popular appeal of her work. This tension is apparent in the continuities and discontinuities between the narratives of her fictional and non-fictional stories of Arizona mining communities. Kingsolver’s revised 1996 introduction to *Holding the Line* defends her compulsion to write so-called “cautionary tales” of political awareness and interrelatedness:

A novel at its best sheds insight on life, but the reader may choose to take or leave its lessons. I would like in this case to narrow that choice, and so this is not a novel. It is a cautionary tale. Its lesson is: watch your back, America...What happened to them could happen to you, or me, and perhaps sometime it will. For better or for worse, this is the story of what could become of us. (xxiii)

I suggest that this stated motivation for writing *Holding the Line* also emerges in *Animal Dreams*’ social and political “lessons.” The reader may still choose whether to “take or leave” these messages, but *Animal Dreams* offers a none the less “cautionary tale” and to a far wider readership than *Holding the Line*. It is an idea to which this thesis will return as it concludes.

⁴⁶ Epstein, 36.

CHAPTER 4

**“This is a work of fiction”: The Political Efficacy of
Inter/Intratextual Dynamics in *The Poisonwood Bible***

Barbara Kingsolver prefaces *The Poisonwood Bible* with an Author’s Note which opens with the words “This is a work of fiction.” This proclamation suggests that without a caveat, the novel could be confused with a factual account or memoir of late twentieth-century Congolese history. The Bibliography appended to the novel also contributes to such pseudo-factual trappings, and is illuminated by Kingsolver’s suggestion that she loves fiction “for what it tells me about life...for how true it is.”¹ As Kate Turabian notes, “Researchers cite sources to be fair to other researchers, but also to earn their readers’ trust.”² The Author’s Note, Bibliography, and novel’s inter- and intra-texts referenced by the characters within the world of the novel, all contribute towards the sense that this is an informed piece of work which readers may trust to represent a reliable and researched account of the Congo. By eliciting her readers’ trust through the citation of sources, whether they are of literary inspiration or contextual detail, the novel’s political values appear to be legitimised. This chapter explores the extent to which this appeal to legitimacy underpins Kingsolver’s political strategy of raising awareness of her chosen issues through an appeal to popular readership.

Developed from the short story “My Father’s Africa,” the title of which highlights its colonial and patriarchal preoccupations, *The Poisonwood Bible* tells the story of a Baptist missionary family from Georgia that moves to the Congolese village of Kilanga in 1959. It spans thirty years of their personal and political experiences in both Africa and America. Kingsolver claims that childhood time spent in a small village in

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder: Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 210.

² Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*, 7th Edition, Revised by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 134.

central Congo gave the place “permanent importance” in her mind,³ imbuing her motivation to write the novel with what Doris Lessing calls the “old fever” of sensory memory.⁴ Kingsolver claims that the influence of childhood memories, combined with an adulthood of political activism and interest in what she calls “cultural imperialism and post-colonial history,” shaped her desire to write this novel.⁵ She purports to have spent “almost a year just honing the different voices” and a total of four years writing *The Poisonwood Bible*,⁶ claiming that she would be dead before becoming “truly smart enough to write this book” so she had “better get it started while I was still kicking.”⁷ This chapter interrogates the effect of these claims and of the novel’s uncited intertexts and intratexts, and explores the work’s ability to live up to the expectations of cultural and political importance which such claims encourage.

The Author’s Note in *The Poisonwood Bible* blurs memoir and novel, history and literature, and fact and fiction. Combining a fictional village and unusual missionary family with a real country and historical figures such as Patrice Lumumba, political events corroborated by recorded history, and a bibliography for readers “who might wish to know more of the facts underpinning the fiction”⁸ compounds this seeming paradox. Asserting “This is a work of fiction” while assuring the reader that “The

³ Harper Collins. “FAQs.” *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*

<http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question11> (accessed October 12, 2007)

⁴ Doris Lessing, *This Was the Old Chief’s Country: Collected African Stories, Volume One* (1951). St Albans, Herts: Triad/Panther Books, 1979: 10.

⁵ Harper Collins. “FAQs.” *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*

<http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question11> (accessed October 12, 2007). For an exploration of Kingsolver’s representation of exceptionalism in the novel and the political agenda which apparently shaped it, see Susan Strehle, “Chosen People: American Exceptionalism in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49.4 (Summer 2008): 412-429 and Diane Kunz, “White Men in Africa: On Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*,” in *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America’s Past (and Each Other)*, edited by Mark C. Carnes, 285-297 (New York: Simon, 2001). Comparing Kingsolver’s work to that of Margaret Laurence, Kimberly A. Koza interrogates their representations of African countries on the eve of independence and details the challenges facing such Western women writers in much the same way as I explore the challenge of representing Native Americans through a discussion of Kingsolver and Sherman Alexie in Chapter Two. “The Africa of Two Western Women Writers: Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Laurence,” *Critique* 44 (2003): 284-94.

⁶ Ibid. <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/question04> (accessed August 8, 2004)

⁷ Ibid. <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question12> (accessed October 12, 2007)

⁸ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), ix. Subsequent references will appear in the text in parentheses.

historical figures and events described here are as real as I could render them with the help of recorded history, in all its fascinating variations” (ix), Kingsolver suggests that *The Poisonwood Bible* may be read as an historical novel – without having to meet the academic standards of an historical study of Congolese politics and society. Kingsolver’s recognition of the “fascinating variations” of recorded history, however, and her self-proclaimed reliance on “memory, travel in other parts of Africa, and *many people’s* accounts of the natural, cultural, and social history of the Congo / Zaire” (ix, italics are my emphasis) highlights the fallibility of a universal truth or single viewpoint. The novel’s structure, with its subjective variations on shared experiences, also emphasizes the fallibility of objective narrative “truth.”⁹

In addition to unpacking the importance of author-cited intertexts, this chapter explores the intertexts which Kingsolver neglects to mention or credit, including *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, and other of her own novels. In the Author’s Note, Bibliography, and in interviews, Kingsolver cites influences on the novel including *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Kingsolver downplayed the influence of *Little Women* on the novel when asked whether she was consciously trying to create a literary parallel, conceding that she “considered that other famous family” but insisting with a wry dismissal that “the parallels don’t go too far. Louisa May Alcott didn’t put any snakes in her book.”¹⁰ While there are undoubtedly parallels between Alcott and Kingsolver’s novels with their female-dominated families, character dynamics and gendered explorations of social mores, this chapter considers the tension between the novel’s other inter- and intratexts

⁹ Anne Marie Austenfeld also examines the subjective variations of the five related female narrators, one dead, and goes beyond my reading of the five women as representative of different political and philosophical viewpoints to suggest that these narrators mark the emergence of “a new fictional tool” which departs from familiar literary forms. “The Revelatory Narrative Circle in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36.2 (2006): 293-305.

¹⁰ Ibid. <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question19> (accessed October 12, 2007)

to offer a more elucidating insight into the effectiveness of the political aspects of Kingsolver's work.

This analysis of the effectiveness of Kingsolver's intertextual connections underpins my exploration the effectiveness of her proclaimed political goal of using *The Poisonwood Bible* to raise awareness of interrelated sites of oppression. This chapter also examines the intratexts referred to by characters within the novel, such as the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the Bible, in order to address Kingsolver's use of known history and culture as a tool to emphasise the work's representational legitimacy. Exploring the structural and thematic parallels inspired by inter- and intratexts, enables the unpacking of both Kingsolver's construction of *The Poisonwood Bible* as an informed and informative work designed to enlighten American readers about their own colonial history, and the idea that this is not "just" a story, but a parable of biblical import.¹¹

In keeping with the novel's claim to enlighten readers, in the introduction, Kingsolver states "I couldn't have written the book at all without two remarkable sources of literary inspiration, approximately equal in size: K.E. Laman's Dictionnaire Kikongo-Francais, and the King James Bible" (ix). Reference to the Kikongo-French dictionary highlights the novel's preoccupation with linguistic multiplicity, while the novel's studied biblical parallels will be explored in relation to its author's claims to political importance.

The structure of the novel mirrors the thematic developments of its parallel biblical passages, emphasizing Kingsolver's reliance on the influential nature of her inter- and intratexts as shorthand for the moral and political resonance of her own work. The Bible is the only text to function as both inter- and intratext to the novel:

¹¹ Verlyn Klinkenborg extends this idea of enlightening American readers to suggest that *The Poisonwood Bible* is a novel about America, a "portrait, in absentia, of the nation that sent the Prices to save the souls of a people for whom it felt only contempt." "Going Native," *New York Times Book Review* (October 18, 1998): 7.

Books One to Five each open with a biblical quotation and chapter from minister's wife Orleanna, decades after the Price family's time in the Congo. Each chapter is headed with the name of the character and the order of these characters remains the same throughout the Genesis chapters of Book One: Orleanna, Leah, Ruth May, Rachel, Adah. Adah herself notes this hierarchy as she discusses the sisters' roles in the family; "This is our permanent order: Leah, Ruth May, Rachel, Adah. Neither chronological nor alphabetical but it rarely varies, unless Ruth May gets distracted or falls out of line" (72).

This rigid pattern of biblical quotation and the opening chapter in the voice of Orleanna foregrounds the hold that religion and matriarchal influence has upon the daughters' narratives during this period. Book Six breaks this structural model, opening with a quotation from "Song of Three Children" in *The Apocrypha* into a chapter narrated by oldest daughter Rachel at the age of fifty, mirroring the shifting political narratives. The historical context of the books parallels the fortunes of individual characters. Leah's is the lead narrative during a period in which the Congolese elected Patrice Lumumba as Prime Minister in the hope of breaking the chains of colonialism, while Rachel's narrative takes prominence during the 1980s as the Mobutu regime in Zaire reaches the height of its power and she flourishes in her own pseudo-colonial role as proprietor of a whites-only hotel in the French Congo. Book Six also contains two further chapters, from Leah and Adah, confirming the absence of Ruth May and Orleanna which is emphasized by the book being prefaced by the biblical "Song of *Three Children*."¹² Ruth May's death means she has, indeed, "fallen out of line" with the sisters' familiar pattern while Orleanna no longer heads the scattered family or offers a sense of home to the girls.

Ruth May's given Congolese name, Bandu, means "the littlest one on the bottom. And it means the reason for everything" (268). She is the youngest, and her

¹² Italics are my emphasis.

death is the “reason for everything” that subsequently happens to the Price family. She is represented as an asexual mother figure, playing Mother May I? with Congolese children and lying in bed with Orleana when they are both ill. As the “mother” in the game, the Congolese children keep asking for permission at her gate even after she is killed, just as Orleana keeps seeking forgiveness from Ruth May for allowing her to die. Both “mother” figure Ruth May and biological mother Orleana are consumed by the very things that literally and emotionally kill them. The youngest Price girl chooses to remain in the Congo to risk her life by voting “for Jesus so hard her pebble struck the cross and bounced” (380), while Orleana sacrifices herself to her family. Immersing herself in the Congo, Ruth May befriends local children, resists American medicine by refusing to take her quinine pills, and accepts the Congolese protective nkisi token from Nelson, which will ensure that instead of dying, she “will just disappear for a second and then...turn up someplace else, where it’s safe” (269). When she is killed by the indigenous green mamba snake, Ruth May’s narrative doesn’t die, but “turns up” in that of the snake safely ensconced in the trees where she “could be right next to you and you wouldn’t even know it” (141). Orleana never escapes from the guilt of her daughter’s death, and spends the rest of her life seeking forgiveness from Ruth May as she works to raise money for African aid charities.

Leah’s social activism represents her desire to “belong somewhere, damn it” (538), as she tries to cast off her own whiteness through motherhood to a black child. Like Codi in *Animal Dreams*, Leah sees motherhood as a source of belonging and identity which transcends race and may allow her to “scrub the hundred years’ war off this white skin” and become part of the African communities in which she lives with husband Anatole (538). Leah’s desperate need to belong is evident in her pride that she could carry a parcel on her head “like any woman here!” (442). As she looks at the various shades of her sons’ skins, she describes how whiteness disappears altogether

over time. While she is distraught that “white and black lives are different kinds of currencies” (494), Leah’s search for belonging indicates her awareness that her two families (the Prices and the Ngembes) will each be in some way defined as “other.” Race thus joins gender and environment as sources of identity and exclusion with interlinked sources of oppression in the narrative.

While Anatole notes that the parallel name of Lea in Kikongo means “nothing much” (236), he names Leah Béene and thus gives her meaning in an African context. She is “purest truth,” and is reliant upon him for meaning just as he is upon her. She describes how she “took him and held on,” leaving Anatole with “no choice” but to stay with her (455). She “colonises” him because he enriches her identity, in much the same way as the novel reminds readers that foreign powers used the wealth of African nations including the Congo to ensure global economic power. Yet later, Leah refers to Anatole as “cultivating me like a small inheritance of land where his future resides” (453), indicating that theirs is a relationship of mutual need.

Rachel performs her femininity, using it to manipulate men and to benefit materially. Femininity is not associated with motherhood (she cannot get pregnant because Axelroot left her infertile) but with sex and performance. Rachel exploits a male fascination with sex in order to advance both financially and socially, mirroring the behaviour of the colonists who exploited Joseph Mobutu’s desire for power to their own benefit. She describes how, “when men want to kiss you they act like they are just on the brink of doing something that’s going to change the whole wide world” (334). As the emblematic temptress of market capitalism, when men embrace Rachel, they often *are* changing the world. Her first “husband” Eeben Axelroot plots the assassination of Lumumba and her second, Daniel DuPree, is Attaché to the French Ambassador to South Africa during the late 1960s. Her guiltless reliance upon sexual allure and

selfishness means that, “Instead of getting trampled I simply floated like a stick in a river, carried along on everyone else’s power” (344).

Like Rachel, Mobutu benefits while others toil, with the eldest Price girl suggesting that she has cast off oppression and poverty and made something of herself because of the hard work of her servants. Despite this proclaimed overcoming of oppression, Rachel’s infertility and her overt sexuality suggest that she has actually been co-opted by patriarchy, just as Mobutu, in trying to raise the profile of the Congo along with his own bank balance, became an adjunct to his imperialist American sponsors. Indeed, Rachel’s performance of femininity does not free her from oppression but makes her part of its machinery. That Rachel will not allow Leah’s black husband to stay at her hotel underlines the effect of *The Poisonwood Bible*’s fractured narrative structure in emphasising the different perspectives on race and nation denied by the colonial mindset.

Book Seven, entitled “The Eyes in the Trees,” opens without a biblical quotation and consists of only one chapter without a character heading. It is the only book in *The Poisonwood Bible* without a parallel biblical book, although it contains a wealth of religious symbols. From the hopeful, naïve imperialism which structures the novel’s Genesis book, this final book points to an omniscient Nature as narrator, and specifically to the all-seeing spirit of Ruth May now contained in the body of the green mamba snake.¹³ This final book is a reprise of the Price women’s forest journey from the first book of the novel. In Book One, “The mother waves a graceful hand in front of her as she leads the way, parting curtain after curtain of spiders’ webs” (6), while in Book Seven, “The mother leads them on, blue-eyed, waving a hand in front of her to part a curtain of spiders’ webs” (608), reiterating the centrality of matriarch Orleanna who leads the others’ narratives. Orleanna’s encounter with the okapi is also revisited in

¹³ The problem of representing nature anthropomorphically is addressed in more detail in Chapter Five with reference to the final “coyote” chapter in *Prodigal Summer*.

this final book: “he is startled by the picnic, and his cautious instincts drive him deeper into the jungle, where he finds a mate and lives through the year” (608). This cyclical return to the beginning emphasizes the biblical influence on Book Seven and Kingsolver’s preoccupation with ecological and political interrelatedness, which ensures that “Every life is different because you passed this way and touched history” (608).

In order to unpack Kingsolver’s biblical parallels, which inform the novel’s courting of popular and critical appeal, this section will map these parallels in more detail. In the novel’s first book, Genesis, the Price family arrives in the remote Congolese village of Kilanga from Bethlehem, Georgia to establish a Baptist ministry for one year. Such biblically-resonant origins emphasise the family’s mission of salvation and also gesture towards Nathan’s misguided conception of himself as a Jesus figure, hailing from an American Bethlehem, which he chose “off a map” while Orleanna was heavily pregnant with the couple’s first child. Kingsolver’s opening book is paralleled by the Old Testament Book of Genesis, which charts the beginning of time, life, sin and salvation.¹⁴ Book One of the novel opens with Genesis 1:28, a verse also quoted by Garnett Walker in *Prodigal Summer* to justify his attempts to subdue and control nature: “And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion/over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”¹⁵ This theme of rejuvenation and nature’s cyclical return recurs throughout Kingsolver’s novels. In *Prodigal Summer*, Nannie Rawley interprets this Genesis verse as a celebration of interrelatedness, while Nathan’s singular urge to control both nature and women emphasises his inability to understand the

¹⁴ All references to the Bible refer to the King James Version. In her opening Author’s Note, Kingsolver cites this as the version she used for reference. This thesis employs *The King James Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988).

¹⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 188.

multiple interpretations of words, events and beliefs. The multiple voices, meanings of words, and interpretations of events in the Congo provided by Kingsolver's protagonists offer the chance of representational clarity and political change which can emerge as a result of the effect of this on readers, in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's emphasis on the novel as a "developing genre" predicated upon change.¹⁶

Genesis centres on four major events: the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, and the history of four great patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. Kingsolver replaces the history of these patriarchs with the narratives of the four Price sisters; Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May Price, as they begin their lives in Africa. Despite being born in Georgia, their spiritual, political, and personal awakenings take place in Africa. The four sisters provide the central narratives in Book One. They are young and female and in employing biblical parallels, Kingsolver highlights the importance of the voices of such characters as witnesses, purveyors, and contributors to history.¹⁷

The second book of the novel, *The Revelation*, finds parallel with "The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John" from the New Testament, highlighting the alternation between the Old Testament and either New Testament or Apocrypha in the books of *The Poisonwood Bible*.¹⁸ "The Revelation" is written during a time of persecution, focuses on "the unveiling of something previously unrevealed,"¹⁹ and is both apocalyptic and prophetic. Book Two of *The Poisonwood Bible* contains revelations of an impending flood of change for Methuselah, the Prices, and the Congo. The uncomfortable truths which Nathan has been avoiding in Book One are made explicit in

¹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 33.

¹⁷ While I focus on Kingsolver's political and commercial imperative to represent the voices of these female narrators, Kristin J. Jacobson reads them as evidence of *The Poisonwood Bible* as neodomestic fiction, which she suggests "recycles the domestic novel in historically conscious ways that posit alternatives to conventional white, middle-class home." "The Neodomestic American Novel: The Politics of Home in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 24.1 (2005): 105–27.

¹⁸ Books One, Three and Five find their titular and thematic parallels with Old Testament books while Book Two parallels a New Testament book, Books Four and Six draw inspiration from Apocryphal books, and Book Seven, as previously mentioned, finds no titular biblical inspiration.

¹⁹ *The King James Study Bible*, 1978.

Book Two, as Kilanga's village chief Tata Ndu is revealed to believe that "bringing the Christian word to these people is leading them to corrupt ways" (147), and fellow Baptist Mission family the Underdowns advise the Prices to leave the country as Belgium is granting independence to Congo. Orleanna admits in the face of these political realities, "We had no idea" (189), but Nathan experiences no such moment of clarity, stubbornly retaining his paternalistic religious zeal and announcing, "This is not a nation...If these people are to be united at all, they will come together as God's lambs in their simple love for Christ. Nothing else will move them forward. Not politics, not a desire for freedom – they don't have the temperament or the intellect for such things" (192). Nathan is told by a Belgian doctor, "if you're looking for Congo's new leaders, do not bother looking in a school hall. You might better look in prison – Mr Lumumba landed himself there after the riots last week. By the time he is out I expect he will have a larger following than Jesus" (139). It is a statement that portends the demise of Belgian colonial rule and of missionary Christianity.

Book One ends with Nathan freeing the family's tame parrot Methuselah, whose name has come to be regarded both as a synonym for any living creature of great age and a prophecy of impending disaster. The Old Testament describes the figure of Methuselah as having lived for "nine hundred eighty and seven years" and dying in the year of the Great Flood.²⁰ Methuselah has become "too tamed" and forgets how to fly away and eat by himself (133) and Orleanna likens herself to the parrot, describing how she "cowered beside my cage, and though my soul hankered after the mountain, I found, like Methuselah, I had no wings" (228). While Methuselah is killed and thus returns to nature, the Price women scatter and the Congo struggles to wrest itself from its colonial power base. Such explicit parallels indicate the novel's attempt to equate the disempowerment by patriarchal forces of women, nature, and Africa.

²⁰ Genesis 5:25.

Adah confirms these parallel oppressions, noting that Methuselah was “curiously exempt from the Reverend’s rules” in much the same way that Nathan finds “the Congolese people beyond his power” (69). If Methuselah is a metaphor for a colonised African nation, he still needs the Price family just as they desperately need Mama Tataba: the embodiment of local knowledge “upon whom our lives depended” (103). The attempts of Africa and Orleanna to cast off oppression are connected by Nathan’s inability to understand either of them. Orleanna may feel as though she has been destroyed by Nathan, to the extent that “bullets would pass right through her” just like the “already dead” Simia warriors (499), but she manages to lead her remaining children away from his patriarchal dictatorship. Orleanna protests that she is “an inferior force” (218), who is initially “Occupied as if by a foreign power” (226). Adopting the ecofeminist association of the oppression of women with the oppression of a land, which Kingsolver develops in *Prodigal Summer*, *The Poisonwood Bible* attempts to stage parallel oppressions within a political allegory. It is difficult, however, to reconcile Orleanna’s “occupation” by her chosen husband with the literal occupation of the Congo by Belgian forces and American-supported dictator Joseph Mobutu.

Different voices are represented in Adah’s narration, underpinned by her assertion that “When you do not speak, other people presume you to be deaf or feeble-minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations” (40). It is unsurprising that the almost mute child Adah is the character who most often repeats others’ revealing statements, emphasizing her preoccupation with language. Adah’s chapters offer keen observations of Rachel’s misuse of language with its unwitting insights into the family’s new life in the Congo, or “The Pale Which We Are Way Beyond” as the eldest Price girl calls it (39). The charting of Rachel’s linguistic errors by her sisters offers insights into the subconscious slippage between racial and gender hierarchies, as she notes, “But the men, now that is a course of a different color” (51). Other darkly comic assertions reveal

the true status of relationships within the family. Discussing her union with Eeben Axelroot and, by implication, her experience of her parent's marriage, Rachel allows that "We Christians have our own system of marriage. And it is called Monotony" (460).

While Rachel's character is revealed in her misuse of language, Adah's understanding of the language similarly reveals her fears. Despite being a reluctant twin, for example, she is particularly troubled by the Kikongo word "Kwilu" which she notes is "without a single rhyme" (38), for it has no complementing partner, no twin sound. While her disdainful attitude towards her father's religion suggests an early tendency towards atheism, she describes her pursuit of science as the search for "a religion that serves" (463). Her character represents empirical analysis; she becomes a scientist, she highlights the inaccuracies of newspaper reports, and she is exacting even in her personal life. The male doctor with whom she has an affair in Atlanta "cures" her crooked walk, only to be condemned for being unable to see the beauty and necessity in imperfection.²¹ Adah's outsider status is writ large upon her body, which becomes a tool for her resistance to oppressive forces, while the scarred bodies of the Congolese expose their battles against colonialism. As Ruth May notes: "their skin is a map of all the sorrows in their lives" (140). This helps to explain why Adah is so drawn to fellow outsider Anatole, exiled in the Congo by his education, and a marked outsider in the US due to his scarred face.

In addition to their physical markers of difference (Rachel's preoccupation with her blond hair, Leah's with her whiteness and Adah's repeated reference to her crooked walk, for example), the Price women's "burden" is also carried in their material possessions and political preconceptions as they enter the Congo under the weight of

²¹ For a thorough examination of Kingsolver's representation of disability in the novel, see Stephen D. Fox, "Barbara Kingsolver and Keri Hulme: Disability, Family, and Culture," *Critique* 45 (2004): 405–20. Fox interrogates the extent to which Kingsolver departs from traditional literary representations of disability and suggests that she creates a pivotal character such as Adah to define the relationship of their culture to disability.

patriarchal oppression, as well as frying pans and cake mix. Kingsolver's macropolitical interests are emphasised by the arrogance of Nathan's paternalism. Through Leah, Nathan proclaims that he will "demonstrate to all of Africa how to grow crops!" (44). He levels the beds "as flat as the Great Plains" as he tries to impose American values on foreign soil (48). This attempt to recreate his own nation as a pioneer in Africa is thwarted by nature which ensures there are no insects in the Congo to pollinate a garden planted with American seeds (92). Even Nathan's belief that "God created a world of work and rewards...on a big balanced scale" (43), is tied to a pioneer's sense of entitlement and the idea that people need rewards to coerce them into working.

This contrasts markedly with Loyd's idea in *Animal Dreams* that people work hard as tenants of the land to maintain balance with the environment and to repay the land for the gift of survival it offers. For Loyd, the land is a religion in itself, while for Nathan, religion justifies his attempts to subdue nature and, by association, women. Indeed, Nathan "felt it had been a mistake to bend his will" to African nature when he replants the beds (111). Leah recognises that in the Congo, as in Loyd's Pueblo community, "the land owns the people" (321), and it is no coincidence that the "Congolese sense of balance is spectacular" (122). The novel's emphasis on balance relies on the recognition that we are all part of nature, that the land does own us. Nathan is thus established as a patriarchal and destructive source of imbalance as well as a product of his historical context and experience. While Nathan is the closest that Kingsolver comes to portraying a villain in any of her novels, condemnation is tempered by the explanation of his behaviour as shaped by his wartime experiences, implying that the injustice of war is at the root of the Price family's dissolution.

Book Three of *The Poisonwood Bible* is entitled The Judges in reference to the eponymous biblical book, wherein the children of Israel fail to maintain high spiritual standards and God brings oppressors to afflict them. Their land was contested by

expansionist empires to both the north (Hittites) and south (Egyptians).²² Book Three of the novel opens with a quotation from “The Judges,” as an angel reminds the people of Israel that they had sworn to reject the false idols of the land’s native inhabitants: “And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars...They shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you” (213).²³ Like the biblical book which condemned the adoption of “native” religious practices by the holy people of Israel, Nathan’s angry rejection of compromise in his Christianizing mission sets the tone for the third book of Kingsolver’s novel.

In *The Judges*, Ruth May and Orleanna take to their beds with fever and while they do survive, the village children also get sick and many die. The mothers of the dead children then keep away from Nathan’s church, because they “had already tied the *nkisi* around the child’s neck or wrist, a fetish from Nganga Kuvudundu to ward off evil. They were good mothers and did not neglect this protection” (336). The children’s deaths and the ant plague which ends Book Three, however, only confirm Nathan’s belief that the villagers are being punished for not following God. The ant plague is presented ambiguously as being at once a destructive curse and a necessary cleansing ritual for the community, which reconfirms their faith in nature. Book Three makes such alternative interpretations of spiritual wellbeing explicit, with the visit from Kilanga’s former Baptist minister Brother Fowles resulting in a showdown with Nathan, who scorns the Congolese “pagan Gods and false idols” (284), while Brother Fowles praises their “intelligence and the great feeling for the living world around them” (284).

Orleanna opens this third book by begging for forgiveness and understanding from Ruth May. She implores her daughter; “I want you to find me innocent” (9),²⁴ and tries to explain how she came to be “married to Nathan’s plan. His magnificent *will*”

²² *The King James Study Bible*, 401.

²³ *Ibid*, 405. *The Judges*, 2:2-3.

²⁴ In saying “you,” Orleanna speaks directly to both Ruth May and the reader in seeking redemption and forgiveness.

(226). Orleanna's recognition of the religious imperialism of Nathan's will emphasises the colonial underpinning of 'The Judges' apparent suggestion that the rejection of indigenous religious rituals is the only holy course of action. That Orleanna describes being consumed by Nathan's will, in parallel with God's will to punish the people of Israel for their "false" idolatry of native religion, emphasizes the minister's dominance over the narrative. Orleanna alludes to Lot offering to sacrifice his daughters in Genesis 19:8-14, only to possess them himself when his wife is turned into a pillar of salt. In the opening chapter of Book Two: The Revelation, Orleanna explains why it took her so long to leave Nathan, claiming that she "was blinded from the constant looking back" just like "Lot's wife" (111-112). Orleanna presents her own deference to Nathan's will as the apostasy from which she needs deliverance, while Nathan considers his adaptation to Africa as weakness from which he seeks deliverance. This pattern of "apostasy, oppression, repentance, and deliverance by heaven-sent deliverers" is a key theme in the biblical Book of Judges and is reflected by the novel's multiple interpretations of what the sin is and how they may make amends for it.²⁵

Nathan fervently adheres to his literalist interpretation of the biblical Judges' condemnation of so-called "false idols" as justification for his blanket imposition of Baptist (and American) beliefs without recognition of the cultural, political and religious context of the Congo. When he "bends his will to Africa" over the planting of seeds, he seeks forgiveness from God by returning to his uncompromising position, which Leah likens to "God with his back turned" (355). Orleanna suggests that she is the subject of Nathan's doctrine, which is itself the "false idol" for which she seeks forgiveness from her dead daughter, Ruth May. Leah similarly recognizes her subjugation by her father and his religion and spends the rest of her life rejecting his arrogant imperialist approach, even when this causes suffering to her own family. Leah seeks forgiveness

²⁵ *The King James Study Bible*, 408.

from Ruth May, who dies on the same day as Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba is murdered, but also from her husband Anatole whose political loss she conflates with her personal grief.

Book Four of *The Poisonwood Bible*, Bel and the Serpent, and the eponymous Apocryphal passage are structured by parallel narrative developments.²⁶ The Apocryphal verses of Bel and the Serpent tell how the Babylonians and their King worshipped the idol Bel and every day left offerings of food and wine for their “living God.” Kingsolver opens Book Four with a quotation to this effect from Babylonian King Astyages: “Do you not think that Bel is a living God? Do you not see how much he eats and drinks every day?” (357).²⁷ Daniel, believing that only “the Lord my God...is the living God,”²⁸ sets a trap using ashes from the fire to catch the Priests who were actually consuming the offerings left for Bel. It is this passage, and Daniel’s use of ashes to lay a trap, which Leah recreates to catch the person responsible for leaving the green mamba snake in the kitchen house. Rachel describes how they decide “to set a trap, like Daniel in the temple” (409). In *The Apocrypha*, upon discovering that Bel is a false idol, the King kills the priests and Daniel offers further proof of the Lord God as the only living God by slaying the dragon. The community then attempts to kill Daniel for destroying the idols and the belief system in which they had traditionally trusted by placing him into a lions’ den. But God protects him.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, many important members of the community turn against Leah for her role in the hunt, which undermines the traditional gender roles upon which the community’s daily functioning relies. Leah defies the assumption that a white woman cannot belong within an African culture, and the idea that she cannot be a

²⁶ The book of “Bel and the Serpent” is also known as “The Idol Bel and the Dragon,” or “Bel and the Dragon” in different versions of *The Apocrypha*.

²⁷ See also “The History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon, Verse 6” in *The Apocrypha: Authorized (King James) Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 111.

²⁸ “The History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon, Verse 25” in *The Apocrypha*, 112.

provider in the Western, male tradition.²⁹ Even as he defends Leah's skill as a hunter, her childhood friend Nelson "ridiculed Gbenye's aim by calling him nkento. A woman" (397). Adah casts Leah as an "oblivious Hester Prynne," carrying her letter in the form of "the green capital D of her bow slung over her shoulder. D for Dramatic, or Diana of the Hunt, or Devil Take Your Social Customs" (314-315), rather than the A for Adulterer originally described in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Like fellow truth-seeker Daniel, however, Leah is protected from death, but her actions divide the community and indirectly lead to the death of her sister. Kuvudundu seeks to scare the family into compliance with local customs by planting in the family's kitchen house the snake which kills Ruth May. He blames the conflict over the hunt on Leah and Anatole's resistance to the status quo and his actions confirm the association of Leah and fighting oppression. Like the Congolese independence fighters, Leah clashes with enforcers of tradition and insists upon change.

As a result, the innocent Ruth May is killed, just as the Priests' children and wives are slain in the Apocryphal passage. Furthermore, the power struggle between idol Bel and Daniel's Lord finds a parallel in Tata Ndu's election which pits Jesus Christ as "personal God, Kilanga village" against the local customs and rituals (376). In this way, Tata Kuvudundu and Nathan Price represent two opposing viewpoints, the singularity of which the multiple protagonists of Kingsolver's novel suggest is insufficient to represent truth. Just as Kuvudundu fulfils his own prophecy that "the snakes will come out of the ground and seek our houses instead of hiding in their own" for allowing a woman to participate in the hunt (385), so Nathan shapes Christianity to his own ends, "announcing his own calendar and placing upon it Easter on the Fourth of July" (52). While Kuvudundu assumes an alliance with nature, so Nathan attempts to subdue nature. Both men, vying for the role of personal saviour of Kilanga, seek to secure their

²⁹ Women are already providers in African culture, yet Leah aspires to a dominant form of provision associated with a pioneering masculine hero conquering nature in US culture.

personal positions, and in privileging their own viewpoints, are each guilty of worshipping the false idol of self.

Nathan's obsession with *The Apocrypha* and Kingsolver's use of direct parallels in structure and plot between these "lost" books of the Bible and books four and six of *The Poisonwood Bible* emphasize the Price family's isolation from conventional Baptist preaching. This is also highlighted by the contrast between the Prices and the Fowles, and the ending of financial support from the Baptist Missionary League. The extreme religious zeal of Nathan's preaching, his unbending attitude to his family, environment and the beleaguered congregation also frames Kingsolver's novel as a critique of colonialism rather than of Christianity. As such, Kingsolver maintains the potential for popularity among a Christian readership by representing the dangerous failures of Nathan Price's Congolese mission as resulting from his extreme religiosity, patriarchal imperialism and wartime trauma – rather than the teachings of the Christian church.³⁰

Nathan dominates the Kilanga-set chapters, and remains a silent but resolutely dominant character in the rest of the novel, even when the family has split apart geographically. However, while it is the Price women and not Nathan who speak, Nathan's narrative dominance is evidence of his patriarchal control and his symbolic function as the embodiment of colonialism. Much like Rachel Carson and Cole Widener in *Prodigal Summer* and Hallie Noline in *Animal Dreams*, Nathan is the novel's absent centre. His unvoiced yet potent character confirms Kingsolver's assertion that "the absence of a thing is as important as its presence."³¹ Adah has a clear understanding of her father's failings, noting: "His punishment is the Word, and his deficiencies are failures of words" (242). His misuse of Kikongo emphasizes his arrogant corruption of

³⁰ For further analysis of the reception of Kingsolver's representation of Christianity in the novel, see Judith Bromberg, "A Complex Novel About Faith, Family and Dysfunction," *National Catholic Reporter* (March 19, 1999): 13 and Elaine R. Ognibene, "The Missionary Position: Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," *College Literature* 30.3 (2003): 19–36.

³¹ Harper Collins, "FAQs," *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*, <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question04> (accessed July 28, 2004).

Christian ideals which threatens the lives of his family. When Ruth May is killed, Leah describes how “Our father seemed to be nowhere” (424), highlighting both the physical absence of her parent and spiritual “Our Father,” confirmed by the absence of his voice in the text. The novel’s female protagonists provide all the information that is necessary to characterize this absent male centre. Nathan’s lack of narrative voice allows the reader to realize the subjectivity of truth indicated by the other characters.

Extratextually, Kingsolver reassures readers that “Nathan obviously doesn’t represent maleness! He represents an historical attitude.”³² She justifies Nathan’s lack of a voice on the basis that, “We’re the captive witnesses, just like the wife and daughters of Nathan Price. Male or female, we are not like him.”³³ While this central male character is therefore unavoidably linked to the idea of colonialism, Kingsolver’s statement emphasises her desire to distance the reader from colonial guilt, suggesting instead that, like Orleanna in the novel, “we” (male or female readers) are rendered “captive witnesses” by the power of such imperialist characters as Nathan. By allowing the Price women their voices, she is, by extension, giving voice to what she perceives to be the reader’s concerns, implying that the reader is often marginalized in literature just as citizens are marginalized by the actions of their own paternalist government.

This multi-voiced structure is also designed to mirror the conflict between democracy and the Congolese system of voting according to which all members of the community must agree. It is only when there is consensus among the Price women that we gain a clear sense of the family’s situation, as is the case with Ruth May’s death which we experience from four points of view. Kingsolver suggests that the characters represent a philosophical scale with “absolute paralyzing guilt on the one end and “What, me worry? I didn’t do it!” at the other. Orleanna is paralyzed, and Rachel represents the careless, “What, me worry?” Leah, Adah, and Ruth May take other

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

positions in between, having to do with social activism, empirical analysis, and spirituality, respectively.”³⁴ *The Poisonwood Bible* as conceived by its author, then, encourages the reader to realise the tapestry of truth offered by different viewpoints.

Book Five of *The Poisonwood Bible* is entitled Exodus after the Old Testament book charting “the story of freedom for God’s people from slavery and the beginning of national identity.”³⁵ Kingsolver opens this book with a quotation detailing Moses taking Joseph’s bones and the people of Israel to safety across the Red Sea, guided by God: “And ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you. And they took their journey...and encamped...in the edge of the wilderness” (429).³⁶ While Ruth May’s bones are not carried out of Kilanga but buried there, it is their memories of her which the remaining Price women carry with them as they escape. In the Bible, Exodus connects “the age of the patriarchs” and “the remaining books of the Law,”³⁷ just as Book Five describes Orleanna’s release from the bondage of her marriage and her burgeoning clarity about what is most important. The biblical passage relates how God “fulfilled His promise to Abraham by multiplying his descendents into a great nation and then redeeming them from bondage,”³⁸ while in Kingsolver’s novel, the remaining Price women are freed from bondage by their mother rather than Nathan’s God.

As Orleanna brings all of her belongings out of the house to give to Kilanga’s women on the day of Ruth May’s death and the first rains, she says that she needs “truth and light, to remember my baby’s laughter”; it is a “relief” to let the other women carry away her burden (434). Freeing herself from the trappings of marriage and possessions, Orleanna cites her compulsion to keep moving as the “source of our exodus” (435). Of Nathan, Orleanna notes “his kind will always lose in the end...Whether it’s a wife or

³⁴ Harper Collins, “FAQs,” *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*, <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question18> (accessed September 2, 2004).

³⁵ *The King James Study Bible*, 99.

³⁶ Exodus 13:19-22.

³⁷ *The King James Study Bible*, 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

nation they occupy, their mistake is the same: they stand still, and their stake moves underneath them. *The Pharoah died*, says Exodus, *and the children of Israel sighed by reason of their bondage*” (436). Having walked for days with only their fellow women travelers to aid them, Leah notes that “with no men around, everyone was surprisingly lighthearted” (442), despite the recent trauma of Ruth May’s death and the ongoing political upheaval experienced by the Congolese women. The rest of Book Five charts Adah, Rachel and Leah’s individual continuations of Orleanna’s initial exodus.

The Song of the Three Children is the sixth book of *The Poisonwood Bible* and its title refers to a lengthy biblical passage in Daniel 3, which would come between verses 23 and 24 in Protestant Bibles, but is omitted as an Apocryphal addition. This addition contains the prayer of Azariah while the three youths were in the fiery furnace, a brief account of the angel who met them in the furnace, and the hymn of praise they sang when they realized they were delivered.³⁹ Book Six of the novel contains only the narratives of the three remaining Price children, mirroring the youths from the apocryphal passage, with Rachel and Leah returning to their maiden names after being, variously, Rachel Price Axelroot, Rachel Axelroot, Rachel Price Axelroot DuPree Fairley and Leah Price Ngemba in Book Five. This reassertion of their family name of Price accompanies each of the characters as they explain life choices made in reaction to the same powerful catalyst of their sister’s death. This renaming reasserts their connectedness not only to each other but to the memory of Ruth May.

Books One to Six of *The Poisonwood Bible* have biblical titles, unlike Book Seven, *The Eyes in the Trees*, which suggests that it is nature’s observations, rather than God’s, that enforce morality. Naming this last and only single-chapter book of the novel *The Eyes in the Trees* positions the observer as the enforcer of conscience. In this chapter, written from the perspective of Ruth May’s dead spirit in the form of a green mamba

³⁹ The book of “The Song of Three Children” is also called “The Song of the Three Holy Children,” or “The Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Holy Children” in different versions of *The Apocrypha*.

snake, nature is a constant observer of human actions. Ruth May, and the animal she “becomes” in death, interpret human behaviour through their observations, in much the same way as the reader. The idea of constant, if passive, observation imposing morality is indicated by Orleanna’s positioning of the reader, like nature and the dead spirit of Ruth May, as a principle-defining observer, telling the reader, “I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees” (5). The eyes in the trees represent the spirit of Ruth May and of the Congolese environment, and also the reader. In philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, even an imagined observer is deemed sufficient to regulate behaviour. Bentham famously propounded the theory of a prison in which the inmates could be observed at all times and thus self-regulate their behaviour as a result of this perceived constant surveillance, that is to say, the “sentiment of a sort of omnipresence.”⁴⁰ In *The Poisonwood Bible*, nature and the reader are posited as constant witnesses to the actions of the characters, suggesting that Kingsolver as an author is, in part, “regulated” by her expectations of these observers’ reactions to her novel.

Rather than compounding colonial assumptions about the passivity of nature, and literary theory privileging the author in the creation of meaning, the omniscient observer defines the behavior of the characters within the novel and the readers of the novel itself. Speaking to the imagined reader, for example, Orleanna says of her children, “Later on you’ll have to decide what sympathy they deserve” (5). As political philosopher Michel Foucault noted of Bentham’s assertions in his study of the discourse of power, “We live in a society where panopticism reigns” and “knowledge characterized by supervision and examination” has become “the basis of the power.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Jeremy Bentham, *Proposal for a New and Less Expensive mode of Employing and Reforming Convicts* (London, 1798). Quoted in R. Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture, 1750-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 195.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms” (1973) in *Power, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (London: Penguin, 2000), 58-59.

In Kingsolver's novel, panopticism gains power over character, author and even reader, as a perceived observer shaping the author's decisions about character portrayals.

In addition to *The Bible*, the novel's other intertexts emphasise Kingsolver's claim that *The Poisonwood Bible* developed from "a long-term fascination with Africa, and my belief that what happened to the Congo is one of the most important political parables of our century."⁴² In keeping with such explicit political claims for the intended effect of the novel, Kingsolver goes on to explain the motivation behind writing what she calls a "postcolonial" novel for a popular readership:

I live in a society that grew prosperous from exploiting others...but here in the U.S., we can hardly even say the word "postcolonial." We like to think we're the good guys. So we persist in our denial, and live with a legacy of exploitation and racial arrogance...As long as I have been a writer I've wanted to address this, to try to find a way to own our terrible history honestly and construct some kind of redemption.⁴³

Through the narratives of Leah and Rachel in particular, *The Poisonwood Bible* outlines this "terrible history" of overt and covert colonialism in Central and Southern Africa, while Leah's efforts to raise her bi-racial family amidst the poverty of Joseph Mobutu's dictatorship exemplify her attempts at constructing "redemption" to atone for what she calls the "sins" of her country, which leave her "flattened with shame and rage" (569).

Citing the influence of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* on the novel, and emphasizing parallels in her text, Kingsolver suggests that *The Poisonwood Bible* mobilizes "authentic" African tropes and captures local details with a culturally-informed eye. Proclaiming the influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* also suggests an awareness of

⁴² Harper Collins, "FAQs," *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website* <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question12> (accessed October 12, 2007). Reviewers including Margaret Bernstein also recognise the political agenda of the novel. See "Kingsolver Confronts Legacy of Injustice," *The Plain Dealer* (November 30, 1999): 1F.

⁴³ Ibid.

the colonial context and intimates that Kingsolver's novel will offer a postcolonial representation of the Congo through the narrative of privileged foreigners. That Kingsolver fails to mention the literary controversy surrounding Achebe's critique of Conrad's novel, however, betrays a lack of engagement with issues of "authenticity" and postcolonialism at a deeper level. She is seemingly unaware of Achebe's condemnation of what he considered to be racist African stereotypes in Conrad's text, which he revealed in a lecture at the University of Massachusetts in 1975. In an argument which should resonate with a writer whose work represents "Africa," Achebe calls for people to "see the preposterous and perverse arrogance" in "reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind."⁴⁴

While Kingsolver cites mainly African-set intertexts in her bibliography, noting various travelogues and wildlife field books in addition to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the centrality of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 Vietnam war film *Apocalypse Now* indicates the value of exploring geographically-relocated intertexts. *Apocalypse Now* transposed Conrad's Congolese setting to the Vietnamese jungle, intimating that the locations of colonial oppression are interchangeable. The politics of oppression and dislocation are not, after all, limited to one place. While *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien is not cited as an intertext, the clear parallels between *The Poisonwood Bible* and this collection indicate the pervasiveness of political oppression and the idea that such oppression is not limited to a geographical location but is shared across continents, from Kingsolver's Congo to O'Brien's Vietnam. O'Brien's short stories offer a similarly brutal representation of the dehumanising effects of war and the perils of imperialism as *The Poisonwood Bible*, and evoke the horror which Conrad's novel also attempted to elucidate.

⁴⁴ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *The Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 788. Since this initial lecture and subsequent article, Achebe has criticised Conrad's work on numerous occasions and much scholarly work has been dedicated to the controversy. For an overview, see Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1-10.

Just as *The Poisonwood Bible* has received massive popular and critical acclaim, unusual for such a political novel, so Tim O'Brien's challenging work *The Things They Carried* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (in 1991) and has been hailed as "essential fiction."⁴⁵ These works are not the first successes of either writer and both criticise American foreign policy yet garner appreciation from a broad readership. There are recurring characters and interwoven plot strands in O'Brien's collection of short stories which suggest that his work is a valuable intertext for unpacking the political resonance of Kingsolver's novel. O'Brien returns to a familiar foreign setting (in his case, Vietnam) to address a personal and political American story, just as Kingsolver returns to the Congo in *The Poisonwood Bible*, having spent time there in 1963 as the daughter of a missionary doctor. Both O'Brien and Kingsolver's books are narratives about the weight of the things we carry through our lives, whether these "things" are grief, trauma, memory, or the physical manifestations of past emotions.

The parallels with O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* are highlighted by textual references and in the prefacing of the girls' chapters in each book of the novel with the following title pages; "The Things We Carried – Kilanga, 1959" (Book 1: Genesis), "The Things We Learned – Kilanga, June 30, 1960" (Book 2: The Revelation), "The Things We Didn't Know – Kilanga, September 1960" (Book 3: The Judges), "What We Lost – Kilanga, January 17, 1961" (Book 4 : Bel and the Serpent), and "What We Carried Out" (Book 5: Exodus). Like Kingsolver's authorial note and its blurring of fact and fiction, O'Brien's work is also prefaced with the statement, "This is a work of fiction." O'Brien goes on to state that "all the incidents, names and characters are imaginary," which he then immediately undermines by dedicating the collection to the "fictional" characters that populate his stories. O'Brien's narratives are held together by their focus on a group

⁴⁵ Robert R. Harris, "Too Embarrassed Not to Kill: Review of *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien," *New York Times Book Review* (March 11, 1990) <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE5DF1039F932A25750C0A966958260&sec=&pon=&pagewanted=1> (accessed October 13, 2008)

of soldiers, whose multiple viewpoints reveal a fuller representation of their experiences in Vietnam in much the same way as Kingsolver's female protagonists offer multiple interpretations of their Congolese experience. As Kingsolver herself asserts; "The four sisters and Orleanna represent five separate philosophical positions, not just in their family but also in my political examination of the world. This novel is asking, basically, 'What did we do to Africa, and how do we feel about it?' It's a huge question. I'd be insulting my readers to offer only one answer."⁴⁶

Mirroring O'Brien's titular and thematic premise, Orleanna states of her family's experiences, "We can only speak of the things we carried with us, and the things we took away" (11). For the Price women, like O'Brien's soldiers, "The things they carried were largely determined by necessity."⁴⁷ O'Brien describes how the things the soldiers carried "varied by mission" and if "a mission seemed especially hazardous...they carried everything they could,"⁴⁸ while Orleanna details her checklist of "civilization's evils we felt obliged to carry with us," suggesting that the Prices too carried all they could to equip them for the hazards of the Congo. Each character in *The Poisonwood Bible* is defined by reference to the items they carry: Rachel's mirror and Nathan's hoe are the most obvious examples, with Rachel's vanity and Nathan's imperialism revealed by their physical possessions just as the "scared" soldier Ted Lavender in "The Things They Carried" packs extra items to provide him with the illusion of added protection.⁴⁹ As a result of their traumatic experiences, the entire company shares the carrying of a mine detector "partly for safety, partly for the illusion of safety."⁵⁰ O'Brien's soldiers "carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the

⁴⁶ Harper Collins, "FAQs," *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website* <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question18> (accessed October 12, 2007)

⁴⁷ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1990), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6. Nathan carried not only physical possessions but an imperialist attitude, with daughter Leah describing how he "aimed for no more than to have dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth" (10-11).

⁵⁰ O'Brien, 9.

things they carried,”⁵¹ just as the Prices carry “excess baggage on our bodies” (17). And like the soldiers, as the women’s experiences in the Congo unfold, they realize that they “brought all the wrong things” (75),⁵² and come to share only “the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear.”⁵³ Following the deaths of Ruth May and Patrice Lumumba in *The Poisonwood Bible*, and the death of Lavender in “The Things They Carried,” Kingsolver and O’Brien’s characters all carry ghosts.

Kingsolver cites Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in the novel’s bibliography and Conrad’s iconic exploration of the Congo inevitably impacts upon any postcolonial attempt at representing the country. In addition to the shared Congo setting of Conrad and Kingsolver’s books, *Heart of Darkness* provides useful narrative parallels. In much the same way as Conrad reveals Marlow’s inconsistencies through his dominant narrative, I suggest that Kingsolver’s multiple protagonists allow for a more radical exploration of colonialism by revealing the characters’ contradictory perceptions. Rachel’s representations of her experiences in South Africa on the international diplomatic scene and her marriage to French Attaché Daniel DuPree, far from deflecting her American sense of western superiority, seem to ingrain it even further, highlighting the imperial tenacity of both Europe and America. While Rachel’s racism highlights power relations between Africa and the West and forces contemporary readers to confront racist assumptions bound up in colonial attitudes, Leah’s quasi-confessional search for redemption is her attempt to overcome white colonial guilt.

The novel’s focus on women’s voices in a colonial setting offers an equal and opposite preoccupation with gender to Conrad’s male-dominated text, which has been

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² Whether unnecessary material goods or obsolete political and religious ideology, in both works.

⁵³ O’Brien, 12.

criticized for its “sexually stereotyped characters.”⁵⁴ Kingsolver reclaims Marlow’s statement that his “is the speech that cannot be silenced,”⁵⁵ as a rallying cry for female voices, prompting, in turn, criticism for not representing male voices. As literary critic J. Hillis Miller suggests, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* “sets women” against “men who can live with the facts.”⁵⁶ This contrasts with Kingsolver’s novel, which represents women who manipulate the “facts” to explain their very different political and personal choices. Nathan cannot deal with those facts which interfere with his religious conversion of Kilanga village. He refuses to shape his garden appropriately so it will survive the African weather and even changes the date for Easter to fit in with his plan to baptise the village children. Nathan is the only character who pursues and invests in the singular notion of truth, which Nina Pelikan Straus’ reading of *Heart of Darkness* posits as a male trait. Straus suggests that Marlow “presents a world distinctly split into male and female realms – the first harboring the possibility of “truth” and the second dedicated to the maintenance of delusion.”⁵⁷ Given Nathan’s preoccupation with the “truths” of colonial rule and Western supremacy, Straus’ analysis of Conrad’s novella offers a useful counterpoint for *The Poisonwood Bible* which posits singular “truths” as delusions and suggests that awareness of this limitation is itself the closest it is possible to get to truth.

The other central male characters in the novel, Anatole and Brother Fowles, also offer an alternative to the gendered binary of truth and fantasy which Pelikan Straus suggests underpins Conrad’s fiction. Indeed, in choosing to ignore the “facts” of village life which deny Leah the right to hunt, for example, Anatole highlights the possibility of truth as precluding change. In direct contrast to Nathan, who refuses to deal with facts in order to leave his religious views unchallenged, Anatole’s refusal to accept certain

⁵⁴ Gordon Thompson, “Conrad’s Women,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 32 (1978): 461.

⁵⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902), ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 63.

⁵⁶ J. Hillis Miller, “*Heart of Darkness* Revisited,” in *Conrad Revisited*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 47.

⁵⁷ Nina Pelikan Straus, “The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 124.

“facts” actually allows for the possibility of change. As such, his relationship to societal facts is the product of his anticolonial politics just as Nathan’s is exactly the opposite. Indeed, Nathan’s pursuit of religious salvation for the Congolese is directly linked to his experiences in another colonial conflict in Korea. In this way, South East Asia and Africa are comparative and interrelated sites of colonialism, with Nathan’s experiences there informing his views and behaviour in the Congo, just as Conrad’s Congolese-set *Heart of Darkness* conversely found resonance with Vietnam in Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*.

In addition to this influence of narrative technique and gendered readings, the importance of the English book emerges as a symbolically comforting colonial presence in both *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Heart of Darkness*. Upon Marlow’s discovery of an English book on sailing, in a riverside hut deep in the Congo, he comments that it gave the “delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real.”⁵⁸ The book functions here as a link to a supposedly ordered world outside the uncontrollable chaos of Marlow’s time in Africa, just as the Price family’s reading matter self-consciously offers the reader insight into the individual characters and their roles within the broad spectrum of western reactions to colonialism. Kingsolver includes books within *The Poisonwood Bible* as signifiers of colonial authority and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha discusses how a book “installs the sign of appropriate representation: the word of God, truth, art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative.” Bhabha goes on to discuss how the appearance of such books “in the wilds” also starts a “process of displacement, distortion, dislocation.”⁵⁹

For the Price girls, English books offer a safe haven of recognizable structure within the chaotic new Congolese life in which they find themselves, in keeping with Jacques Derrida’s assertion that, “The discovery of the English book establishes both a

⁵⁸ Conrad, 65-66.

⁵⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 31-32.

measure of mimesis and a mode of civil authority and order.”⁶⁰ The books themselves act as a form of resistance to immersion in their new Congolese reality and link to some semblance of (western) normalcy. In *Genesis*, Leah describes how, “I just tried to ignore the whole business as I lay in the hammock with my nose in the same book I’d already read three times” (119). Like Marlow, who finds that reading an English book makes him “forget the jungle,”⁶¹ this comfort and quasi-xenophobic resistance also reinscribes the girls’ racial, religious, and economic difference (and assumed superiority in each of these categories) from the local “Tribes of Ham,” as Ruth May first calls the Congolese. Ruth May describes how the Underdowns “felt sorry for us so they sent us comic books to take on the airplane with us...Donald Duck. Lone Ranger. And the fairy tale ones, Cinderella and Briar Rose” (24), to provide a fantasy escape into comforting moral tales. Ruth May is desperate to bring the character from her favourite book, *Stuart Little*, into her Congolese environment. She names a variety of pets (which either die or have to be set free) after Stuart Little, but her efforts are rejected by the local environment, suggesting that naming something does not mean you control it. Nathan eventually discovers this when his wife, despite sharing his name, leaves him.

The specific texts read and referenced by each of the girls not only serve as shorthand for their respective characters, but the gradual abandonment and revisioning of these “colonial” texts also parallels their varied attempts at creating order and security. Rachel notes that she owes “the secret of my success to that little book I read a long time ago called *How to Survive 101 Calamities*,” which taught her to “Let other people do the pushing and shoving, and you just ride along” (585). In her later life in South Africa, Rachel describes the reading of *Ladies Home Journal* as central to the comforting camaraderie and isolation from political reality of her fellow ex-pats: “Our

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session,” in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 189-190. As quoted in Bhabha, 31-32.

⁶¹ Conrad, 65-66.

magazines always arrive so late that we are one or two months out of style...but heck, at least we are all behind the times together” (459).

In contrast, Leah assimilates into Congolese life, self-consciously attempting to cast off her own colonial guilt along with her formerly favourite texts, which feature adventurous heroines like Nancy Drew and the Bobbsey Twins, and sustain her during the family’s early days in Africa. In Book Two, Leah describes how “all would go quiet and we’d return cheerlessly to our books...From the same nursery-school lot that brought the Bobbsey Twins I chose a Nancy Drew, out of pure boredom, feeling guilty and outraged to be reduced to that circumstance, as a young woman who menstruates and reads at the college level. Though I must confess, some of the Nancy Drews held my attention” (168). Leah assimilates these characters into her own burgeoning identity as an adventurer craving justice, while desperately trying to cast off the western imperialist assumptions upon which such heroines were based.

It is through Adah’s narratives that Kingsolver emphasizes the poetic tropes which underpin Book Four in particular. As Adah notes, “I was not present at Ruth May’s birth but I have seen it now, because I saw each stop of it played out in reverse at the end of her life. The closing parenthesis, at the end of the palindrome that was Ruth May” (416). This idea of Ruth May as a palindrome is also apparent in the youngest daughter’s role in the settling and unsettling of the family in the Congo. Ruth May is first to befriend the local people (through the game “Mother May I?”) and her death results directly in Orleana, Rachel, Leah and Adah leaving Kilanga. Ruth May is the key to both the beginning and end of not only her own life, but the social hierarchy of the village and her family’s role within it. By befriending the children on arriving in the Congo, she contributes to the slow acceptance of the female members of the Price family while her death as a result of Tata Kuvudundu leads to his being held accountable. The presence of English-language books retards the settling in to Congo

life (through the girls' immersion in texts, they avoid their Congolese reality) and unsettling of the family. The characters become so immersed in English language texts as to become texts in themselves. In addition to this self-conscious textualisation of the novel's characters *by* the characters within their narratives, they are also Kingsolver's imagined literary creations; that is to say, the characters are "texts" to be written (by themselves and by Kingsolver) and read (by each other and by the reader) both within the world of the novel and as part of the text of the novel itself.

The unsettling of the Price family in the Congo by the death of Ruth May is prophesied in the content and structure of Adah's American poems. Adah opens the second chapter of the novel's second book by paraphrasing the William Carlos Williams poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," "So much depends on a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water standing beside the white chickens. That is one whole poem written by a doctor named William C. Williams...He wrote the poem while he was waiting for a child to die" (195).⁶² This reference to the impending death of a child is compounded by a subsequent reference: "The doctor poet in our village is the *nganga* Kuvudundu...writing poems for us alone. So much depends on the white chicken bones in the calabash bowl left standing in a puddle of rain outside our door" (199). Kuvudundu leaves the latter as a warning to the family not to meddle with the village traditions. Through Adah's linguistic and literary preoccupations, Kingsolver transposes an American poem into the warnings of a Congolese witchdoctor, achieving the imperialist effect of privileging American words even in an African context. Williams' poem is the ur-text for Ruth May's death as represented through Adah's narrative, even though it is Kuvudundu's African chicken bones which prophesy Ruth May's death and the Price family's dissolution.

⁶² The poem as written by William Carlos Williams reads "so much depends upon – a red wheel barrow – glazed with rain water – beside the white chickens" William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923, Numbered XXII in *Spring and All*) in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Fifth Edition, Volume 2*, edited by Nina Baym et al. (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 1221-1222.

As well as defining Ruth May as a palindrome, framing her death with an Emily Dickinson poem (“Because I could not stop for death – he kindly stopped for me,”⁶³ 416) and prophesying it with a William Carlos Williams reference, Adah also defines herself as a palindrome, calling herself Ada and self-consciously composing reversible sentences. Adah’s preoccupation with poetry and palindromes is pivotal to her defiantly-claimed dual identity as *mendüka*, which means both “bent-sideways girl” and “fast-flying bird” (335). In exile from her western home, Adah finds an identity and a certain security in American writing, and her Congolese setting allows her a linguistic understanding of the multifarious Kikongo language and culture, highlighted by her exploration of the meaning of “*muntu*” (238-239). As she suggests in Genesis, “The Congo is a fine place to learn how to read the same book many times. When the rain pours down especially, we have long hours of captivity, in which my sisters determinedly grow bored. But there are books, books there are!” (67).

While many of the books which appear within Adah’s narrative are not physically present in her Congolese home, her memories tie them firmly to her “home” nation and emphasises their comforting role in her African context. For example, Adah challenges Leah to identify quotations from books which she “wrote down...from memory,” including Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, “which I had read many times. I have a strong sympathy for Dr Jekyll’s dark desires and for Mr Hyde’s crooked body. Before we fled Bethlehem’s drear libraries I had also recently read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Paradise Lost*...and many other books Our Father does not know about, including the poems of Miss Emily Dickinson and *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* by Edgar Allan Poe” (64). Both Adah and Leah embrace the postcolonial as they grow away from and out of their youthful reading habits.

⁶³ See also Emily Dickinson, “103” in *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited and with an introduction by James Reeves. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1959), 65.

Even Rachel, the least literary member of the family, considers books to be first on the list of comforts possessed by Brother Fowles and his family. She describes how the Fowles' boat is "hardly more than a little floating shack with a bright green tin roof. Inside, it had all the comforts, though: books, chairs, a gas stove, you name it" (286). The comforting presence of books suggests some semblance of control over, if not nature, then at least the family's immediate surroundings. Indeed, Brother Fowles' collection of bird books to categorise the African wildlife within recognizable western norms are the tomes left behind in Kilanga at the end of his ministry and discovered by Adah upon her arrival in the Congo. It is as though Brother Fowles eschewed such empirical books and the exact words of the Bible in favour of a closer personal relationship with his environment, as emphasized also by his conversation with Leah during which he states, "When I want to take God at his word exactly, I take a peep out the window at His Creation. Because that, darling, He makes fresh for us every day, without a lot of dubious middle managers" (279).

With such links between *The Poisonwood Bible*, O'Brien's stories, and claimed intertext *Heart of Darkness*, Kingsolver's novel suggests that while the politics of colonialism are not limited to a specific location, they can be made tangible by anchoring the setting in local details. Binary images of light and darkness dominate *The Poisonwood Bible*'s biblical allegories and Conrad and Coppola's works, as Kingsolver's novel purports to explore the personal stories of the Price women in order to shed light on the politics of colonialism. Leah describes Lumumba pledging to make the Congo "the heart of light" (210); Adah hears the Americans planning an "African death" for Lumumba as she waits in the "long shadow" (339); and Leah works her skin "to darkness under the equatorial sun" as she "erases whiteness" through her progeny (595).

Before returning to the intertexts which shape Kingsolver's novel and highlight its attempt to balance popular and critical acclaim in order to raise awareness of her political concerns, this section will explore in more detail the politics of colonialism represented in the novel. Leah's attempts to "erase whiteness" are only one example in the novel of the multitude of ways in which women both resist and function within the discourse of colonialism. Missionary wife Orleanna is an ambassador of southern values, yet she is also subject to oppressive forces within these values and the host nation's culture. She even asks, "What is the conqueror's wife, if not conquest herself?" (9), thereby emphasizing the novel's explicit association of the parallel oppression of women and nation, personal and political. The realization that she and her daughters have been described as Nathan's "five wives" reveals the overlapping patriarchal frameworks in the Congo and the US despite opposing ideas of democracy and community (556). While Nathan attempts to export his version of the American South through his garden, his assumption of the superiority of Western democracy as a political system, and his Baptist teachings as a religious faith, Kingsolver similarly transposes her liberal concerns onto an African backdrop.

Orleanna likens her own oppression with that of the Congo; she explains the parallels between her marriage to Nathan and the Congo's relationship with the United States by stating: "The United States has now become the husband of Zaire's economy, and not a very nice one. Exploitative and condescending, in the name of steering her clear of the moral decline inevitable to *her* nature" (515, my emphasis). Orleanna describes how "I was his instrument, his animal" (101), just like the Congolese who work in the mines for the colonialists. She suggests that a "wife is the earth itself, changing hands, bearing scars" (101), in much the same way as Anatole's face bears the scars of colonisation.

Nathan also criticises Orleanna for “the sins of womanhood” evident in his own daughters (78), condemning femininity as a sign of weakness in such a way as to make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Denying Orleanna and his daughters’ autonomy on the basis of their female status, he configures femininity as a trait to be controlled, subdued, and condemned for its likeness with nature. Nathan and Orleanna conform to what Patrick Murphy calls the “androcentric-based difference” between the “definitions of ‘fathering’ and ‘mothering’...the former of begetting and unlimited expansion and the latter of sustaining and cultivating.”⁶⁴ The novel positions Orleanna as colonised by Nathan just as Africa was by Western imperialism and she describes him as being in “full possession of the country once known as Orleanna Wharton” (228).

Orleanna argues that “to resist occupation, whether you’re a nation or merely a woman, you must understand the language of your enemy” and use it to defeat oppression using the oppressor’s own language as a form of resistance (435). The villagers of Kilanga realize this lesson before Orleanna, choosing to use a western-style “democratic” vote to decide on whether Tata Kuvudundu or Jesus Christ is the personal saviour of Kilanga village. Unsurprisingly, Jesus loses and Nathan’s church is defeated. Rejection of oppression through the language and symbols of the oppressors is practised by postcolonial writers from Chinua Achebe to Ayi Kwei Armah, whose representations of African cultures act as powerful tools in support of political change. Orleanna’s resistance to Nathan’s control first exhibits itself in her attempts to get the villagers to accept his message, bribing them with a chicken feast, and through her quiet alliance with her children against their father’s anger. It is actually Orleanna’s swearing which teaches the parrot Methuselah the word “Damn,” a fact which the girls hide from their father, accepting his punishment in order to protect their mother, as Kingsolver

⁶⁴ Patrick Murphy, “Ground, Pivot, Motion: Ecofeminist Theory, Dialogics, and Literary Practice,” *Hypatia Special Issue: Ecological Feminism* 6, no.1 (Spring 1991): 150.

highlights Orleanna's growing frustration at their predicament and the growing camaraderie between the female Prices.

When Ruth May dies, Orleanna realizes that her passive resistance has been too slow in effecting change and abandons it in favour of physical resistance. Unlike nations whose political resistance to colonial oppression manifests itself in violence, Orleanna resists through her physical *absence*, abandoning Nathan and Kilanga altogether. Like Adah's silence, Orleanna's absence is a more powerful message to Nathan than any words of resistance. The Price women's method of securing their freedom is in marked contrast with the Congolese, who have nowhere else to go.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver returns to the idea of America as a nation of amnesiacs which emerged in *Animal Dreams* with reference to the contras in Nicaragua and environmental damage. *The Poisonwood Bible* suggests that people in America are broadly unaware of global political realities. Adah sends Leah newspapers with misleading stories about the Congo highlighted (505). Leah hears about the fight between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali, for which each boxer was paid \$5 million, being fought above a prison full of political prisoners at the same time as she discovers that her son's friend Elévée is forced to leave school to become a prostitute (509-510). Elévée's personal experience is a sad and ironic nod towards Mobutu's political "prostitution" of the Congolese people in order to boost his own wealth – at the expense of the nation's children's futures. Mobutu's attitude towards the wealth of the Congo mirrors that of the short-sighted schoolchildren in *Animal Dreams* to the wilderness: both believe it will never run out and there will be no consequences to its exploitation. Kingsolver's didactic insistence upon the personal as political is adamant

but it is also limited both by the novel's conflation of unequal forms of oppression, and the framing of the text as a self-contained political "authority."

While annexing the intertextual "authority" offered by Conrad and O'Brien's works, the intratexts contained within *The Poisonwood Bible* function as sites of safety and tension in the novel, highlighting the comforts and limitations of colonialism. Anatole's description of Belgium's refusal to allow any of the Congolese access to education highlights Kingsolver's oft-proclaimed reverence for representing indigenous voices in order to disrupt the self-fulfilling prophecy of paternalistic arguments against independence based upon a lack of indigenous literacy. The characters' emphasis on the salience of literacy to political freedom, at first as a way to escape Nathan, and latterly as a way to equip Leah's children to build a new future for their exploited nation, emphasizes the novel's adherence to an idea propounded by James Weldon Johnson, that, "No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior."⁶⁵

In keeping with such politically-motivated literacy, Kingsolver cites Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the novel's bibliography, claiming it as an intertext for her own African work. Achebe's title originates in a line from W.B. Yeats' 1921 poem "The Second Coming," "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,"⁶⁶ which was itself written at a pivotal postcolonial moment for Ireland following the war of independence, as "a personal means of achieving public speech in poetry."⁶⁷ Achebe's aphoristic title has more recently been appropriated by political American hip hop ensemble The Roots as the title for their 1999 album. The lyrics to The Roots' songs often make reference to the struggle for African-American civil rights and African independence and they situate

⁶⁵ James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 9.

⁶⁶ W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1971), 99 (from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921).

⁶⁷ A. Norman Jeffares, "Introduction" to *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1971), xix.

themselves as postcolonial rebels, in keeping with Kingsolver's use of Achebe's novel, and Yeats' poem by extension, as intertexts for her own work of postcolonial "rebellion." The album's sleeve notes even thank Dr. Chinua Achebe, "who contributed information, advice, suggestions...to make this record possible" and dedicate the work to "the forgotten artists, the fallen artists, and the true artists." This idea of art, whether in the form of music or literature, as a way to overcome oppression and address political ideas, is prevalent in Kingsolver's fiction.

Cultural details from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* recur in *The Poisonwood Bible*: people call snakes "sticks" to ward them off and twins are abandoned by their families at birth. Achebe's novel tells how "twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest,"⁶⁸ while Nelson informs Adah about this custom in *The Poisonwood Bible* (240-241). The cleansing effect of the natural world supplies imagery across both texts; in Achebe's novel, a locust cloud is welcomed, while in *The Poisonwood Bible* the traumatic experience of the ant swarm nonetheless has a purging effect. The most telling parallels are textured in the mutual misunderstandings, both linguistic and cultural, between missionaries and local people. Nathan's mispronunciations proclaim that Jesus is both poison and beloved, and the Price family fails to recognise that Tata Ndu's offer of marriage to Rachel is a sign that the family are becoming a burden on the community.

While *The Poisonwood Bible's* central figure of Nathan Price is shaped by his experiences of war, *Things Fall Apart* is a study of a warrior who feels his strength undermined by the memory and inheritance of his father. Okonkwo, like Nathan, is intent on making his own way in life and compelled to perform his masculinity as ritual. In a description which could equally be applied to Nathan, Achebe writes of Okonkwo, "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the

⁶⁸ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 43.

forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself."⁶⁹ Both African warrior Okonkwo and American Baptist preacher Nathan are driven by fear of failure and weakness which they feel betrays their gender and their community. Nathan is desperate to prove himself after what he perceives as the shame of being the sole survivor from his company in Korea, while Okonkwo strives to rise above the failings of his father and prove himself courageous. Kingsolver's emphasis on the influence of Achebe's novel on *The Poisonwood Bible* suggests the importance of ensuring that in her Congo-set novel, her critique of patriarchy, imperialism and fear will not be limited in its application to a single continent.

Offering a complex and sympathetic portrait of traditional village culture, Achebe informs Western readers, including Kingsolver, about Ibo cultural traditions, while simultaneously reminding his own people of the valuable heritage of their past. Kingsolver's novel reminds Western readers of the influence of their nation's colonial past on contemporary identity and experience. Both authors reject the Hegelian representation of Africa as an ahistorical, undeveloped continent with no history or culture worth considering. Kingsolver does so in such a way as to highlight the need to be wary of colonial hierarchies and privileges, partly in response to her Appalachian upbringing. In Baltimore journalist Helen Winternitz's 1987 Congolese travelogue, cited in *The Poisonwood Bible* bibliography, a paternalistic associative link between remote Appalachian traditions and Congolese customs is implicitly recognised. Winternitz describes how the "centrepiece of Marie Therese's basket was a glass bottle containing a liquid with a yellowish cast to it, what everyone called 'Zaire whiskey.' Brewed from

⁶⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

corn and potent as anything drunk in the back hollows of Appalachia, it is central Africa's match for moonshine.”⁷⁰

The limiting representation of Appalachia as an undeveloped region lagging behind contemporary American society, epitomized by William Goodell Frost's 1899 article “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” which emerges as such an important assumption to be countered by alternative representations in *Prodigal Summer*, offers a parallel with Kingsolver's postcolonial rejection of the depiction of Africa as an ahistorical region or biblical garden to be tamed in *The Poisonwood Bible*.⁷¹ Only seven years before Frost's article was written, philosopher G.W. Hegel asserted that Africa

...is no historical part of the world; it has no movement of development to exhibit...What we properly understand as Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the *conditions of mere nature* and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's history.⁷²

Kingsolver's apparent transposition of her own experience of the American South – the Appalachian region of Kentucky where she grew up – onto African soil, exporting her regional concerns and universalizing the experiences of marginalized, often rural and agriculturally based communities, is thus compounded. Achebe's narrative emphasis on the variation of African cultures over time and region also represents a rejection of the stereotype of Africa as an undifferentiated primitive land. This idea of a constantly changing culture, rather than a frozen and ahistorical one, is both reminiscent of Goodell Frost's patronising and limiting representation of Appalachia and is overturned in Kingsolver's novel. When Orleanna, Rachel, Leah and Adah attempt to return to Kilanga in order to leave a marker on Ruth May's grave, they are told that Kilanga no longer exists.

⁷⁰ Helen Winternitz, *East Along the Equator: A Congo Journey* (Sevenoaks, Kent: Sceptre, 1989), 64.

⁷¹ William Goodell Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (1899): 311-319.

⁷² G.W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (1892) (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), Introduction.

Kingsolver describes *The Poisonwood Bible* as “a political allegory, in which the small incidents of characters’ lives shed light on larger events in our world.”⁷³ Using personal stories to discuss broader political issues, the novel conforms to Kingsolver’s emphasis on the idea that people denied voices by traditional canonical literature are important and that their voices need to be heard. In *The Poisonwood Bible* this reinforces a central problem for sympathetic readers; Kingsolver’s novels may attempt to speak for marginalized “outsiders,” but as a middle-class white woman, she cannot unproblematically position herself as “other” in each given situation. In his discussion of postcolonial environmental literature, Graham Huggan develops the idea that “the crucial questions of who speaks and for whom require constant critical attention, particularly in cases where “othering” is the inadvertent result of an act of well-intentioned political advocacy.”⁷⁴ Just because Kingsolver identifies herself as Appalachian, or a female scientist, or a political activist, does not mean, by extension that she is able to speak for *all* outsiders. She explicitly cites these labels, in what Huggan might call “an act of well-intentioned political advocacy,” in order to “allow” her to speak about subjects such as the oppression of the Congolese people by a Western-supported dictator. While this is not to suggest that one must live an experience in order to write about it, Kingsolver’s work also invites Huggan’s prescribed “critical attention” to her claims of “outsider” status.

Kingsolver equates her time in the Congo as a child with an understanding of racism more generally, claiming that she was “also an outcast” and “got a real extreme

⁷³ Harper Collins, “FAQs,” *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*, <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question04> (accessed July 28, 2004).

⁷⁴ Graham Huggan, “‘Greening’ Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.3 (2004): 720.

look at what it's like to be a minority.”⁷⁵ Spending a year in Africa subject to curiosity about the color of one's (white) skin can hardly be equated with the experience of growing up black in the racially-segregated US South of the 1950s. Similarly, the novel's likening of the oppression of female characters such as Orleanna, who retains her individual freedom, to the oppression of the Congolese people, fails to convince. Such overreaching parallels actually undermine the novel's attempts to foreground political “facts,” confirming *The Poisonwood Bible* as the very “work of fiction,” albeit weighed down by didacticism on occasion, Kingsolver disingenuously labels it in her opening note. Referencing intratexts which engage with popular culture, from comics and magazines to advertising slogans, Kingsolver's characters succeed in encouraging reader engagement, as evidenced by the novel's commercial popularity and its status as an Oprah's Book Club choice. The novel's intertexts, laden with postcolonial and canonical resonance, also emphasize the political and cultural importance of *The Poisonwood Bible*, a claim which was legitimized by the novel being shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1999. I argue, however, that along with the Author's Note, inter- and intratexts, these markers of legitimacy risk suggesting that there is no real need for readers to look further than this novel to understand Congolese and even colonial history. *The Poisonwood Bible* allows readers to *feel* as though they have engaged thoroughly with a political, historical narrative, while limiting that engagement to political and historical issues set by the parameters of this novel alone.

⁷⁵ Robin Epstein, “The Progressive Interview: Barbara Kingsolver,” *The Progressive* (February 1996): 34.

CHAPTER 5

**An Ecological Prothalamium: The Union of Interrelatedness,
Ecofeminism and “Othered” Voices in *Prodigal Summer***

Prodigal Summer celebrates the marriage of humankind and nature and of local environments and global influences. Opening with Aaron Kramer’s 1948 poem “Prothalamium,” Kingsolver’s novel and its three interwoven stories propound a political maxim of environmental and global interrelatedness in much the same way as Kramer explores social and political themes using the traditional form of metered rhyme in his poetry.¹ Kramer’s poems function as acts of political witness from the eras of McCarthy to Reagan just as Kingsolver claims the intended effect of her own work to be an incitement to change.²

This chapter explores the ways in which thematic preoccupations and structuring principles unite in *Prodigal Summer*, in keeping with the author’s political strategy of courting popular appeal and raising awareness of her chosen issues, in this case to emphasize environmental interrelatedness. Kingsolver’s rendition of “othered” voices in the novel is unlike the representations of distant “others” of her previous works (Nicaraguan refugees, Congolese villagers, mining families in New Mexico); these voices in *Prodigal Summer* originate in the author’s home state of Kentucky. Kingsolver’s Appalachian characters, informed by their distinct locale, are shown to survive through their interrelatedness with other cultures and environments, while their three narratives become structurally as well as thematically interconnected as the novel progresses.³ In

¹ Aaron Kramer’s “song in honour of a marriage” was originally published in his collection *The Thunder of the Grass* (New York: International Publishers, 1948).

² Kingsolver made this purpose even more explicit when she transposed the fictionalised farming community of *Prodigal Summer* into the details of her non-fiction work *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* in 2007, which she insisted was printed on recycled paper. Rachel Donadio, “Saving the Planet, One Book at a Time,” *New York Times Book Review* (July 9, 2006): 27.

³ Amanda Cockrell, in her essay outlining the tropes of Kingsolver’s fiction, suggests that these interconnected narratives bring together the motifs that mark the rest of the author’s fiction, including “the lost child, the found child,” “the coyote,” and “the pact with the gods of the earth.” “Luna Moths,

order to unpack the ways in which this is achieved, I address Kingsolver's use of ecofeminist principles and themes to inform the novel's emphasis on interrelatedness, which in turn underpins its multilayered structure. Ecofeminists argue that the ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature is the same as that which authorizes oppression based on race, class and gender. In exploring gender difference in relation to nature, *Prodigal Summer* exposes the dichotomy of nature vs. civilization in which "nature is coded nonwhite and female while civilization denotes white and male,"⁴ while recognising the origins of this duality and exploring its historical usefulness in explaining human/nature relationships.

While Kramer's "Prothalamium" represents Spring as a groom capable of waking "murdered dreams" and coaxing song from "mute birds," Kingsolver's novel charts an awakening of aspirations and environmental interrelatedness only a season later, over the course of a single verdant Summer. *Prodigal Summer's* three distinct narratives are marked by the chapter titles "Moth Love," "Old Chestnuts" and "Predators." As relationships develop between the protagonists and their local environments, so the thematic overlap between the narratives builds. The very structure of *Prodigal Summer*, with overlapping and interpolated stories, reflects the interrelatedness inherent in ecosystems and in relations between people and their environments.

My reading of *Prodigal Summer* suggests that Kingsolver's writing about groundedness, place, and ecology draws upon her academic and personal understanding of bioregions and a specifically Southern locale.⁵ Kingsolver's early career in biological science informs the novel's representation of a biocentric view wherein all life is

Coyotes, Sugar Skulls: The Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver, a Critical Essay." *The Hollins Critic* 38.2 (April 2001): 1-15.

⁴ Michael A. Bryson, *Visions of the Land: Science, Literature, and the American Environment from the Era of Exploration to the Age of Ecology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 61.

⁵ Jeff Giles' review of the novel similarly notes that it is "rife with ecological debates" and suggests that the female characters "stand in for the author" as they attack the "arrogance with which mankind presides at the top of the food chain." "Getting Back to Nature," *Newsweek* 136.18 (October 30, 2000): 82.

interconnected. This view, held by deep ecologists and ecofeminists alike, inspires naturalist Susan Fenimore Cooper's insistence that "Americans should see themselves as merely one part of a large and complex ecological community."⁶ This chapter explores the novel's representation of this maxim. It explores the extent to which Kingsolver subscribes in this novel to an ecofeminist sense of gendered dualities in her depiction of the environment and the ways in which her male and female characters are configured within it. In doing so, it takes Ariel Salleh's essay "Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection" as representative of this ideology. It also draws on Suzanne Jones' essay on the Southern family farm, which explores the way Kingsolver's narrative structure reflects her political agenda, highlighting the ways in which readers are encouraged to learn about interconnectedness through the novel's form by "actively making unheralded connections."⁷ This idea is not unique to *Prodigal Summer* but is a recurring trope in Kingsolver's work; as this thesis has argued, her multiple protagonists and interwoven narratives reflect, to varying degrees of didactic success, the political and environmental connections learned and propounded by her characters.⁸ Suzanne Jones suggests that "Kingsolver is out to change the way readers perceive themselves and their relationship to the natural world."⁹ I would go further, suggesting that it is not only her readers' relationship with the natural world that *Prodigal Summer* sets out to change, but that of humanity as a whole. For Jones, this didactic agenda is deemed to be a successful motivator to understanding local and global interconnectedness. I suggest that the effectiveness of *Prodigal Summer* to motivate political action is further enhanced by the

⁶ Ibid., xiv.

⁷ Suzanne Jones, "The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*," in *Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South since 1920*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006), 187.

⁸ Comparing *Prodigal Summer* to *The Poisonwood Bible*, Janet Maslin also describes the Appalachian-set novel favourably as a wise "landscape miniature with a didactic mission." "3 Story Lines United by the Fecundity of Summer." *The New York Times* (November 2, 2000): E8.

⁹ Ibid., 185.

publication of its non-fiction counterpart, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, with its explicit call to ecological arms.

In offering a reading of a single novel, and a farm-based, southern one at that, Jones' analysis unsurprisingly focuses on Kingsolver's work in the context of "new agrarian" writers such as Wendell Berry and Norman Wirzba, authors including Janisse Ray who offer an alternative representation of southern womanhood, and the field of local and global intersections. While Jones' ten-page article pragmatically employs the work of a single historian, Arif Dirlik, to underpin its textual analysis of these intersections, I nuance Jones' use of Dirlik by combining it with the work of ecofeminist theorists such as Ariel Salleh, in order to explore Kingsolver's representation of the Appalachian locale in *Prodigal Summer*.

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia is a 200,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of twelve other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.¹⁰ While comprising parts of states which are recognized as either "Southern" or "Northern" in popular discourse, the Appalachian mountain region is defined "from both sides as a ridge instead of a region, a barrier without an interior."¹¹ *Prodigal Summer* is set in the fictional mountain tobacco community of Egg Fork, Zebulon Valley in the rural Kentucky Appalachian region, the area where Kingsolver herself was raised. Kingsolver talks about leaving Kentucky and being told by everybody that she was "from the

¹⁰ The Appalachian Regional Commission, "The Appalachian Region," ARC, <http://www.arc.gov/index.do?nodeId=2> (accessed July 19, 2008)

¹¹ Rodger Cunningham, "Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia," in *The Future of Southern Letters*, eds. Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 43.

South,”¹² yet Appalachia is also notably configured by Southerners as “other.” This is a point often discussed by critics such as Rodger Cunningham, who suggests that within the South there is an “Other’s Other,” a region “marked by a double otherness that complicates its very sense of its own being and yet, by that very fact, opens up unusual possibilities for self-articulation of being.”¹³ *Prodigal Summer* captures very well this “othered” region, this Appalachia, while Kingsolver’s characters depict the author’s own ingrained sense that she has spent her life feeling “like an outsider.”¹⁴

In order to unpack the ways in which Kingsolver elucidates the novel’s maxim of environmental interrelatedness, this section details the interwoven structure of the narrative. “Old Chestnuts” explores the relationship between cantankerous old landowner Garnett Walker and his organic-apple-growing neighbour Nannie Rawley. The titular “Old Chestnuts” refer explicitly to the American Chestnut which suffered such a blight during the early 1900s that few were left standing and the valley’s fortunes (and those of its inhabitants) were changed forever. Nannie and Garnett personify the few American Chestnut trees left standing and, like these trees which struggle to survive, they strive to maintain smallholdings on their own. It can even be seen as an ironic title, bringing to mind the phrase “that old chestnut” in reference to a clichéd or outdated point of view. While Garnett is an old man struggling to adjust to a new world, Nannie is forward-thinking, unconventional and even youthful in her demeanor (Garnett prudishly comments on her braided hair and unselfconscious wearing of shorts, for

¹² Elisabeth L. Beattie, “Barbara Kingsolver Interview,” in *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*, edited by Elisabeth L. Beattie (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 155.

¹³ Cunningham, 42.

¹⁴ Beattie, 153. This statement indicates that not only do the categories with which Kingsolver is labeled inscribe her outsider status (as Appalachian, Southern, ecofeminist, feminist, scientific, agrarian) but she even positions herself as an outsider from these already “othered” groupings.

example). The interaction between these senior citizens undermines the idea of youth as a value in itself and of young people as the primary catalysts for change and progress.

“Predators” tells the story of government-employed forest warden Deanna Wolfe who has lived alone for two years in a small cabin made from the logs of blighted chestnut trees high up on Walker Mountain, itself named after Garnett’s great grandfather. Deanna spends her days protecting the wildlife from hunters (in particular her beloved coyotes), but her life changes when she begins a relationship with a young hunter, Eddie Bondo. Young, newlywed and equally quickly widowed, biologist Lusa Landowski adopts her dead husband Cole’s surname, Widener, as she adapts to her role as a landowner and farmer in the “Moth Love” chapters. Inheriting Cole’s Appalachian tobacco farm when he dies in a lorry accident, she tries to come to terms with grief and love, for her husband and for the land. The “Moth Love” chapters, therefore, are structured according to Lusa’s attempts to balance her in-laws’ expectations with a more sustainable way of using the land. Deanna’s chapters are dominated by her coming to terms with herself as part of the environment, subject to its cycles and seasons. Lusa and Nannie’s chapters meanwhile place more emphasis on a familial sense of interrelatedness and agricultural compromise.

Each story is told in the third person, although “Old Chestnuts” includes letters between Garnett and Nannie. When asked about her choice of narrative voice, Kingsolver explains how she uses the precise observation afforded by multiple third-person perspectives to get “closer to the bone” of representational truth.¹⁵ As a trained scientist, Kingsolver recognizes that there is no such thing as an objective observer and she suggests that first-person narration can actually distance the author from thematic truths in favour of an individual literary performance. She describes writing in the first

¹⁵ Beattie, 155.

person as “a grand, magnificent lie, because I know it’s not true.”¹⁶ Within this logic, Kingsolver’s choice of a third-person perspective for each of the chapter strands fits the novel’s didactic emphasis on conveying the maxim of interrelatedness.

Alternating between these chapter titles, *Prodigal Summer* has three phased patterns. The first nine chapters rotate from “Predators” to “Moth Love” to “Old Chestnuts” respectively. Chapters Ten to Thirteen do not conform to this pattern of rotation, and this break in the pattern coincides with a drawing together of the narrative strands and their characters. Chapter Ten in particular marks the focus on the interrelatedness of the three narratives with Lusa and her teenaged nephew Rickie discussing religion, regionalism and Garnett’s knowledge of goats, which is later so pivotal to both Lusa’s new land use and to the Widener family. Garnett is in fact grandfather to Lusa’s other niece Crystal and nephew Lowell, although he is known to their cousin Rickie only through his work with the school on a 4H goat project. The three stories, which so far are linked only by geographical proximity, begin to come together through the tangled and forgotten web of family ties, agricultural knowledge and shared values. This is evidenced by Deanna saving a moth in Chapter Eleven, which brings Lusa’s moths into the ranger’s world of “Predators.” Later in the same chapter Deanna tells Eddie about her dead father, his old girlfriend Nannie Rawley and her dead half-sister Rachel, thus making the first link between Deanna and Nannie’s narratives. As Deanna notes, “Speaking aloud of Nannie and Rachel had brought those two into this cabin” just as the moth symbolically brought to mind Lusa’s story.¹⁷

The interwoven structure of the novel reflects Kingsolver’s thematic focus on the cyclical patterns in nature and human behaviour. Even the brief Chapter Twelve emphasises interrelatedness, with Garnett whistling “Pretty Saro,” “casting it up to the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 174. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

mockingbird on the grain shed” so that he can “catch up a few of Garnett’s notes and weave them into his merry hymn to the day” (188-189). Garnett, with his obsessive pesticide spraying and rejection of organic farming, seems to be the least ecologically-minded of the characters. That his whistling is woven into the experience of the mockingbird suggests both that his behaviour impacts upon the environment (in negative and positive ways) and that he is not as ecologically autonomous as he thinks. Indeed, it is his later advice to Lusa on her goat project which allows her to divert the land use from tobacco. Chapters Fourteen to Twenty-Seven mark a second phase in the novel as the chapters invert the initial pattern to alternate from “Old Chestnuts” to “Moth Love” to “Predators,” thus giving primacy to the story of the elders. The importance of inherited wisdom and long-standing knowledge of the land is thus emphasised. Chapters Twenty-Eight to Thirty-One offer long concluding chapters for each narrative strand, culminating in the untitled Chapter Thirty-One with its third-person description of the movements of the coyote that Deanna has tried to protect.

This final untitled chapter emphasises the novel’s central theme of interrelatedness as developed through the interweaving of the three other narrative strands, which reveal not only the links between human characters and attitudes towards the environment, but also the community’s relationship with the environment. The omniscient narrator of this final “coyote” chapter appears, somewhat problematically, to be nature itself, developing the “eyes in the trees” motif from *The Poisonwood Bible*. By apparently speaking for nature, however, Kingsolver projects her own voice onto a silent, marginalized “other.” It is effect, rather than intention, by which one must ultimately assess the author, for it is by that very maxim that Kingsolver gauges her own political judgments. Her emphasis on human interrelatedness with the environment underpins her narrative choice to speak for nature. It is in this final chapter that the limitation of Kingsolver’s dogged pursuit of ways to configure the importance of human

interrelatedness with nature is revealed. The suggestion that humanity is a part of nature undermines the sense that nature is untainted and wild, a sense which is only exacerbated by the coyote being described anthropomorphically.

Kingsolver foregrounds an imaginative and sympathetic narrative strategy when speaking for the coyote in the novel's final chapter. In so doing, she subverts the traditional use of animal fables in favour of a conservationist moralizing and seems to adopt J.M. Coetzee's suggestion that there is "no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another" and "no bounds to the sympathetic imagination."¹⁸ Kingsolver represents the concerns of the coyotes in parallel with the concerns of the human characters in the novel while acknowledging the animal's fundamental "wildness" in an attempt to sidestep accusations of anthropomorphic reductionism. Accusations of anthropomorphism are actually compounded by Kingsolver's ascribing emotions like love and uncertainty to the coyote and, rather heavy-handedly, indicating parallels between the coyote and the character of Deanna, albeit with the intention of creating sympathy for the natural world.

Both Deanna and the coyote avoid "fiercely open places" in the valley (444); they are "used to being sure" of their path, and appreciate the effect of weather on their environment. There are parallel descriptions of the coyote lowering her nose to check for a scent to follow, just as Eddie catches Deanna doing, and of the coyote "inhaling the faint scent of honeysuckle" in her communion with the environment, just as Lusa does when the smell of honeysuckle reaches across the fields and signals her husband's love. Kingsolver seems to espouse Coetzee's representational accolade of "thinking oneself into the being of another" by defying the limitations of the authorial voice. Yet in speaking for the coyote, Kingsolver also makes her recognizably sympathetic in characteristics and concerns, thus eliciting ecologically empathetic sentiments. As

¹⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, edited by Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 35.

feminist critic Linda Vance suggests, writing narratives that “give voice to animals and make humans care about them in appropriate ways” is “no easy task.” Vance argues that authors need to encourage readers to care about animals, not “because they are like us” but “because they are themselves.”¹⁹

While Kingsolver may not achieve the semantic leap of making the reader care about the coyotes in their own right, rather than because of their relatedness to her protagonists, she at least succeeds in eliciting empathy in spite of difference. It is difficult to imagine how the coyote could be given a coherent voice (which necessitates that it conforms to human linguistic norms) without losing some essential wildness. Literary critic Patrick Murphy argues that literature has “brought nature onto the stage of culture as a speaking subject”,²⁰ and that the test for whether ecofiction offers “accurate renderings of the speaking subjects” is the actions that works “call on humans to perform.”²¹ Murphy intimates that an authentic voice for nature would call for fundamental changes in human behaviour and society. By this measure, the political efficacy of Kingsolver’s novel is apparent in its avocation of the need for a change of attitudes towards the environment.

The clear connections between Deanna’s first chapter and the coyote’s first chapter (the novel’s last) create empathy for the coyote and for nature, by playing upon tropes of human interrelatedness with the environment. The human plots, concerns and arguments are not so much juxtaposed with the coyote as linked and grounded by her unseen presence. Rather than distancing the reader from the characters, the coyote’s awareness of events in the valley highlights their essential role in the interaction of the

¹⁹ Linda Vance, “Beyond Just-So Stories: Narrative, Animals, and Ethics,” *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 185.

²⁰ Patrick Murphy, *Farther Afield in Nature-Oriented Literature* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 56.

²¹ Patrick Murphy, *Literature, Nature and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 24.

delicate ecosystem of Zebulon Valley. The threads linking Deanna and her coyotes, and by extension, the human chapters and the coyote's chapter, are explicitly revealed through identical sentences in both the first and last chapters of the novel. Both Deanna and the coyote are "used to being sure" (3, 444); they "loved the air after a hard rain" (3, 444); they run in "a gait too fast for companionship" (3, 444), and they recognise that "solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot" (3, 446). In the coyote chapter, the awareness of human assumptions and decisions emphasises that despite people's feelings of separateness from nature, they are inextricably interwoven with the environment. The identical sentences continue, with the narrator suggesting of both the coyote and Deanna that "if someone in this forest had been watching her – a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees – he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path" (3, 446). It seems fitting that the man with the gun is Eddie Bondo who, while he reveals himself to Deanna after tracking her and does not mean her harm, remains fascinated with her.

The novel's penultimate sentence closes with an additional clause which does not appear in the first chapter: "a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end" (447). This addendum emphasises the significance of interaction. Throughout Deanna and Eddie's relationship, they each adopt the roles of predator and prey. The relationship and the novel itself begins with the pair tracking each other and talking about hunting, and reveals the differences which end their relationship before it properly begins, yet the final chapter suggests that their connection has changed both of them and impacted on their environment.

Deanna's awareness of the persistence of predator and prey in the ecosystem, of her own fertility, and of her adopted role as protector (first of half-sister Rachel, and latterly of the coyotes and chicks) suggests an etymological association with the Divine Goddess of the Hunt, moon goddess and emblem of chastity, Diana. While Diana was a

huntress, associated with wild animals and forests, she was also a nurturer of children and a protector of the weak and vulnerable. Deanna's association with the wilderness, her successful tracking of the coyotes and her protection of them highlight Kingsolver's problematising of the reduction of hunter/hunted to a simple gender binary.

As well as the parallels between Deanna and the coyote in Chapters One and Thirty-One, there are additional crossovers between these two chapters. Both Deanna and the coyote are predators, both monitor other wildlife, both stop to check the scent left on the same "chestnut stump...an old giant, raggedly rotting" (4), described later as "a giant, ragged old stump" (445). The novel opens following a storm and culminates in the aftermath of another heavy rainfall, with Deanna suggesting in Chapter One that "a rain like that erased nearly everything" (4), while the coyote in Chapter Thirty-One notes that "last night's rain had pounded through hard enough to obscure the tracks" (446). The world is new after a storm, the rain washing away scents and tracks only for them to be remade. Whatever has been lost, mothers (Jewel), husbands (Cole), daughters (Rachel), or shingles from Garnett's roof, the cycle continues.

As the characters in even this small example highlight, there is a proliferation of names related to precious materials in *Prodigal Summer*. The precious nature of Jewel, Garnett, Crystal and Cole's environmentally-rooted stories is emphasised by their names. Jewel and Garnett each have only a short time left to live, which imbues each moment they do have with heightened significance. The resonance of their names also emphasises that their presence will endure and be valued for future generations. Jewel's daughter and Garnett's granddaughter, Crystal, is about to lose her mother but she benefits from her mother's nurturing, her grandfather's Appalachian land, and her aunt and guardian Lusa's sustainable approach to farming. In keeping with her own precious name, Crystal is already hardened against gender stereotypes and clear in her intended

identity. Cole, like his homonymic material namesake coal, is already dead but he brings Lusa to the farm and ensures its survival.

The interrelated and cyclical structuring of the characters is further emphasised by Cole's farm providing a home for his niece Crystal, a fact which reflects the fact that coal is the crude basis for crystal, transformed only by pressure over time. It is no coincidence that Crystal is rooted firmly in the farming Widener and Walker families as she learns about her environment from Lusa, suggesting that she is likely to distil the best of both inheritances. In keeping with the continued influence of dead family members, Lusa suggests that the Wideners' destiny is "to occupy this same plot of land for their lives and eternity" (36), while Garnett works to produce a chestnut tree that will restore the "landscape of his father's manhood" (132). As well as confirming these characters as part of nature and the generational inheritance which determines its future, their precious names emphasise the universal value of their seemingly ordinary lives.

In addition to the structural interrelatedness which highlights the novel's political message of environmental awareness, the novel also posits a gendered response to the environment, which this section will explore. While the three central female protagonists do not interact directly in the novel, their various actions are seen to be cooperative, implying a shared, gendered environmental approach. Louise Westling describes this phenomenon as a "matristic or egalitarian ideology based on harmony with the natural world."²² *Prodigal Summer* perpetuates this sense of matristic harmony with nature, as both Nannie and Lusa refuse to use poisonous pesticides and Nannie provides a successful model from which Lusa gains abstract support through the older woman's positive influence on Garnett. Lusa's refusal to hurt the coyotes is similarly harmonious

²² Louise Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 17.

with Deanna's mission to keep them alive. The survival of the blighted chestnuts in Deanna's woods and at the top of Lusa's land is explained to the reader by Nannie, who knows the location of the surviving trees.

Contrasting this apparent "female" alliance with nature with a "male" association with culture and society, Cole tells Lusa that "making fun of Zebulon County" is the same as "making fun of me" (35). However, Cole's alliance with the community also represents his commitment to the local environment. Indeed, he is the farmer sent by the community to the university where Lusa teaches in order to learn about pesticide alternatives. Lusa's dream of being embraced by a moth-like man, representing Zebulon Mountain, also confirms the association of Cole with both nature and land. Similarly, Garnett does not conform to the narrow view of masculinity explored by ecofeminists such as Ariel Salleh, who argues that "men's ungrounded restless search for the alienated Other part of themselves has led to a society where not life itself, but "change"...has become the consumptive end."²³ Both these examples suggest that Kingsolver's novel seeks to indicate how false male/female or culture/nature dualities need to be integrated in order to transform a power struggle into an ethic of mutual respect.

Although she may be associated with writing complex women characters, Kingsolver does not reduce her male characters to ciphers, although on occasion they do risk conforming to ecofeminist essentialism. Garnett Walker's suggestion that a piece of ground that needs ploughing is "a small, female terrain" (275), makes an explicit link between male exertion of power over women and nature. When Eddie urinates over the edge of Deanna's porch as she describes how her ex-husband "put his territorial mark on everything I owned, and then walked away," Kingsolver draws parallels between the same male sense of ownership of nature and women. However, the way Eddie

²³ Ariel Salleh, "Deeper Than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (Winter 1984): 345.

compares Deanna's body to "such strange and natural things" (57), confirms her feminine alliance with the wilderness so as to simultaneously complement understanding of the ecological interdependence of predator and prey and her independence.²⁴

Ecofeminist ideas tread a fine line between condemning the categorisation of nature (and women) as "other" while simultaneously insisting on their privileged, even sacred, status. It is this insistence on a gendered relationship with the environment that enables the conflation of the patriarchal environmental ethic and essentialist ecofeminism, as both construct "land as female" and "female as land."²⁵ In patriarchal discourse, nature, like the female body, is inscribed as passive, while ecofeminists such as Salleh suggest that women "flow with the system of nature."²⁶ The ecofeminist association of the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women is emphasised by man's ability to plant seeds in both the earth and the woman. While representing male hunters and farmers, *Prodigal Summer* does not posit either gender as "more natural." Instead, it draws upon the parallel oppression of peoples (admittedly, often women) and the environment. In this way, the novel may be said to extend the ecofeminist equation of the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature beyond gender in order to highlight a parallel "othering" of Appalachian peoples.

The novel's selective ecofeminist rhetoric indicates that human interrelatedness with the environment is not necessarily gendered. Kingsolver's novel suggests that an interconnected sense of self, based on an acceptance that people, both male and female, are part of nature, helps counteract the exploitation of both women and the environment. The universalisation of male values as goals for humanity merely

²⁴ Even Deanna's surname Wolfe emphasizes her predatorial nature which undermines the reductionist binary of male/female as predator/prey respectively.

²⁵ Bryson, 61. See also Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

²⁶ Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology," 340. See also Gretchen T. Legler, "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 233.

compounds the gender dualities which pitch the exploitation of nature against its conservation. Deep ecologists suggest that “denial of dependence on Mother/Nature” has only “served to alienate man from his true self,”²⁷ and while ecofeminists tend to agree on this point, many also recognise that the Mother/Nature symbiosis is a double edged sword, allowing men to expect the earth to deal with any mess they may create while serving all their wants and needs.²⁸ While deep ecology recognises the difference between the genders and the need for men to realise that they are part of nature, it neither addresses these existing dualities nor explicitly links the oppression of women to the exploitation of the environment. Ecofeminism develops the principles of deep ecology, offering a distinctly gendered theory of environmentalism.²⁹

Kingsolver represents the duality of masculine and feminine as a social construction to obscure weakness and difference.³⁰ Femininity is represented, for Deanna at least, as “a test like some witch trial she was preordained to fail” (16). While Deanna’s first husband abandons her because “her skills and preference for the outdoors were choices a man had to leave” (21), Jewel’s ex-husband Shel accuses her of making their daughter into “a little homo” because she lets Crystal “wear jeans and cut her hair like that” (123). Deanna’s ex-husband is unable to admit that he too is part of nature and instead chooses to condemn Deanna as “a curiosity, a nonsense of a woman” (45), for her apparently unwomanly affinity with the environment. With Eddie however, Deanna hates “feeling older than him and like a weakling, a girl” and longs to

²⁷ Salleh, “Deeper than Deep Ecology,” 340.

²⁸ Catherine Roach, “Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relationship,” *Hypatia Special Issue: Ecological Feminism* 6: 1 (Spring 1991).

²⁹ Salleh’s “Deeper Than Deep Ecology” essay explores the interrelated definitions of deep ecology and ecofeminism. For more perspectives on ecofeminism, see Greta Gaard ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), Jim Cheney, “Eco-feminism and Deep Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 9 (Summer 1987): 115-145, Greta Gaard & Patrick D. Murphy, eds., *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), Patrick Murphy, *Literature, Nature and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), Lucy Sargisson, “What’s Wrong with Ecofeminism?” *Environmental Politics* 10.1 (2001): 52-64 and Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: women, culture, nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Judith Butler propounds the idea that gender is bodily performance and the body is a primary site for social coercion in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999).

prove her alliance with nature (313). Patriarchal justification of oppression either associates the “other” with untamed nature or declares it to be unnatural. Within such rhetoric, women are either so allied to nature as to be uncivilised or seem unnatural in their independence from natural processes such as childbirth.

In linking the exploitation of the environment to a patriarchal tradition of controlling women, *Prodigal Summer* explores a number of ecofeminist ideas, although Kingsolver opts not to depict environmental degradation only in gendered terms. Just as deep ecology and ecofeminism focus on the fight against pollution and resource depletion, so *Prodigal Summer* highlights the effects of environmental pollution on the lives of women and animals through issues of disease and fertility. Nannie makes the link between Garnett’s herbicide spraying and Ellen’s cancer explicit, emphasising as she does a masculine belief in having the “right” to control nature. Ecofeminists Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan suggest that women are more likely to have a connected sense of self and to focus on responsibilities while men have a more separate sense of self and therefore focus on rights.³¹ Kingsolver herself notes that “women tend to write more about relatedness, and men tend to write more about conflict and overcoming and manipulating the environment.”³² Such ideas infuse *Prodigal Summer*.

As in *Animal Dreams*, in *Prodigal Summer* environmental pollution also acts as a metaphor for the “ideological pollution” and “psychological contamination” that ecofeminists argue are produced by a patriarchal “culture of domination.”³³ The “Old Chestnuts” sections of the novel rely on the absent characters of Rachel Carson Rawley and Ellen Walker to develop the characters of Nannie and Garnett respectively. Rachel

³¹ See Nancy Chodorow, “Family Structure and Feminine Personality,” in *Woman, Culture and Society*, edited by M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974) and Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³² Donna Perry, “Interview with Barbara Kingsolver,” in *Back Talk: Women Writers Speak Out*, edited by Donna Perry (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 150.

³³ Salleh, “Deeper than Deep Ecology,” 342.

and Ellen's deaths are implicitly linked to pesticide use. Indeed, Nannie accorded Rachel her name "after that lady scientist" (138).³⁴ Following Rachel's death, Nannie dedicates herself to finding the right cross of genes for her organic apples (which she also calls Rachel Carson); something she was unable to do for her daughter.

In keeping with ecofeminist suggestions that "the more dependent a region is on resources from outside its locality, the more vulnerable it is ecologically and socially,"³⁵ *Prodigal Summer* suggests that changes wrought on the environment and the characters which inhabit it (human and otherwise) result from the dependence on resources from outside the region. These changes range from the harmful effects of hunting predators and reliance on pesticides (which kill not only plant life but also, it is implied, both Ellen and Jewel through cancer) to foreign "invaders" as diverse as the fast growing kudzu vine and the immigrant Mexican workers, that impact upon the local culture. Kingsolver's novel configures outsiders as sources of change in both positive and negative ways. In social anthropology, the concept of endogamy describes a situation where individuals marry and mate within a discrete community, while exogamy is characterised by individuals marrying and mating outside the community to ensure diversity. These principles infuse Kingsolver's narrative emphasis on humans as part of nature and speak to the need for diversity within communities.

The novel represents the positive and negative effects of diversity, weighing the introduction of new varieties of apple and chestnut species justified by the principle of exogamy, against the benefits of maintaining the natural heritage of existing communities, as advocated by endogamy. While Japanese blight kills the American

³⁴ Rachel Carson was a renowned advocate of environmental ethics. Her 1962 book *Silent Spring* challenges the practices of agricultural scientists and the government, and warns of the dangers of pesticide use, which are deemed responsible for the death of the eponymous Rachel Carson in *Prodigal Summer*. Carson's biographer, Linda Lear, describes how the writer "could not stand idly by and say nothing when...human existence itself was endangered." Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (London: Penguin, 1999), 4.

³⁵ Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology," 343.

chestnuts, so a Chinese tree allows the American chestnut to return (132). Similarly, Eddie both threatens Deanna's coyotes and conceives a child with her. And Lusa, who marries into the Widener family and is seen as stealing the farm once her husband dies, actually ensures its survival by introducing a new glocal approach to farming. The coyote, often considered to be a trickster figure in Native American mythology, figures prominently in *Prodigal Summer* as a maligned outsider in its own territory. While white settlers condemned native peoples as savages and embarked upon a process of cultural genocide, hunters have made the coyote a scapegoat for their fears about the decline in a traditional agricultural way of life. In this way, Deanna is seen to empathise with the coyotes as fellow matriarchal "refugees of human damage" (58).

The ecofeminist suggestion of the difference between a (masculine) focus on rights, and a (feminine) emphasis on responsibilities is consistently reiterated throughout the novel. While "a ten-year-old boy will happily presume ownership of a miracle of nature" (83), and Eddie can sleep "the untroubled sleep of a landlord" (99), Deanna recognises that Zebulon is "not her mountain," it is "nobody's damn mountain" (102). To borrow Ariel Salleh's formulation, Kingsolver's novel replaces the "Man/Nature dualism" with a "*relational total-field image*" where man is not "in" his environment, but essentially "of" it.³⁶ In this way, Kingsolver subscribes to ecofeminist rhetoric in the novel but not to condemn male patriarchy as a resolutely destructive force, with women as the holistic heroines. Rather, she raises awareness of the risks inherent in such dualities. *Prodigal Summer* offers a vision of potential balance between genders as achieved through recognition and respect for difference. It is not men, but outdated patriarchal views regarding the environment, that are configured as the "enemy." The patriarchal framework which makes distinction between privileged and oppressed, and self and other, is precisely what Kingsolver's novel attempts to demythologise.

³⁶ Ibid., 340.

Kingsolver redresses the androcentric premise that men are autonomous from nature, a premise which has traditionally polarised masculinity and femininity. The need to balance gender, nature and society while recognising their interdependence, is central to Kingsolver's writerly project and is a recurring theme across all of her work.

Prodigal Summer revises human relationships with nature through a non-androcentric representation of human relationships, with Lusa exclaiming to Cole "You're nature, I'm nature" (48). This is symbolically underlined by the moths, which "tell their love across the fields by scent" (50), just as men are drawn to women by their hormones at certain points in their cycle. In turn, this helps to explain why Lusa, Deanna and Nannie identify so strongly with their environment; in it they see the patterns of their own experience. The novel's female characters are aware of their alliance with ecology and live with the knowledge that "solitude is only a human presumption" (3). They find ways to make nature work for and with them; Lusa times the fertility of her goats carefully to get the best price for the meat when other farmers are giving them away; Deanna is desperate to protect the fragile chicks living in her cabin yet does not interfere with the snake in her roof which eventually kills the chicks. Kingsolver's women do not protect everything "natural" in some utopian vision of the natural world; they are pragmatic ecologists, affording predators equal protection and observing the delicate balance which makes their environment so unique.

Lusa is a literal custodian for the land, ensuring its prosperity for the next generation of the Widener family. She even adopts the Widener surname to confirm her association with the farm. Deanna is the government-employed steward for the wild forest and its myriad trails and ecosystems while Nannie (whose name even suggests the role of guardian) tends the cultivated orchard.³⁷ Kingsolver depicts women at different stages of life who may be read as mirroring the concerns of their generation. 28-year old

³⁷ Nannie's name is also shared with that given to a female goat, in keeping with Lusa's husbandry of the animals.

Lusa's community-building pastoral land is tied to family; 47-year old Deanna's forest wilderness both reminds her of her fertility and its imminent menopausal end, and senior citizen Nannie's organic apple orchard mirrors her acceptance that nature determines fate and signals the importance of thinking beyond the individual life span.

The physicality of the women in *Prodigal Summer* may be said to "gender the landscape"³⁸; Deanna clarifies the link between women and nature, telling her young lover Eddie that "Any woman will ovulate with the full moon if she's exposed to enough moonlight" (95).³⁹ The link between women and nature is reiterated in Kingsolver's emphasis on the "natural" cycle of Lusa's body coinciding with the moon and inspiring male desire. Such examples confirm Louise Westling's assertion of a "voluptuous landscape" as "purposive."⁴⁰ Page DuBois, in her exploration of the fundamental differences between male and female associations with the land, also argues that women's bodies are "fruitful, spontaneously generating earth" and give way in time to a "cultural appropriation of the body," as men "claim that they must plough the earth, create fields, furrow them, and plant seeds if the earth is to bear fruit."⁴¹ The use and abuse of a feminised nature is repeatedly explored by Deanna's relationship with Eddie, with its tensions between conservation and hunting: Deanna's approach seemingly holistic and responsible and Eddie's exploitative and rights-based. Such simplistic equations are complicated by the depiction of Eddie as a semi-mythical figure whose hunter role results from protective, familial, communitarian values.⁴²

³⁸ Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 77. It is a phrase that is central to her eco-critical reading of the seductiveness of utopian depictions of the environment by contemporary women writers.

³⁹ Louise Westling explores this "analogy assumed between the productive, cultivated earth and the fertile bodies of women" in ancient cultures (Westling, 11)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴¹ Page DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 28.

⁴² Eddie has known families whose losses to coyotes severely affected their livelihoods and homes. As such, his reaction to the coyotes is not entirely grounded in a sense of ownership or control of nature.

Eddie's "naturalness" is highlighted as he tries to "tame" Deanna during their lovemaking, taking "the nape of her neck in his teeth like a lion on a lioness" (99), and when he leaves her conceding that he "has met his match" (435). Such examples firmly establish both Eddie and Deanna as intrinsically part of nature, each with "the right to persist in their own ways" (179). The representation of each of them as natural predators parallels the coyotes, particularly in their "elaborate courting rituals that involve a lot of talking and licking, and...presents of food. Meat, especially" (327). Eddie even has his own "act of provision" when he brings Deanna a turkey, a natural prey (321). However, as competing predators, they also represent two entirely different approaches; Eddie kills out of fear, Deanna hunts from necessity in balance with the local ecosystem. By hunting Eddie, watching "his body without his knowing it" (10), and making this man her "prey?" (6), Deanna comes to love this human predator just as she loves the coyotes, discovering in him a kindred spirit. Hope is subsequently signalled by Eddie watching but not killing the coyote; in Deanna's pregnancy and her return to the valley, and Lusa's guardianship of Garnett's grandchildren. As the final sentence of the novel makes clear, in a mirroring of Deanna's hyper-consciousness of her role in the ecosystem, "Every choice is a world made new for the chosen" (3, 447).

Deanna fits within the local ecosystem, her presence limiting outside influences which could upset the balance, just as wolves were the original mountain predators yet were killed off by overzealous hunting. While cultural understanding and ecological preservation are positive goals, the values placed upon deciding what is to be saved can be problematic. As Appalachian novelist Sharyn McCrumb posits in one of her ballad novels, when she explores the artificial reintroduction of indigenous species to the mountains, "the point of having a yard filled with all native plants is that they're supposed to grow here naturally. It's supposed to be easy to let the natural plants take

over your yard, because you won't have to work so hard to keep them alive."⁴³ *Prodigal Summer* refers to the artificial introduction of honeysuckle and domestic cats which threatens the local plants and animals, while intimating the threat posed by outsider Eddie to Deanna's independence and the survival of her beloved coyotes.

While Deanna is preoccupied with the maligned coyotes slowly returning to the mountains after being hunted out, Lusa's chapters highlight her scientific love of moths. In the first chapter of "Moth Love," Lusa's reading about the difference between male and female moths is bound into her memories of husband Cole by the smell of the honeysuckle he is cutting for her as she reads. In later "Moth Love" chapters, this shifts from a memory of the way nature transforms her love for Cole into a love for nature as her way of telling and celebrating her love for Cole. Moths are also compared to men other than Cole in Lusa's chapters. At the Fourth of July picnic to which Lusa invites all of Cole's family, it was "no wonder the men were fluttering around her like moths: she was fertile" (232). While this statement emphasises Lusa's fertility as an object of male desire, the men are also "fluttering around" Lusa because she finds herself "allying with these men against their women" (228), as fellow outsiders in the Widener family.

Just as Lusa's femininity coexists with masculine empathy, so Kingsolver's novel explores ecofeminist concern for the environment without finally succumbing to gendered essentialism. Her continual rejection of gender stereotypes even within liberal ecofeminist discourse is emphasised when Lusa takes over the role of landowner and the physical labour this involves, transforming her petite curvy figure into hard planes of muscle. Her conversion from city scientist into a female embodiment of her dead Widener husband confirms that it is Cole in particular who draws the closest parallel with Lusa's beloved moths; he too was "a starving creature, racing with death to scour the night for its mate" (36). In parallel with her dead brother, Jewel also dedicates her

⁴³ Sharyn McCrumb, *The Songcatcher: A Ballad Novel* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), 196.

“poignantly brief” adult life “to the pursuits of locating and coupling with a mate” (439), urging Lusa to remind Crystal and Lowell that giving birth to them gave her life meaning. Like the childhood apparitions of Jewel and Cole which Lusa sees on the stairs, the Luna moths are “already ghosts, mourning their future extinction” (68).

In much the same way as young widow Mrs Larkin isolates herself in nature following her husband’s death in Eudora Welty’s story “A Curtain of Green,” Lusa seems to be a “kind of female Lear” in *Prodigal Summer* as she attempts to “meet and join the forces that have destroyed her happiness.”⁴⁴ In Lusa’s case, the force which destroyed her happiness is the farm, initially as the catalyst for conflict with her husband and latterly as the economic failure which compels Cole to take on the additional employment which causes his death. By the novel’s end, however, Lusa embraces the ecological management of the farm to forge a future for herself and the orphaned Widener children. She rejects the idea propounded by previous generations that there would always be more land to “cultivate” and more game to hunt, and so hunted, fished and “slew natural predators” with “no thoughts” of an ecological future.⁴⁵ Kingsolver’s characters appear to be aware that, as Louise Westling summarises, sometimes there is “no looking westward for another promised land.”⁴⁶ Instead, the novel charts their efforts as they address “the task of repairing the damage done by and to us.”⁴⁷ Just as Garnett cultivates his chestnuts knowing he will never witness the fruition of his labours, so Lusa thinks beyond herself to the future of her family and environment.

Even though for the most part the characters do not meet within the narrative of the novel, their cooperation through a shared commitment to family, future and land is not

⁴⁴ Westling, 129.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

even shaken by death.⁴⁸ The novel rejects a patriarchal emphasis on individual competition in favour of what Michael Bryson calls the “collaborative, cooperative potential” of the community.⁴⁹ The subconscious, biological behaviour of the coyotes, who work together as a pack, is mirrored by the novel’s human characters’ familial, environmental, and narrative interlinking.⁵⁰ Kingsolver notes that adults in the coyote pack would “forgo reproduction” (59), with all members instead “bent on one member's reproduction” (20). For Deanna’s coyotes, as for Lusa’s farm, “the entire community...is the family.”⁵¹ If the coyote parents die, “the pups would hardly suffer for their absence” (59), because the community steps in to care for them in much the same way as Lusa pledges to bring up Jewel’s children when she dies.

Death does not alter the pattern of human behaviour in *Prodigal Summer*, as relationships are mirrored in later generations. In suggesting this, Kingsolver’s novel criticises a short-sighted focus on consumption with no view to sustainability. The novel’s structure emphasises this mirroring of human generations in the nation’s ecosystems. In “Moth Love,” the ghosts of Jewel and Cole as children are replaced by the living siblings Crystal and Lowell. It is implied that Crystal and Lowell in turn will take over Garnett’s chestnut project when he dies and that Deanna and her child will maintain Nannie’s apple orchard, in this way answering Garnett’s question: “Who did she think would be around to pick [the apples]?” (273). This narrative cycle continually emphasises that humanity is part of nature. Like the moths in their unconscious pursuit of a mate, Jewel realises you should not wait around “thinking you’ve got all the time in the world. Maybe you’ve just got this one summer” (407). Sex is thus configured as the

⁴⁸ Lane von Herzen’s *Copper Crown*, also set in the rural south although in East Texas, similarly suggests that “cooperation between women...can transcend differences and even death” although Monteith critiques this novel’s utopian propensities. Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?*, 77.

⁴⁹ Bryson, 77.

⁵⁰ *Prodigal Summer*’s focus on people’s interrelatedness with their environment, their neighbours and their families is paralleled in the Congolese political choice to rely upon consensus rather than competitive democracy as described in *The Poisonwood Bible*.

⁵¹ Bryson, 74.

“pursuit of eternity” for Deanna and Eddie (27), just as it is for the moths and goats in “Moth Love,” the coyotes in “Predators,” and even the poignantly asexual reproduction of the apples and chestnuts in Nannie and Garnett's orchards. Garnett and Nannie, having reached an age where sex no longer allows reproduction (according to Nannie, they are biologically “dead,” 341), use their orchards to develop their crops. Nannie makes this clear to Garnett, telling him: “What you’re doing is artificial selection” and that nature “does the same thing, just slower” (283).

Prodigal Summer explores the “human sacrifice at the heart of fertility ritual,”⁵² whether fertility of the land or human procreation. This representation of the sacrifices inherent in an interrelatedness with nature results in even Cole’s death being represented as a tragic yet unassailable part of nature’s cycle. This emphasis on life as cyclical, with even Jewel’s tragic impending death from cancer tempered by Lusa’s promise to care for her children, highlights a central problem for ecofiction. It is hard to engage the reader and make them care about whether individual characters live or die if even death is figured within the positive assertion that the community will survive and prosper through natural interrelatedness despite the loss of one of its members.

Kingsolver revises what nineteenth-century writers such as William Goodell Frost considered to be a backward “mountain fatalism,”⁵³ as symptoms of an ecological mindset. Lusa’s lucrative endeavours to change the production of the Widener farm towards more profitable and sustainable crops such as goats allow her to protect the land from pollution and re-roof the old barn that Cole used to play in. Nannie similarly pursues a sustainable, organic goal as she splices new varieties of apples, though again the scale of her operation is small. This difference in scale between organic landowner Nannie and self-proclaimed “modern farmer” and pesticide-devotee Garnett (279),

⁵² Westling, 4.

⁵³ William Goodell Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (1899): 314.

shifts the idea of successful agriculture away from quantity, supply and profit, towards quality, global awareness, and environmental sustainability.⁵⁴

In her staunch refusal to engage directly with Appalachian stereotypes, even by overemphasizing a strong intellectual mountain life, Kingsolver instead quietly represents inherited folk tales, anecdotes, family recipes and descriptions of the land and the history written upon it, compounding the prejudice against “old English ballads” and regional “anecdotes” that Goodell Frost described as the “literature of the illiterate.”⁵⁵ The novel’s emphasis on cultural and environmental heritage allows its characters to imagine new and sustainable futures for Appalachia which integrate the global and the local in a way that “energizes and sustains both.”⁵⁶ Lusa’s knowledge of Islam and Judaism, for example, informs her cooking and determines her goat rearing business, indicating the global origins of the locale’s future heritage.

Kingsolver’s own life follows a similar trajectory to that of her Appalachia locale which, according to poet and critic Robert Snyder, has proceeded from “self-consciousness to self-possession.”⁵⁷ In Kingsolver’s interviews, she describes spending her youth being defined by others, just as Snyder describes how in the region’s “early stages,” the inhabitants of Appalachia saw themselves only “in the eyes of outsiders.”⁵⁸ This Appalachian “self-possession” is made evident in the Wideners’ treatment of Lusa as an outsider in the novel. Deemed as such because of her “city” upbringing and approach to her environment, Lusa’s treatment reflects what Robert Higgs and

⁵⁴ *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* develops this theme in a non-fictional account of the Kingsolver family’s own experience of living on a smallholding, as she describes how Tuscans and Umbrians choose to retain in their food the same “central compelling value” which informs her family’s year-long project: “that it’s fresh from the ground beneath the diners’ feet” (AVM 257).

⁵⁵ Frost, 314.

⁵⁶ James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 10.

⁵⁷ Robert Snyder, “Image and Identity in Appalachia,” *The Appalachian Journal* 9 (1982): 132.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

Ambrose Manning describe as the definition of an Appalachian as someone with “a personal connection to, a love of, the mountains.”⁵⁹

Higgs and Manning’s nature-based definition of regional identity, however, risks alienating residents of Appalachia’s cities. Cole pointedly refers to Lusa’s urban upbringing as an indicator of her “dire outsider” status (36), even though she comes from nearby Lexington and her parents both “came from farming lineages” (45). Lusa reacts with stereotypes of Appalachian farmers, reading the local newspaper’s gardening column in a “stupid, exaggerated mountain burr” to emphasise its ignorant content (35), and mocking Cole’s family for disliking her “delicately tinted botanical” china crockery (even if she only does this to disguise her hurt at their spurning of her dinner invitations). As the novel progresses, however, Lexington-born Lusa refutes the idea of a rural / urban divide as defining the “nature-based definition” of Appalachian identity.

Deanna’s nature-based identity is initially posited in terms of her solitude and in terms of what Salleh calls a “voluntary simplicity in living.”⁶⁰ When she begins to spend time with Eddie, however, she chooses to live more purposefully in society, albeit with a heightened awareness of her environment. Deanna is comfortable in her mountain retreat away from human contact and behaves “naturally” and unselfconsciously as she tracks the coyote and maintains the wilderness.⁶¹ It is through her relationships with people and with nature, however, that Deanna (and the reader) comes to understand her character, in the way feminist Carol Gilligan describes gendered difference in identity formation, suggesting that male identity “precedes intimacy and generativity in the optimal cycle of human separation and attachment,” while for women, intimacy “goes along with identity, as the female comes to know herself as she is known, through her

⁵⁹ Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose N. Manning, eds., *Voices from the Hills: Selected Readings of Southern Appalachia* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1975), 13.

⁶⁰ Salleh, “Deeper than Deep Ecology,” 339.

⁶¹ The idea of the wilderness as requiring human maintenance could be seen to undermine its very status as “wild.” Indeed, the preservation of nature is itself unnatural, although when faced with a proprietary economic ideology, embodied by Eddie, it is necessary.

relationships with others.”⁶² Even in her supposed mountain isolation, Deanna’s sense of self is defined by her relationships. Deanna Wolfe’s name further reiterates her identification with (predatory) nature, and her Thoreauvian existence in the woods embodies the ecofeminist idea that all “creatures of natural origins” must “return periodically to the earth for the footholds of sanity somehow denied us by civilization.”⁶³ *Prodigal Summer*’s female characters insist that in myriad ways humans should work *with* the land to seek a balance rather than trying to control it.⁶⁴

The interrelated dualities of man/nature and masculine/feminine are presented as self-defeating; the more they are enforced, the more nature rebels. While Appalachia is seen as the “other” even to an “othered” South, the region’s ecosystems help to shape American identity if only through an expression of non-compliance. Just as Crystal rejects her aunt’s enforced vision of femininity by going naked rather than wearing a dress, so nature rejects human attempts to control it, as highlighted by Kingsolver’s symbolic use of the Volterra principle as an image of renewal and resurrection. The Volterra principle, as explained in the novel, states that insecticide spraying drives up the numbers of insects just as Deanna’s thesis suggests that hunting coyotes “actually increases their numbers” (218, 260).⁶⁵ This idea finds a parallel in Cole’s more fanciful farming schemes, which are abandoned only to be refined and perfected by Lusa in her adaptability. Nature’s rejection of human control or desire is also emphasised by the prolific honeysuckle overtaking Lusa’s barn and the eating of Deanna’s beloved chicks by the black mamba snake in her roof despite weeks of care.

⁶² Gilligan, 12. The coyote’s realization in the final chapter of its interrelatedness with Deanna confirms the ranger’s obsessive relationship with the pack.

⁶³ Glenn A. Love, “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” *Western American Literature* 25:3 (1990): 207.

⁶⁴ *Prodigal Summer*’s Garnett and *The Poisonwood Bible*’s Nathan both employ paternalistic bible quotes to justify their right to subdue the environment while Lusa emphasises this apparent gender difference as she tries to “name the insects in the parlor rather than squashing them” as Cole did (42).

⁶⁵ For more detail about the Lotka-Volterra Predator-Prey Model, as this theory is properly known, see the interactive edition of Colin R. Townsend et al, *Essentials of Ecology: Second Edition* <http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/townsend/model/model08.html> (accessed on April 18, 2004).

To this extent, all the characters are “living among ghosts” as a way to remind them to look to the future (78). As Deanna’s observations of the returning coyote family suggest, “the ghost of a creature long extinct” is a restoration akin to “a beating heart returned to its body” (66), in much the same way as the ghosts of Cole and Jewel’s optimistic youth are restored both figuratively and aspirationally by Lusa. Realising he is a man “running out of time” (283), Garnett ponders, “When I’m dead, what have I made that stays here?” (260). When he sees a ghost “not of himself” but of his “surviving face” circumscribed by a mirror frame made from “the remains of that extinct tree” (214), Garnett realises he too is reliant upon nature and also part of it. He works for a future that will be lived, if not by him, by future generations. Nannie, Lusa and Deanna similarly recognise the need to work for a future they will not see. As such, the ghosts in *Prodigal Summer* represent more than apparitions of people who have died; they remind the living to aspire to work towards goals beyond the reach of their own lifetime. They represent a loss of physical existence but ghosts gesture towards realising dreams which lost members of the community cannot realise.⁶⁶

Prodigal Summer’s interwoven structure, emphasised by parallels within and across the narratives, compounds its thematic preoccupation with environmental interrelatedness and cyclical patterns in nature and human behaviour. This sense of interrelatedness is explored through the novel’s female characters in the context of their Appalachian locale, and informed by ecofeminist ideas which equate the domination of nature with patriarchal control over women. While the characters of Lusa, Deanna and Nannie

⁶⁶ In his discussion of Lee Smith’s Appalachian novel *Oral History*, Rodger Cunningham similarly notes that “few if any of the characters are able to call into question the forms of power and the power of forms in which they are embedded, and therefore to become able to live their own existences in authentic ways. The ghost that haunts Hoot Owl Holler is the trace of the lives that none of its inhabitants are able to live fully.” Cunningham, 49.

suggest a gendered response to the environment broadly in line with ecofeminist tenets, they also indicate the ways in which Appalachia is “othered” as a region in parallel with women and the environment. Likening identification with place to environmental awareness through its female characters, *Prodigal Summer* indicates that awareness of locale can unite apparent “outsiders,” including the coyote in the novel’s final chapter.

While the anthropomorphism of the final chapter may leave Kingsolver open to accusations of undermining the coyote’s inherent wildness, her representation of the coyote encourages readers to be more receptive to the novel’s message of environmental interrelatedness, in much the same way as utopian literature is deemed to function.⁶⁷ Literary critic Carol Farley Kessler suggests that “unreal elements” in utopian fiction can “estrangle the reader from the rules of the known world,” and make them “more receptive” to a story’s calls for change.⁶⁸ If Kingsolver’s narrative is effective, coherent and engaging – factors which underpin her commercial popularity and professed political intent – it may not be possible for her to be faithful to any story but her own. The primacy of the human voices in *Prodigal Summer* supports this assertion, while Kingsolver’s emphasis on being “part of a tribe” that extends beyond people to include place,⁶⁹ indicates her intention to be faithful to environmental stories. Although it breaks the narrative pattern of rotation and represents a shift from the apparent androcentrism of the preceding chapters, the coyote chapter highlights the novel’s thematic focus on the cyclical by making human-environmental interrelatedness explicit: Kingsolver’s human stories are as much stories of the environment as of the coyote.

Prodigal Summer employs themes which critics consider central to the pastoral novel, notably the sense of “nostalgia for or regret over the loss of an idyllic condition:

⁶⁷ Kingsolver’s characters and the values they propound are grounded firmly in place, time, and existing mechanisms of power and as such cannot be labelled as entirely Utopian. Lusa experiments with alternative forms of agriculture to make money not to exempt her from the conventions of the status quo.

⁶⁸ Carol Farley Kessler, ed., *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women, 1839-1919* (Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley: Pandora Press, 1984), 5.

⁶⁹ Perry, 145-146.

childhood, a perfect love, an idealized farm, a promised land, the innocence of Eden.”⁷⁰ By integrating human concerns with environmental ones, however, *Prodigal Summer* replaces the nostalgic representation of “an idealised farm” that Suzanne Jones discusses in her essay on *Prodigal Summer*, with a hopeful maxim of environmental interrelatedness.⁷¹ Rather, Kingsolver’s novel develops the view posited by Wendell Berry, that “real pastoral conflicts are often not city versus country but intrarural,” depicting an embattled landscape through images of “deterioration, decay, and decadence.”⁷² Just as the Pastoral herdsman mediates between “the constraints of society” and “the constraints of nature,” so Lusa seeks balance between financial and ecological survival. Garnett also embodies the pastoral conflict Berry describes between “the static past and the changing present” when he sees “a piece of the old, lost world returning right before his eyes” as he plants his new chestnut seedlings (206).⁷³

Kingsolver’s novel is unashamedly didactic in imagining the possibilities of the holistic interaction of humanity and the environment. Her didacticism is not limited to informing readers about the challenges facing Appalachian farmers, but extends to a range of subjects, including patterns of coyote behaviour and the effects of pesticides on the ecosystem. Like Aaron Kramer, whose poem “Prothalamium” prefaces the novel, Kingsolver adapts traditional forms to her own political and ecological ends. By drawing elements from traditional utopian and pastoral literature into a structural and thematic web of interrelatedness, and representing characters attached to one another through their shared environment, *Prodigal Summer* posits new ways of interacting with the environment as underpinned by Kingsolver’s long-held preoccupation with the human need to belong.

⁷⁰ John Cooley ed., *Earthly Words: Essays on Contemporary American Nature and Environmental Writers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 3.

⁷¹ In Jones’ reading, *Prodigal Summer* suggests “that an ecological imbalance may be corrected.” Jones, “The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species,” 187.

⁷² Cooley, 3-5.

⁷³ Ibid.

A CODA

**“Only We Can Demolish Our Own Ideals”:
Taking a Stand on the Kingsolver Oeuvre**

Emerging from “behind the mask of fiction,”¹ in 2001 Kingsolver used her writing to take a political stand against what she perceived as an injustice. In a number of articles for US and British newspapers, Kingsolver grieved for those lost in the attacks of September 11, 2001, while calling for an alternative rhetoric to a white Christian American “us” and an ill-defined terrorist “them.”² In articles including “Only We Can Demolish Our Own Ideals,” she extolled the “patriotic duty” of challenging intervention in Afghanistan and positioned herself as a dissenting American voice, arguing that while recent events indicated that outsiders “can destroy airplanes and buildings,” it is only “we, the people, who have the power to demolish our own ideals.”³

In her forcefully-titled article for the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, “Only We Can Demolish Our Own Ideals,” reprinted in other newspapers across the US, Kingsolver posits political engagement as a way to protect American ideals, and her inclusive and repeated use of the pronoun “we” underlines her belief in a united community of Americans. It also, however, reminds the critic of the high moral standard to which Kingsolver holds both her readers and her nation, when she rejects “sabre-rattling” and speaks out against American actions which make her feel “direly ashamed.”⁴ In an earlier interview with *The Washington Post*, she argued that people “like to believe that art

¹ Robin Epstein, “The Progressive Interview: Barbara Kingsolver.” *The Progressive* (February 1996): 33.

² Kingsolver’s articles on this theme, many of which rework similar material, include, “Not in Our Name: We Won’t Deny our Consciences,” *The Guardian* (June 14, 2002): 20; “Reflections on ‘Wartime,’” *The Washington Post* (November 23, 2001): A43; “A New Kind of Flag to Rally Around,” *Seattle Post* (October 19, 2001): B5; “No Glory in Unjust War on the Weak,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 14, 2001): M1; “It’s My Flag, Too,” *Publisher’s Weekly* (February 4, 2002): 19; “Only We Can Demolish Our Own Ideals,” *South Florida Sun Sentinel* (September 26, 2001): 19A; “New Symbol Needed: Old Glory should not mean rockets and bullet wounds,” *Charleston Sunday Gazette-Mail* (September 30, 2001): 1C; “Jingoism isn’t Patriotism,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (September 27, 2001): 17A.

³ Kingsolver, “Only We Can Demolish Our Own Ideals.”

⁴ *Ibid.*

is amoral, that it stands outside the questions of should or shouldn't. But I don't."⁵ Arguing that while it is "very hard to criticize this country, our domestic or our foreign policy, or our attitude, or our Americanism," Kingsolver claims that "given the chance to do that,"⁶ she is compelled to do so. Writing what she calls "cautionary tales" of political awareness, her fiction attempts to teach the same lesson as her explicitly political articles: "watch your back, America" (HTL xxiii). Just as Kingsolver posits that only the United States can affect the destruction of its own ideals, so I suggest that it is only the author who can undermine her fiction's political efficacy:⁷ firstly through resorting to unconvincing parallels of oppression, and secondly by usually limiting the terms of engagement with her chosen political issues to the novel form.

While Kingsolver's non-fiction uses personal examples to address issues from foreign policy to Appalachian farming, this tendency creates a tension in her fiction between political didacticism and reader engagement; between her self-confessed need to educate readers about the political issues she holds dear and encouraging the readerly enjoyment necessary to secure popular appeal. Kingsolver's self-conscious middlebrow balancing of claims to "high art" and "popular culture" indicates her pursuit of popular appeal which, far from compromising her politics, is a political strategy in itself as she seeks to raise awareness of her chosen issues amongst the largest readership.

Kingsolver's claim that she only writes in voices which she hears and knows "by heart,"⁸ namely those of women rather than men, highlights the difficulty facing a writer who claims an ideological commitment to representing the ideas that bring people together while her fiction is aesthetically reliant upon factors which differentiate people

⁵ Megan Rosenfeld, "Novelist in Hog Heaven; 'Pigs' Brings Home the Bacon While Its Author Writes Her Heart Out." *The Washington Post* (July 14, 1993): D1.

⁶ Epstein, 36.

⁷ Even as he criticises her "simplistic" representation of Native Americans, for example, Sherman Alexie admits that he has "read her work and likes much of it." Timothy Egan, "An Indian Without Reservations," *The New York Times Magazine* (January 18, 1998): 18.

⁸ Harper Collins, "FAQs," *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website* <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question24> (accessed October 12, 2007).

from each other, including gender. Kingsolver not only writes predominantly about women but also claims to prefer reading books by women “because women tend to write more about relatedness, and men tend to write more about conflict and overcoming and manipulating the environment. It’s a huge generalization...but it seems true to me.”⁹ Arguing that the lives of women smallholders in Appalachia, Nicaraguan refugees, and activist high school teachers are all “worth writing about,”¹⁰ Kingsolver reveals the political intentions of her fiction, while its popularity underlines the effectiveness of her characters in eliciting the interest of readers.

Kingsolver concedes that it is “a fact of our culture that the loudest mouths get the most airplay,”¹¹ and it is the popularity of her own fiction which affords the author such a public forum in which to express her “loudmouth” political views. Far from compromising her politics, Kingsolver’s popularity allows her to promote her political position at its most representative and when it is most idiosyncratic. Kingsolver’s political stand against American action in Afghanistan in 2001 resonates with images from her similarly critical fictional representations of the underground railroad of illegal immigrants fleeing from Guatemala in *The Bean Trees*, of CIA intervention in Nicaragua in *Animal Dreams*, and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in *The Poisonwood Bible*. As I asserted in the introduction to this thesis, Kingsolver is a political writer precisely because her work seeks explicitly to represent such political issues, which are themselves sustained by her middlebrow commitment to popular appeal. It is not only Kingsolver’s explicit activism and issues-based approach which indicate her fiction is political, however, but also its ability to sustain systemic critique, which the existence of this thesis itself indicates. Kingsolver’s activism is evident in the tropes and techniques of her fiction, which I have mapped in this thesis and will summarise here.

⁹ Donna Perry, “Interview with Barbara Kingsolver.” In *Back Talk: Women Writers Speak Out*, edited by Donna Perry (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 150.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹¹ Kingsolver, “Only We Can Demolish Our Own Ideals.”

Consistently returning to multicultural communities, alternative families, social and economic inequality, and environmental awareness, Kingsolver's fiction is characterised by the politicised personal narratives of predominantly female protagonists. In Chapter One, my analysis of Kingsolver's short stories suggests that the structure of her 1989 collection, *Homeland and Other Stories*, confirms that interrelatedness is not only a theme but also a narrative technique. *Homeland's* twelve short stories examine the concepts of home and belonging, interacting to highlight the representation of identity tied to place and environment. These early works include characters and images which inform Kingsolver's later novels; "My Father's Africa," for example, was developed into *The Poisonwood Bible*; "Why I am a Danger to the Public" informs the struggle of the Grace community in *Animal Dreams*; and the creation of identity which transcends generations through a combination of environmental awareness and memory in "Homeland," is a trope which recurs in *Pigs in Heaven*, *Animal Dreams*, and *Prodigal Summer*.

Chapter Two details the emergence of politicised personal narratives in Kingsolver's first novel *The Bean Trees* and its sequel *Pigs in Heaven*. The development of Kingsolver's representation of Native American communities begun in "Homeland," for example, is elucidated by comparing these paired novels. The "dreamy" outcome of shared custody for the illegally-adopted Native American Turtle suggests the possibility of compromise between the apparently dichotomous factions of individual and community, a compromise which Kingsolver herself posits as central to all her fiction.¹²

This chapter also explores the self-conscious parallels between *Pigs in Heaven* and legal precedents of Native American adoption, as an example of Kingsolver's narrative technique of employing non-fictional intertexts and details of known history to verify

¹² Kingsolver in Rhoda Koenig, "Portrait of the Artists' Friend," *New York Magazine* 26 (June 14, 1993), 99.

the informed status of her fictional work. This technique exemplifies Kingsolver's middlebrow negotiation of the impulse to detail political issues "authentically," simultaneously making claims about "high art" while maximising her readership.

The role of memory as a trope which indicates both the fallibility of a single perspective, and its facility to unite as well as divide communities, which I addressed in Chapter One, is more fully analysed in Chapter Three. Exploring the first of Kingsolver's paired fiction and non-fiction texts, *Animal Dreams* and *Holding the Line*, this chapter posits that both environmental and political interrelatedness determines Codi's notion of "ground orientation" and belonging. Chapter Four interrogates "the things that attach people" as represented in *The Poisonwood Bible*, and assesses the novel's pursuit of populist political awareness through fictionalised personal narratives. This chapter suggests that the political efficacy of the novel is threatened by its claims to historical and literary "authenticity" as specifically suggested by its use of intertexts, intratexts, Author's Note and Bibliography, and risks limiting the reader's engagement to the apparently comprehensive parameters of the novel itself.

The title of this thesis resonates particularly strongly in my final chapter, which focuses on the political and environmental interrelatedness structuring Kingsolver's novel, *Prodigal Summer*. This 2001 novel stands as a distilled culmination of all the Kingsolverian tropes and techniques mapped by this thesis: it has female narrators, a fact-infused fictional narrative that includes references to scientific theories and religious rites, a thematic preoccupation with environmental interrelatedness mirrored by an interwoven structure, and alternative families comprised of what Werner Sollors would call "consent"-relations. *Prodigal Summer* represents this Appalachian community through the details of the local environment, all the while connecting it to the global influences which shape its distinct locale, positing environmental engagement as a strategy for

changing the way people live: a strategy made even more explicit in the novel's non-fiction counterpart *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* published late in 2007.

Kingsolver's fiction seems intended to remind us that we all belong to the same human community and that differences cannot sever these ties. In a 1993 interview with *Poets & Writers*, Kingsolver argued that "as a species we crave ceremony. All animals have their ceremonies and ours are very social; we do things in groups."¹³ Her emphasis on cultivating a group identity based on environmental awareness is exemplified by the idea of "ground orientation" in *Animal Dreams*, and the connections between the environmentally-grounded narratives in *Prodigal Summer*. It is an anthropological-literary construction which serves her political maxim of interrelatedness.

In exploring the reification of roots and rootedness, Thierry Verhelst suggests that "indigenous cultures contain within them the seeds necessary to give birth to societies which differ from the standardized and devitalized model."¹⁴ Similarly, Kingsolver claims that "literature on the themes of 'home' and 'community' is growing by leaps and bounds" as increasing numbers of readers seek to "ground their existence in something that is durable, safe and life promoting,"¹⁵ yet, in keeping with Verhelst's proposition, also different from the "standardized" model. Her fiction contributes towards this increasingly popular area of thematic interest, as the title of her bestselling short story collection *Homeland and Other Stories* makes explicit and the success of her latest non-fiction work *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* indicates. In much the same way as Kingsolver's work itself suggests, Wendell Berry argues that adopting values which rely on the environment as a source of identity brings "local nature, local people, local

¹³ Amy Pence, "An Interview with Barbara Kingsolver," *Poets & Writers* (July-August 1993): 21.

¹⁴ Thierry Verhelst, *No Life Without Roots: Culture and Development* (London: Zed, 1990), 24.

¹⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, "Foreword," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 9.

economy, and local culture into a practical and enduring harmony.”¹⁶ It is worth considering that the popular appeal of Kingsolver’s fiction may well lie in her espousal of the notion of groundedness – or a “grounded globalism” – a proposition which could usefully be interrogated in a future reception study of Kingsolver’s fiction.¹⁷

Kingsolver is a writer who always takes a political position in her narratives and, in so doing, wears her heart on her literary sleeve. In setting such high standards to aspire to in addressing political equality, environmental awareness and personal and social responsibility, Kingsolver’s fiction invites scrutiny of the author herself. If as readers we are encouraged to be as ethically responsible as the characters Kingsolver creates and the values they espouse, it is inevitable that the spotlight will turn back on the ways in which Kingsolver’s characters are defined according to her authorial persona, particularly when the twinning of her fiction and non-fictional works encourages this association, as this thesis has demonstrated in reading *Animal Dreams* alongside *Holding the Line* and *Prodigal Summer* alongside *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

The effect of Kingsolver’s authorial persona on the reception of her fiction and the ways in which this persona is reinforced through her fiction and non-fiction is a dynamic which could be explored in future research, perhaps through a comparative analysis of similarly middlebrow writers. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage further exploration of Kingsolver’s work. As the first full-length scholarly work dedicated to the entirety of Barbara Kingsolver’s fiction, this study maps the oeuvre of a writer who has achieved critical success in the form of Pulitzer nominations, American Booksellers Book of the Year awards, a National Medal for Arts, and commercial success in the form of bestselling novels and even non-fiction works – not to mention the populist accolade of being selected as an Oprah’s Book Club author.

¹⁶ Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in Wirzba, 33.

¹⁷ For a full exploration of ideas of grounded globalism, see James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

Kingsolver is a political writer who explores political issues through the personal narratives of her female narrators. Balancing the representation of her chosen political issues with the appeal to popular readership, Kingsolver's work adheres to didactic tendencies of the middlebrow. She not only informs readers "how to" read her novels through introductions, author's notes, and apparently self-penned "reader's guides" on her website, but also suggests further reading in bibliographies, indicating the informed nature of her fiction and suggesting how it may be located more broadly in its cultural context. Encouraging readers to recognise their interrelatedness both to each other and to their local environments, Kingsolver's fiction itself functions as a way to connect readers to such awareness.

My analysis of Kingsolver's fiction focuses on her negotiation of the tension between art and politics because it is the dynamic which informs her claims to ask and answer political questions through fiction, and her belief in the necessity of popular appeal to encourage a broad readership for her political narratives. I argue that Kingsolver effects this negotiation in part by transcending the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction – employing a bibliography, referencing intertexts and intratexts, and exploring political, historical and legal issues – in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that "the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven,"¹⁸ but are subject to constant re-evaluation. Just as Bakhtin argues that the boundaries between fact and fiction are porous, so Kingsolver's fiction bridges "fact" and "fiction," and "art" and "politics," in its pursuit of representing "the things that attach people rather than the things that drive them apart."¹⁹

¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 33.

¹⁹ Perry, 154.

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