



## Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) and Archival Reimaginings of Eco-Cosmopolitanism

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**ABSTRACT** This article blurs the boundaries of literature, agriculture, public history, grassroots political activism, and public policymaking in order to problematize the current eco-cosmopolitan trajectory of ecocritical theory, a trajectory promulgated by Ursula K. Heise in important essays and books. Foregrounding the voices of grassroots environmentalists as well as the public-relations campaigns of multinational agribusiness trade groups, materials collected in the special collections of Iowa State University, the article resituates Smiley's prizewinning novel and offers a complication of current conceptualizations of eco-cosmopolitanism. The article aims to show the struggles of rural people to embrace a planetary consciousness—a global awareness that can paradoxically foreground as well as participate in the continued ecological devastation of the landscapes these activists hold dear. These local voices underscore the challenges human subjects face in articulating and narrating environmental relationships—even despite their intimate proximity to these landscapes. Just as *Thousand Acres's* mastery of a complex environmentalist voice is hard won, so too is that of dozens of rural people across the world. The challenges they face demand the close attention of the environmental humanities, not only to deeply engage appropriate texts, but to engage them with a framework that expands the orchestra and zeros in on the critical problems of global agriculture, planetary health, and human rights.

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Jane Smiley notes that her novel *A Thousand Acres* was “precipitated” by “a few accidents.” Not an accident like the one that befalls the novel's Harold Clark, a neighbor farmer who is blinded by anhydrous ammonia, or Pete Lewis, who gets drunk, drives his truck into a nearby quarry, and drowns, but an accident that involved “a visit to McDonald's in Delhi, New York, in the summer of 1987.” This particular golden arches was “decorated with pictures of the Midwest,” Smiley remembers, “and the one in the booth we sat in had a man standing in a barn in what seemed to be wheat country.” She began telling her husband her idea for her new work, a rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. “He said, ‘You could set it on a farm in Kansas,’ and I said, ‘I don't know anything about Kansas.’ Pooh. Dismissing him!”<sup>1</sup> Dismissing him indeed: Smiley's reimagining of *King Lear*, transported to Iowa, topped bestseller lists,

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Smiley, “Shakespeare in Iceland,” in *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Los Angeles, 1996*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson, and Dieter Mehl (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 51.

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snagged Pulitzer and National Book Critics Circle prizes, and became a Touchstone Pictures film starring Jessica Lange, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Colin Firth. Within two decades, this story of an Iowa family's disintegration in the late 1970s over the division of its patriarch's estate and subsequent revelations of sexual abuse had spawned a rich critical apparatus inquisitive of the novel's treatment of gender, violence and trauma, adaptation, and human and ecological interpenetrations.<sup>2</sup>

This uncanny moment at the novel's genesis is more provocative than it might seem at first glance—and certainly so as ecocriticism with renewed vigor rethinks an ethic of proximity through the prism of eco-cosmopolitanism. This eco-cosmopolitan impulse is what Ursula K. Heise defines as “environmental world citizenship” that “attempt[s] to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary ‘imagined communities’ of both human and nonhuman kinds.”<sup>3</sup> That Smiley imagines setting *King Lear* in the U.S. Midwest as she and her husband sit between bucolic images of Midwestern farm country and the metamorphosis of its agricultural productivity into Big Macs and Coke plants her in a similarly liminal threshold. It is a threshold that paradoxically entrenches yet undermines U.S. imperialism at home and abroad and confronts omnivores-always-on-the-move a thousand miles away with the ecological impact and carbon footprint of their meat, potatoes, and liquid corn diet and the social injustice of the impoverishment of farmers and food-service workers alike. What's more, it exposes the insufficiency of environmental world citizenship, constrained as it is by the extranational power of global trade organizations, the futility of political and environmentalist expression through individual purchase-power, and the absence of functioning global environmental regulation. Grounded in my reading of the novel alongside archives of agricultural history, science, and economics, this essay aims to show how *A Thousand Acres* reveals both the

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Slicer, “Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds,” in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). See also Glynis Carr, “Persephone's Daughters: Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Classical Myth,” *Bucknell Review* 44, no. 1 (2000); William Conlogue, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Amy Levin, “Familiar Terrain: Domestic Ideology and Farm Policy in Three Women's Novels about the 1980s,” *NWSA Journal* 11, no. 1 (1999); Barbara Mathieson, “The Polluted Quarry: Nature and Body in *A Thousand Acres*,” in *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*, ed. Marianne Novy (New York: St. Martin's, 1999); and Sharon O'Dair, “Horror or Realism?: Filming ‘Toxic Discourse’ in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*,” *Textual Practice* 19, no. 2 (2005). Ceclia Tichi, in “Canonizing Economic Crisis: Jack London's *The Road* (*American Literary History* 23, no. 1 [2011]), sets a provocative agenda for future interpretations of the novel: as an expose of industrial agriculture's systemic predatiousness.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10, 61. In “The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism” (*PMLA* 121, no. 2 [2006]), Heise calls on ecocritics to engage theories of globalization, to complicate its simplistic rejection of economic globalization while celebrating intercultural coalitions (513-514). Scott Slovic, editor of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, responds to Heise's call by dedicating the journal's spring 2011 issue to “manifest[ing] the global energy in the fields of ecocriticism and environmental literature” (257). In this special *ISLE* issue, Shazia Rahman offers an interpretation of Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* (2003) that seeks to reposition Heisian eco-cosmopolitanism as “neither an extension of nationalism nor an opposition to a nationalism that can be co-opted by US imperialism” (262), and Laura Barbas-Rhoden showcases Latino children's literatures as exemplary of a “threshold point in which place, identities, and traditions are in flux as a result of the process of deterritorialization associated with crossing borders and merging cultures” (373).

possibilities and limitations of eco-cosmopolitanism—and consequently to underscore the primacy of environmental humanities in enriching environmental discourse.

In profound ways, the novel born in this upstate New York McDonalds exemplifies an eco-cosmopolitan narrative, centered on the eco-cosmopolitan consciousness of its central character, Ginny Cook Smith. Ginny elasticizes her sensual comprehension of her immediate natural surroundings with her capacity to incorporate within her known world an unseen complexity of human and nonhuman systems, just as Heise proposes that “[e]co-cosmopolitanism reaches toward ... the ‘more-than-human world’—the realm of nonhuman species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange.”<sup>4</sup> In an oft-quoted passage, Smiley describes Ginny’s capacious imagination of the landscape she inhabits, a landscape crosshatched by complex geological and biological interactions across an infinite swath of planetary history:

For millennia, water lay over the land. Untold generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects, lived, shed bits of themselves, and died. I used to imagine how it all drifted down, lazily, in the warm, soupy water—leaves, seeds, feathers, scales, flesh, bones, petals, pollen—then mixed with the saturated soil below and became, itself, soil. I used to like to imagine the millions of birds darkening the sunset, settling the sloughs for the night, or a breeding season, the riot of their cries and chirps, the rushing *hough-shhh* of twice millions of wings, the swish of their twiglike legs or paddling feet in the water, sounds barely audible until amplified by millions. And the sloughs would be teeming with fish: shiners, suckers, pumpkinseeds, sunfish, minnows, nothing special, but millions or billions of them. I liked to imagine them because they were the soil, and the soil was the treasure, thicker, richer, more alive with a past and future abundance of life than any soil anywhere.<sup>5</sup>

The richness of this passage—from Ginny’s celebration of generation, creation, and teeming plenitude to its felicity of intermixture, coupling, and partnership, paradoxically in a novel that traffics otherwise in destruction, decoupling, and alienation—epitomizes the potential richness in an eco-cosmopolitan worldview. As Heise writes, such a perspective has the capacity of transcending the

‘ethic of proximity’ so as to investigate by what means individuals and groups in specific cultural contexts have succeeded in envisioning themselves in similarly concrete fashion as part of the global biosphere, or by what means they might be enabled to do so; at the same time, as the work of Vandana Shiva, among others, highlights, such a perspective needs to be attentive to the political frameworks in which communities begin to see themselves as part of a planetary community, and what power struggles such visions might be designed to hide or legitimate.<sup>6</sup>

As Heise’s and Ginny’s declarations suggest, they possess the suppleness of perspective to celebrate both the local as well as the global, the individual and the communal, and the human and the more-than-human. Their words become beacons in an increasingly urgent search for global solutions to planetary ruin; they offer, as Heise hopes, a revitalizing sense of a

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<sup>4</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 60-61.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 131-132.

<sup>6</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 62.

“thorough understanding of the cultural as well as the ecological frameworks”<sup>7</sup> that will guide future environmental policymaking in surviving a future dominated by increasingly dire forecasts of planetary health.

However, this communion of *A Thousand Acres* and contemporary ecocritical theory fractures when it is considered alongside the archival remainders of grassroots environmentalist coalitions and agribusiness trade groups operating in Iowa during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Would that it weren't so, I say. I cannot help but think that tracing new histories of an eco-cosmopolitan aesthetic, finding in those literary and extraliterary histories an eco-cosmopolitan resonance within specifically agrarian texts, and unveiling in those U.S. agrarian narratives a conduit between myopic provinciality and transnational consciousness would achieve the pinnacle of Heise's eco-cosmopolitan project. Furthermore, I cannot help but think, the identification and nourishment of “the stories and images of a new kind of eco-cosmopolitan environmentalism that might be able effectively to engage with steadily increasing patterns of global connectivity”<sup>9</sup> could inspire a just, sustainable, inclusive, planetarily bioregionalist Green Revolution. As the archival materials considered in this essay demonstrate, however, we can presume neither a functioning environmentalist “ethic of proximity” nor an ecologically sustainable cosmopolitanism. The letters and pamphlets of grassroots organizing against roadbuilding, industrial pollution, and agribusiness reveal the *a priori* fallibility of the “ethic of proximity” Heise takes for granted: grassroots environmentalism might seek to celebrate local places, that is, but its spokespeople seem unable to conceptualize their resistance except in terms that accede to the impoverishment of those places. What's more, the trade journals and mission statements of industry lobbies designed to oppose such resistance—materials collected alongside those of pro-farmer, pro-environment groups at Iowa State University—reveal the canny means by which an eco-cosmopolitan ethos might be co-opted to legitimate continued capitalist petro-industrial exploitations of the environment.

Put simply, Smiley's highly-regarded novel and the discursive context of its late 1970s/early 1980s setting explore profound challenges to the dissemination and operationalization of a global eco-cosmopolitan perspective. The “middle ground” of agriculture that the novel and archives problematize confronts us with the ostensible simplicity of local ecologies and cultures at the same time that they document the thorny complexities of global capital and human migrations. What's more, they wrestle with the allure of an autochthonous myth of agrarian identity and the siren's song of a cosmopolitan escape, an escape better managed by more technocrats and fewer farmers. In the end, *A Thousand Acres* and its archival contexts compel a renewed introspection of U.S. ecocriticism and its quickening eco-cosmopolitan trajectory. They show us that looking outside our usual aesthetic and critical discourses for fresh voices and alternative praxes can help us see the paradoxes we

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> These records are housed in the Special Collections Department of the Iowa State University Library, which maintains a comprehensive archive of materials illuminating agricultural history, science, and economics in Iowa and the Midwest. I am grateful to Special Collections head Tanya Zanish-Belcher for her leadership in stewarding this important collection and making it available to researchers.

<sup>9</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 210.

must confront and untangle. More important, they can lead us to inspired perspectives that might help us realize and refine the eco-cosmopolitan vision Heise and others now imagine.

### **Negotiations of Agriculture and Environmentalism at the Grassroots**

The most famous iteration of Midwestern agricultural activism might be country singer Willie Nelson's Farm Aid, which held its first concert in 1985. It represents an obvious context for *A Thousand Acres*, borne out in copious materials archived at Iowa State University. Both Farm Aid and *A Thousand Acres* focus on family farms: the former aims to celebrate family farmers and fundraise to help them stay on the land, while the latter lays bare the violence that can happen at the heart of a farm family. What's more, both couple family farms with environmental sustainability. Letters sent by Farm Aid to Midwestern homes in the months and years surrounding the publication of *A Thousand Acres* declare that not only do "[f]amily farmers hold the rural economy of our country together"; "[t]hey also protect the quality of our food from the dangers of chemicals and pollutants used in large factory farms. We need family farmers for more than [sic] nostalgia."<sup>10</sup> In another letter, Nelson reiterates the environmental consequences of industrial agriculture: "*Factory farms put family farmers out of business. ... Factory farms pollute our rivers and streams and pollute our water supplies. ... Factory farms treat animals inhumanely. ... This is not a good way to grow our food!*"<sup>11</sup> In letter after letter, handout after handout, Farm Aid extols the harmony of the family farm—in all its clichéd glory, with all its masculinist underpinnings—as a bulwark against continued ecological devastation, just as *A Thousand Acres* slams the trauma of the family farm and the environmental degradation it has spawned. Indeed, despite the untenability of the family at its center, *A Thousand Acres* underscores that families who cannot hold together their own domestic and familial economies cannot create jobs, protect the quality of foods, or reject the false promises of agribusiness. The Heartland Corporation buys out the Cooks thanks to pressure exerted by the agribusiness corporate order's collusion with banks and machinery companies, for example, and the women's cancers originate in a polluted water supply. Ginny, whose environmental awareness makes visible and contemptible the pesticides and herbicides that have ravaged her body and her landscape, can and will speak for the environment. But thanks to her history of sexual abuse, remembered at a time of economic instability, she becomes instead a rural refugee, her knowledge and values unutilized and unappreciated in the anonymity of St. Paul, Minnesota—precisely the result that Farm Aid's powerful advocacy seeks to prevent.

But Smiley's novel and Iowa State's archives offer the opportunity to explore new, more granular perspectives from the grassroots of environmental and social justice activism. Ginny's capacious imagination of agriculture as a meditation on nature resonates with the political reform efforts spearheaded by members of the Farm Land Preservation Association, an Iowa group formed in 1976 to oppose the construction of diagonal roads, roads cut across farms and fields in order to reduce travel times and distances for shippers and tourists. During a time of increased agricultural consolidation, industrialization, and chemicalization, the association's environmental consciousness, much like Ginny's, challenges the tendency of these forces to render "nature" invisible and archaic. In its lobbying efforts against Interstate 380, the

<sup>10</sup> Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, and Neil Young to Farm Aid friend, April 3, 1993, Farm Aid Collected Materials, 1987-1995, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA.

<sup>11</sup> Willie Nelson E. Rogers, Dec. 12 1995, Farm Aid Collected Materials, 1987-1995, (emphasis original).

association produced and distributed numerous accounts of the preservation of nature through the preservation of farming. Carl H. Munn, for example, complains that the state Department of Transportation's plans will endanger the wild birds and animals he enjoys watching:

On any given summer day, I can see probably every bird pictured in the AUDUBON SOCIETY HANDBOOK. From the red-headed woodpecker to the Goldfinch [*sic*], from the barn swallow to the hawk. ... [C]an the DOT guarantee me the continued tranquility of those birds? From where I live, I can see the rare sight of the wild as it was once and for what existence it still has, is yet today. I see the deer as they graze, the coyotes as they hunt and even the mother fox and her young as they bathe in the sun. Can the Iowa DOT tell me that they have researched and found that this environment will not be damaged or destroyed?<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Laura Mae Hicks celebrates the sanctity of a creek threatened by the highway plan:

We moved here in 1941 when I was eleven and I have always loved it. The creek is one of my most treasured parts. It is quiet by the creek. The fields spread out on all sides. One is alone with nature, the grass, the little bugs, the bubbling creek, the vast sky overhead. Far away one can see one's own house & barn, and one can faintly hear the hum of cars on the distant road. A bird flies overhead. How can I describe perfect happiness?<sup>13</sup>

Munn's vision celebrates wildness, harmony, and order, a vision threatened by the state bureaucracy's incapacity for environmental appreciation and valuation. In a similar way, Hicks links nostalgia and family history with appreciation of nature, finding in the creek a retreat where modernity is a distant "hum." Both, like Ginny, see the long creation of the ecology they inhabit as threatened with instantaneous, irrevocable change.

As their reflections on the ecological richness of their landscapes suggest, Ginny, Munn, and Hicks seek resolution through narrative: by telling their stories, by speaking what they see and hear, they seek nuance in the unfolding of technological modernity. Moreover, they speak a common language of the landscape they share—a language that inscribes delocalizing industrialization (tile lines, transportation departments, automobiles) in the landscape even as it seeks some compromise. Even if outright rejection of the highway is impossible, perhaps recognition of their landscapes and the relationships they have created to their landscapes will assuage them, exemplifying Lawrence Buell's powerful theorization of the pastoral as both institutionally sponsored and counterinstitutional, a trope that can strengthen the status quo even as it assails it.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, the Association's conflation of agricultural preservation as ecological preservation is troubling, especially in that members cannot imagine an ecology of Iowa that is not a monoculture of corn, pigs, or cattle. Nonetheless, members articulate concern for the wellbeing of people the world over. "Farm land is our most valuable resource," Ross L. Wiley

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<sup>12</sup> Carl H. Munn, letter, n.d., Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Mae Hicks, letter, March 27, 1978, Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 50.

writes. "To my knowledge, it is the only natural resource we have which we can use year after year, and still have, and continue to use. One acre of prime Iowa land will produce more than any number of acres in the deserts or mountains that cover much of the earth."<sup>15</sup> He contends that the loss of 2,000 acres—the area the interstate would cover—would translate into annual losses of 250,000 bushels of corn, which equals \$575,000 in crop production, which reverberates into \$1.86 million of pork or \$5 million of beef.<sup>16</sup> These consequences entail global responsibilities and obligations. By the count of one unnamed writer, a corn grower and hog producer, the highway "would deprive 2100 people of pork."<sup>17</sup> Preserving the soil joins feeding the hungry in rhetorical and ethical importance: "World shortages of food are awaking us to the importance for the preservation of the good soil of the United States. The state of Iowa has about ¼ of the top producing soil in our nation," writes Glenn J. Burrows, district soil commissioner.<sup>18</sup> Clifford R. Schildmeier concurs: "At present we have plenty of food, but according to predictions, the time is coming where we will run short of food[—]if we [d]on't start to conserve and save the Black soil of IOWA[.] How can we save soil, if we are to waste it in roads, etc.?"<sup>19</sup> In these objections, pastoral values—the preservation and celebration of rural culture, the sanctification of rural nature and work—become global ethical considerations, both between humans and between humans and the environment. Not only do the association's members articulate farmland as a "natural resource"; they frame it as a pastoral obligation they owe human beings across the crowded planet. Thus Smiley's novel signifies in the primacy of its appellation: the 1,000 acres it represents entails not just the possession and dispossession of the Cook family—but in the bushels of crops and tons of meat it might produce, calculations yoked directly to acreages.

Yet this counterinstitutional application of the pastoral nonetheless demonstrates the tendency of such appropriations to strengthen and fortify the status quo, for the Association's characterization of farmland as a "natural resource" (with reverberations of "*national* resource") belies the inefficacy of employing agriculture as a means of articulating nature. Such a formulation undermines Munn's appreciation of "wild" predator-prey relations because they have no "use value," while it haunts Hicks's appreciation for a sentimental retreat from modernity: absent the environmental ravages of contemporary agriculture, that is, the creek would not stand out for its symbolization of harmony, wildness, or purity. Despite the rhetoric of feeding a starving world and saving precious soil, these objections elide the role of the technologies, practices, and property consolidations in producing these very problems to begin with, for these projections of production depend on the historical and material reconfigurations of the landscape into grids amenable to disbursement and modern cultivation. As the group notes, diagonal highways "leave triangular tracts not adaptable to modern row crop farming."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ross L. Wiley, letter, n.d., Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Letter, n.d., Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Glenn J. Burrows to Bruce J. Terris, May 13, 1978, Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Clifford R. Schildmeier, letter, n.d., Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Farm Land Preservation Association Inc., *How to Save the Taxpayers \$96,000,000 and Preserve 450 Acres of Pristine Farm Land*, (Linn County et al., IA: Farm Land Preservation Association Inc., n.d.), Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. Records, 1976-1979, 2. The Association disbanded in 1984, following an 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision in 1979 to permit the Iowa Department of Transportation to construct the highway; I-380 was

Categorizing farmland as a “natural resource” becomes both counterhegemonic and interpellated: the frame of farmland as a “natural resource” guarantees more of the same, preserving not the soil but the status quo of industrialization and chemicalization.

The ecocentric but untenable possibilities of the Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. mirror the ecocentric but untenable vision of *A Thousand Acres*. Just as it channels a discourse of place, so too it channels a troubling tolerance for the interventions that devastate its place. Preserving farmland because it manifests nature fails when, at base, nature itself is feared and subjugated—a phenomenon exemplified by the pathological terror of wildness displayed by the novel’s men. Rose notes: “Daddy’s not much for untamed nature. You know, he’s deathly afraid of wasps and hornets. It’s a real phobia with him.”<sup>21</sup> As a representative of conventional agriculture, Larry’s spheksophobia signifies the alienation of nature from farming on which industrial-commercial practices of cultivation depend. Ginny seconds Rose’s assessment: “However much these acres [Larry’s land] looked like a gift of nature, they were not,” she states. “We went to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks,” a view buttressed by their pastor’s annual message of the importance of farmers.<sup>22</sup> In many ways, the Cooks’ religious perspective mirrors their environmentalist perspective: the notion of the earth as hostile to human beings’ designs, a hostility evidenced in and surmounted by the strategic reengineering of the land by tile lines, the liberal application and valorization of pesticides, and the nonstop injection of fossil fuel. Where Ginny sees contingency and uncertainty, farmers like her father, her husband, and their neighbors the Clarks, find a landscape ostensibly pining for human (synonymously, masculine) intervention and alteration.

Iowa State’s records documenting the grassroots organizing of Louise McEachern and Citizens Against River Pollution (CARP) further reveal and illuminate *A Thousand Acres*’s conundrum of sustaining an environmentalist vision using an agricultural referent. While FLPA sought to prevent the construction of an interstate, CARP protested in the late 1980s and early 1990s an Iowa Beef Packers Inc. (IBP) pork processing facility in Columbus Junction, Iowa, that they charged had polluted the Iowa and Cedar rivers. Like FLPA, CARP’s vision of resistance embraces conventional agriculture and environmentalism, sustainability and technology, nation and community, even as members strain to reimagine these dichotomies under the pressure of globalization. Judging by the volume of her letters and notes contained in the group’s archives, McEachern is CARP’s most prolific and vocal torchbearer. A self-described “53 year old lady, housewife, grandmother and Monsanto employee” who “loves [her] environment,”<sup>23</sup> McEachern’s complex and contradictory subjectivity—environmentalist and Monsanto employee, homemaker and worker—metonymizes the challenges of environmental, agricultural, and cultural reform that *A Thousand Acres* thematizes.

For CARP members, conventional farming and environmentalism, as well as technology and sustainability, go hand in hand, despite their inherent contradictions. Industrial

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completed in 1985. See Farm Land Preservation Association Inc. *et al.* v. Neil Goldschmidt *et al.*, 611 F. 2d 233 (8th Cir. 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Louise McEachern to *PrimeTime Live*, Nov. 24, 1989, Citizens Against River Pollution Records, 1988-1992, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 1 (emphasis original).



agriculture holds forth the promise of feeding the planet's increasing population, while technology offers the hope of environmentally-friendly, sustainable methods of preserving the ecological health of the planet. McEachern writes:

Regarding our environment I believe it simply is not enough to 'unpollute' our World, our state and counties. While we must provide enough food and energy for our growing population, we must rectify the mistakes of past years yet continue to develop and introduce new technologies which will provide the essentials for mankind in the future. And we must ensure, as we know we can, that these new technologies will not create new environmental problems to be dealt with by our children and our great-grandchildren. I believe sustainable development in our state must also mean sustaining our natural resources too!<sup>24</sup>

McEachern presents a complex vision of agricultural production and environmental action. Feeding and powering the world represent moral obligations inextricably but disjunctively linked to the recuperation of ecological health; the means she cites to accomplish this goal—"technology"—are too often the very means that have created the problems she wishes to fix. Nonetheless, McEachern urges profound reforms in the paradigms of conventional agriculture and environmentalism: a pragmatic duty toward sustaining the world's peoples undergirded by renewed activity in environmentally sustainable technological research and development.

In concert with the holistic character of her vision of agriculture, environmentalism, and technology, McEachern probes crises in national identity—crises that lead her to a global awareness. For McEachern and other CARP members, environmental problems such as IBP's discharge of ammonia into the local rivers signify as violations of national identity, incursions heightened because they take place in the nation's heartland and threaten the bald eagle. The fragility of this endangered species within environments of toxicity and pollution encapsulates, for McEachern, the intrinsic connections and palpable urgency of environmental protection and patriotism: "I know I was pleased that we could show our two little grandchildren the Bald Eagles," she writes Iowa state Rep. Mark Shearer. "If the Governor is allowed to dictate to Iowa favoring big business will you have the chance/pleasure of showing your grandchildren our nation's symbol right by Fredonia? I truly doubt it!"<sup>25</sup> As McEachern's regard for the Fredonia, Iowa, bald eagles demonstrate, violations of the environment equal violations of the nation. Paradoxically, her appeal to nationalism and patriotism leads her to see unavoidable connections between environmental abuse and transnational corporate globalization.

Originally my major concern was IBP's pollution of our two beautiful Class A rivers .... As I watched IBP come to our quiet, peaceful, low crime area, I knew it was not only their pollution that angered me, it was their entire way. Why should I an Iowa citizen who has an excellent job (I am a Monsanto employee)[,] excellent wages, excellent safety, excellent benefits want less than that for my fellow man, regardless of race, sex or religion?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> McEachern, letter, Feb. 20, 1990, Citizens Against River Pollution Records 1988-1992, 1.

<sup>25</sup> McEachern to Iowa state Rep. Mark Shearer, Jan. 13, 1991, Citizens Against River Pollution Records, 1988-1992, 1.

<sup>26</sup> McEachern to Jan Mickelson, April 6, 1990, Citizens Against River Pollution Records, 1988-1992, 1.

McEachern's evolution from the position of a Sierra Club-style environmentalist concerned about the degradation of an ostensibly pristine environment, an environment in large part conceptualized in terms of human recreation (evidenced by her reference to the rivers as Class A), to that of environmental justice, the counterhegemonic movement that rejects the collusion of environmental risk and toxicity with marginal social status, signals likewise her move from local and national consciousness to global awareness.

Complicating the work of the novel and these activist groups to forge and sustain an environmentalist ethos through and despite the agriculture that defines their landscape are the transformations of globalization that define their historical, economic, and political moment. As McEachern and *CARP*, *FLPA*, and *A Thousand Acres* demonstrate, the category of the nation—its juridical power, its legislative capacity, and its executive efficacy—fails to shield its citizens and communities from the ravages of globalization, just as McEachern and *CARP* show that it fails to live up to its creed of inclusivity, equality, and fairness. Rather, for these writers and texts, the United States colludes in sanctioning and expanding a revamped transnational corporate order that trades on its efficacy in translating the Midwest into an underdeveloped colony.<sup>27</sup> *A Thousand Acres* concedes this point in its violent and nihilistic historicization of the family farm crisis as a crisis of dispossession, exodus, and diminished economic power, sanctioned and powered by the creation of a national agricultural policy tailored to increasingly global corporate interests. Worse, the economic changes brought on by globalization not only challenge Midwesterners' attempts to create an environmentalist vision, but work to destroy the ecosystems they are trying to preserve, a consequence that even the proponents of global industrial agriculture cannot deny. To quote the circular illogic of the father of the ill-named Green Revolution, Norman H. Borlaug, "[L]arge rural-to-urban migrations in many countries are creating huge mega-cities with major pollution problems. Thus, it is clear that agricultural development is the key to poverty reduction and environmental protection, both in rural areas and to help stem the tide of urban migrations."<sup>28</sup> In too many ways, the Green Revolution has been neither green nor revolutionary, and *A Thousand Acres*'s engagement with globalization helps deconstruct such a frame of mind.

### **Global Pig: Hogs and Globalization in *A Thousand Acres* and the U.S. Midwest**

It is *A Thousand Acres*'s turn to hogs that exposes the problematic workings of globalization and localization in the Midwest. As Smiley's literary precursors Willa Cather, Hamlin Garland, and O.E. Rølvaag attest, the Midwest is a region always already globalized. Yet where these writers depict the entry of "pioneers" from across the world, Smiley describes the egress of the region's ecological and human resources: Larry Cook's corn has to be shipped out, and Ty's hogs go to a distant market (a nod to the responsibility lowans like the members of *FLPA* claimed with honor and dedication); Ty and Ginny take jobs out of state; and Rose dies of

<sup>27</sup> See Cheryl Temple Herr, *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), for a trenchant comparative transnationalist/transregionalist analysis of the Midwest.

<sup>28</sup> Norman H. Borlaug, "Sustainable Agriculture: For How Many, at What Standard of Living, and Over What Period of Time?" (lecture, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, Oct. 25, 1990), Norman H. Borlaug Papers, 1941-1997, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 8.

cancer that results from groundwater pollution. In Smiley's novel, a porcine arms race—"get big or get out," to quote former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz (or, in Smiley's canon, the experimental hog fattened in secret in *Moo's Moo U* [1995])—pressures the Cook family into mortgaging and borrowing themselves into bankruptcy. At the same time, the hog as commodity operates to reframe the Midwest not as an "American" heartland, but a global heartland, whose regional and national safeguards fall in fealty to trade liberalization and "decoupling." In *A Thousand Acres*, the thematization of hog production frames the larger problems of shifting power, capital, and decision making championed and operationalized by industry lobbyists. To that end, Smiley's novel encapsulates the inability of agrarian myths to account for or construct new narratives for or against the environmental and cultural problems of late twentieth-century U.S. agriculture in a global world—thus broaching complex questions of the productivity of an eco-cosmopolitan local/global consciousnesses within a political-economic system governed by transnational corporate capitalism.

Hog farming propels *A Thousand Acres* even when it contradicts sound economic rationalism and domestic harmony and effects the radical reconfiguration of farm, hearth, and region. Despite Larry's increasing instability and unpredictability—he purchases a new set of kitchen cabinets but leaves them to rot outside in the driveway; he wrecks his truck while drinking and driving—Ty perseveres in the family's original plans to increase the farm's hog operations, taking out a \$300,000 loan to lay the foundation for a 4,000-hog facility:

The plan was to convert what remained of the old dairy barn to enlarge the farrowing and nursery rooms, add a gestation building, a grower building, and a finisher, to build a big Slurrystore for waste, and put up two small Harvestores for the corn that would serve the hogs for feed. ... [T]he new buildings were what would save us, the marvelous new silos, the new hogs, the new order, epitomized by the Slurrystore, where all the waste from the hogs would be saved until it could be returned to the ground—no runoff, no smell, no waste, a closed loop.<sup>29</sup>

This conversion narrative operates through the logic of progress and commodification, coveting the eradication of the past in favor of the brand-name siren's song of the present and future. Technology promises liberation from the constraints of farming—of handling wastes, of claiming responsibility for pollution—while brand identification promises capitalist nirvana, of "new hogs" in "the new order." The "closed loop," from "farrowing and nursery" to the disposal of wastes, mirrors the drive of agribusiness toward vertical integration, in whose service corporate interpenetration and consolidation likewise encode a seductive sort of efficiency and closure. The family's prostration—its need to be "saved"—grooms it to clamor for the bombastic claims of progress and commodification, despite an underlying unease toward, and superficial Midwestern conservatism for, expropriation and indebtedness.

In many ways, the architectures of containment in the planned hog facilities, supplemented by consumerist faith in progress, corporate branding, and closed loops, serve as an analogy for the family's ensnarement in economic and political orders beyond their control. On one hand, the novel's lengthy descriptions of the design and construction of Ty's new hog operations point to the fundamental human impositions of order and systematization that express the farmers' repudiations of wildness. On the other hand, their literal and figurative

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<sup>29</sup> Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 168.

enclosure within the tragic narrative of subjection and dispossession serves more poignantly to illustrate the characters' similarly commodifiable disindividuation and abjection.

As hogs are far more inquisitive and destructive than dairy cattle, the plan was to install concrete partitions to about five feet, then wood frame walls above that. Eventually every hog in the building would reside in an aluminum alloy pen with hot water heat in the floors, automatic feeders and nipple waterers for the shoats. There would be, as the brochure said, 'several comfort zones to accommodate varying sizes of hogs.'<sup>30</sup>

The novel's detailed attention to the means and mechanisms of containment and surveillance bely the characters' yearning for simplification. This desire for bottom-line reductionism activates the characters' blind faith in and reliance on commercial speech—"as the brochure said"—for authority and legitimacy. Likewise, the "comfort zones" promised by the corporate broadside function to unfit its consumers for resistance to corporate incursions and reconfiguration, and they mirror the structures of the bank, courtroom, and church in enforcing social and cultural conformity. These architectures, in sum, are designed for global trade, for interchangeability and exchangeability, networkability, synchronicity, and standardization.

This tightening spiral of capitalist incursion and individual subjection plays out against farmers' archetypal sensibility of resignation and prototypical Midwestern conservatism. Ty's hog expansion falls victim to declining prices and rising interest rates, the beginnings of the 1980s farm crisis. Banker Marv Carson supervises the inflation of land values and the increase in debt, convincing Ty to increase his hog operations. "Marv Carson says hogs are going to make the difference between turning a good profit and just getting by in the eighties," Ty reports, and his design to double the hog operation to 1,000 hogs instead quadruples, again on Carson's advice: "Four thousand was a number Marv Carson liked, for one thing .... Pretty soon, four thousand hogs became our plan, and Marv Carson gave us a \$300,000 line of credit."<sup>31</sup> In court, Carson pontificates: "'The idea of being debt-free is a very old-fashioned one. A *family* can be debt-free, that's one's thing. A *business* is different. You've got to grasp that a farm is a business first and foremost."<sup>32</sup> In keeping with Carson's pronouncement that they are a "*business*," not a "*family*," they triumph in court because they prove themselves to be business-oriented and amenable to the constantly shifting character of agricultural economics: "Got to have capital improvements in a business. Economy of scale. All that."<sup>33</sup>

What Carson calls "investment" paradoxically becomes divestment: the entrance of capital extracts the human, natural, and social resources of the Cook farm in order to create surplus, a phenomenon Walter Rodney and other scholars of globalization have explored in terms of European colonization.<sup>34</sup> Indebtedness thus signifies loss of agency and facilitates the reconfiguration of the farm into human and animal "comfort zones" that enable the global commodification and circulation of its producers and products—just as "indebtedness" in developing countries compels "structural adjustments" imposed by overdeveloped countries

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 167.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 325 (emphasis original).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1972).

that further diminish the former's autonomy and power. In much the same way, *A Thousand Acres* narrates the cession of Ty's hog operations to the Heartland Corporation—the ironically-named predator that feeds off the inability of small producers to make it in the get-big-or-get-out world of agriculture.

In minimizing U.S. public policy, political leadership, and shared commons, *A Thousand Acres* underscores that democratic national governance offers little resistance to the predations of global capital and industry. Save an allusion to President Jimmy Carter (whose body becomes a symbol of joking emasculation<sup>35</sup>) and its depiction of the family's battle in court, the novel excludes references to public spaces and structures: readers do not meet local law enforcement, codes inspectors, teachers, or social workers—significant elisions given the characters' sexual abuse and environmentally destructive agricultural expansions. Instead, power resides in the machinations of industry fronts such as the Agricultural Policy Working Group, National Pork Producers Council, and U.S. Meat Export Federation. Iowa State's archives of these groups make clear how grassroots and literary imaginations of environmentalism—of local decisions for development and environmental use, factoring in community and ecological considerations—are circumscribed by a triumph of neoliberalism. While local actors might seek a planetary consciousness, their attempts become co-opted by transnational affinity groups that attenuate local agencies.

Whereas William Cronon contends that Chicago constructs Iowa and the rest of the U.S. heartland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>36</sup> the “world”—prised by the U.S. Meat Export Federation (MEF) in particular, given the emphasis on hogs of *A Thousand Acres*—constructs the U.S. Midwest in the late twentieth century. Founded in 1976, the Federation aims “to promote U.S. red meats overseas” through marketing and international lobbying,<sup>37</sup> thus functioning as a quasigovernmental, transnational interface between multinational corporations and national governments. In particular, it commodifies U.S. Midwestern pork for circulation in a global economy. By the late 1980s, a decade after the setting of *A Thousand Acres* and several years before its publication, the Federation celebrated its success in expanding demand for U.S. pork, thanks in large part to Mexico and Japan, the destinations of 83 percent of all exports<sup>38</sup>; in 1988 alone, industry lobbyists commemorated a 94 percent increase in the value of pork exports:

The figures show that if we get aggressive, the industry can improve pork exports by working with the MEF,' Russ Sanders, National Pork Producers, said. 'The aggressive and effective promotional programs MEF is putting together overseas and the increased amount of TEA [Targeted Export Assistance] allocations made a great impression in markets and helped us reach that critical mass overseas.'<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Meat Export Federation, *Meat Nutri-Facts: U.S. Pork* (U.S. Meat Export Federation, n.d.), U.S. Meat Export Federation, Collected Materials, 1985-1992, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA), 2.

<sup>38</sup> “Pork,” *Action*, April 1989, U.S. Meat Export Federation, Collected Materials, 1985-1992, 5.

<sup>39</sup> “Pork Exports,” *Action*, March 1989, U.S. Meat Export Federation, Collected Materials, 1985-1992, 4.

From industry's perspective, the increase in exports reflects the success of the synergy of industry, government, and consumers, for the Federation's cheerleaders envision a sort of new world order for U.S. farmers, in which American pork feeds the world. To my mind, this marketeerism and boosterism serve as well to drum up an audience for a novel like *A Thousand Acres*. Not only does Made-in-the-U.S.A. pork sell; so too do the cultural narratives that envelop it—even cultural narratives that might shine a negative light on the brand or the storyline, as Smiley's certainly does.<sup>40</sup>

That the default position in which to introduce U.S. pork to international consumers—a “critical mass,” an explicitly undifferentiated and implicitly undifferentiable amalgamation—is one of “aggression” conveys the collision of power, conflict, and resistance, not only in the sale and distribution of flesh but of narratives like Smiley's too. If proponents of globalization cite its potential to break down economic, cultural, and social barriers as its fundamental positive, its critics point to its reification of the structures and modes of imperial power as its fundamental negative, in which powerful nations and their corporate affiliates, in pursuit of profit, economically subjugate less powerful ones. For the MEF, its efforts to increase pork exports rely on creating an economy of desire for pork as a signifier of America, transubstantiating U.S. pork into U.S. culture; the consumption of food represents the consumption of place, region, and nation—a sort of perverse eco-cosmopolitanism.<sup>41</sup> To drum up interest in U.S. pork in Singapore, for example, MEF used “‘Gone With The Wind’ [sic] and Western style radio jingles [to tempt] consumers to try juicy and tender U.S. pork at Swensen's,” a United States-based restaurant, and showcased Virginia baked ham, Chicago cut pork loin, and Carolina barbecued ribs.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Ginny in fiction and Hicks, McEachern, Munn, Nelson, and Wiley in Iowa contend with the state's rise to the top of the rankings in the production of hogs thanks to the national and international marketing efforts of trade associations like MEF—a dubious achievement that brings to local communities rampant groundwater pollution, noxious odors, outbreaks of human and animal disease, dangerous work, community disintegration, and low wages. To quote her brother-in-law, Pete, who tells Ginny about the construction of a concentrated animal feeding operation upriver from their property, “Shit rolls downhill.” “‘I'd imagine that the bacteria level's pretty high,’” he continues. “‘Mmm. Slurp slurp.’”<sup>43</sup> As these lines portend, resignation cannot inspire action—only self-annihilation, crystallized in Pete's subsequent drowning.

Despite their recognition of the devastation of their human and ecological community, the novel's characters reject activism and intervention. In dodging the Vietnam War draft, Jess Clark's character offers the promise of resistance, a promise that falls flat by novel's end. On the surface, Jess symbolizes the lobby's linkage of the military to agriculture and oil. While this

<sup>40</sup> See Bruce Robbins, “Commodity Histories” (*PMLA* 120, no. 2 [2005]), who underscores and explains the contemporary seduction of commodity narratives.

<sup>41</sup> Such appropriations of globalization reiterate Heise's caution: “This argument for an increased emphasis on a sense of planet ... should be understood not as a claim that environmentalism should welcome globalization in every form ... or as a refusal to acknowledge that appeals to indigenous traditions, local knowledge, or national law are in some cases appropriate and effective strategies” (*Sense of Place* 59).

<sup>42</sup> “U.S. Pork Check-off/MEF Promotion Extended at Swensen's in Singapore,” *Action*, January 1988, U.S. Meat Export Federation, Collected Materials, 1985-1992, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 251, 249.

“vegetarian stranger” (to borrow Steven G. Kellman’s appellation<sup>44</sup>) fails as a credible spokesman for the causes of organic agriculture he champions, his refusal to serve in the U.S. military (in particular in a war premised on the indiscriminate application of a fatal, highly carcinogenic pesticide, Agent Orange) nonetheless repudiates the paradoxical impoverishment and enrichment of the Midwest via U.S. military power. Framed as well by the characters’ consistent concern over oil—during the oil embargo of the novel’s late 1970s setting, the farmers watch gas prices as carefully as they watch the weather—*A Thousand Acres* yokes agricultural productivity to global martial conquest. After all, “food is oil” in a world where eroded and less fertile soils demand greater inputs of petroleum-based fertilizers, worked by heavier, more compacting, more gas-guzzling machinery.<sup>45</sup> More profoundly, Jess’s expulsion, whatever readers think of him, signifies the loss of counterhegemonic perspectives—a loss compounded by the statistical disproportion of rural Americans enlisting in the nation’s armed forces.

In this world of heedless marketing, where farmers’ decisions are made for them by powerfully connected global lobbyists, and where these decisions entail major alterations in landscapes and ecosystems, the end of *A Thousand Acres* cannot be anything but tragedy. Neither the Cook women nor the grassroots groups explored in this essay can match the global military-industrial-agricultural complex’s power to effect wholesale environmental and societal alteration, even as they try to salvage a tenable environmentalist vision. The keystone of this power system, the fusion of the interconnections of military, corporate, and national power across national borders, is the Agricultural Policy Working Group, comprised of Cargill, Central Soya Company, Continental Grain Company, International Minerals and Chemical Corporation, Monsanto, Nabisco, and Pillsbury. In contrast to the failed agrarian vision that dooms the characters and community of *A Thousand Acres*, this neoliberal organization envisions “a new agricultural era, one in which farmers and agricultural industries operate more freely, with more competitive opportunities and fewer government interventions or constraints.” The APWG advocates the ushering in of this “new agricultural era” through “trade liberalization” and “decoupling”:

With freer agricultural markets, there is no doubt that the U.S. and rural America will prosper. ... U.S. steps to decouple farmer assistance programs from the market would not only allow American agriculture to use its comparative advantage to capture increased market share, but would also encourage other nations toward reform—and improve the climate for commitments to liberalize agricultural trade.<sup>46</sup>

Couched in the rhetoric of freedom and agency, the vision of the APWG paradoxically delineates the transformation of farm owners into agricultural free agents. This vision does not agitate for international reform but instead for an opening of the American system—one in

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<sup>44</sup> See Steven G. Kellman, “Food Fights in Iowa: The Vegetarian Stranger in Recent Midwest Fiction” (*Virginia Quarterly Review* 71, no. 3 [1995]).

<sup>45</sup> Richard Manning, “The Oil We Eat: Following the Food Chain Back to Iraq,” *Harper’s Magazine* (February 2004), 42.

<sup>46</sup> Agricultural Policy Working Group, *Decoupling: A New Direction in Global Farm Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Agricultural Policy Working Group, 1988), Agricultural Policy Working Group Records, 1987-1988, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 19-20.

which the nation's heartland is reduced to poverty, migration, and dispossession, woes chronicled and excoriated by *A Thousand Acres*.

### **Conclusions: New Perspectives for a Renewed Ecocritical Praxis**

As the texts in this essay demonstrate, novels like *A Thousand Acres*, grassroots resistance movements, and industry problematize conceptualizations of eco-cosmopolitanism and shift the terms of ecocritical theory. For starters, they muddy the waters of bioregionalist approaches to place, complicated as all agricultural landscapes are by the application of technologies in genetic engineering, hydration, and cultivation that struggle to respond to changing climatic conditions across disjunctively developing nation-states.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, they complicate ecocosmopolitanist approaches, for they show the overt and covert permeations of global capital in defining and endorsing certain locales, environmental relationships, and cultural values—definitions and endorsements that have the power of shifting individual or communal understandings of environmental consciousness and knowledge. Last, the voices recorded in this essay compel us to commit ecocriticism to intervening in agroecological crisis, through the collection and dissemination of textual materials produced by, for, and about farm communities; the subsequent fusion of academic and non-academic producers of knowledge; and the ongoing theorization and retheorization of the binaries at the heart of any ecocritical intervention in agroecology—local and global, culture and science, theory and practice. Thus, to my mind, what's less important is the mode of intervention—novels like Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*; nonfiction like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006) or Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001); or documentaries like *Food Inc.* (2009). Instead, what is important is redoubled effort toward critical intertextuality, full inclusion, wide dissemination, and critical self-reflection.

Indeed, just as grassroots groups such as FLPA, CARP, and others can offer ecocritics new perspectives for analysis, so too can grassroots groups offer new visions of ecocritical praxis. Take, for example, the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), a nonprofit group “to research, develop and promote profitable, ecologically sound, and community enhancing approaches to agriculture.” Formed in 1985 against the “twin crises” of Iowa agriculture—“the negative ecological consequences of conventional farming” and “the collapse of commodity prices and the demise of thousands of farms”—the organization aimed for the promotion of “a new paradigm”: “sustainable agriculture.”<sup>48</sup> Today, PFI partners with Iowa State University's Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and together they help farmers research practical innovative solutions to contemporary problems.<sup>49</sup> The organization posits a compelling conceptualization of individual, communal, and environmental negotiations of local and global subjectivity. In its poetic “Vision for Iowa,” the group calls for “Food that is celebrated

<sup>47</sup> See Justin Gillis, “A Warming Planet Struggles to Feed Itself” (*New York Times*, 4 June 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Practical Farmers of Iowa, *Annual Report* (Ames, Iowa: Practical Farmers of Iowa, 2002), Practical Farmers of Iowa Records, 1985-1992, Special Collections Department, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 2.

<sup>49</sup> For example, the group has investigated niche markets for pork in Sweden and Denmark (*Annual Report* 11), and they have sponsored “All-Iowa Meals” which tell the stories of the foods and farmers who grew them (*Annual Report* 12).



/ ... / Farms that are prized / ... / Communities that are alive."<sup>50</sup> In its progression from food to farm to community, this vision statement-in-verse reincorporates individuals into their communities—and, equally important, their communities into their local landscapes as well as their global commons. Put simply, the organization envisions human reinhabitation and communal enrichment as the keys to facing the region's conjoined socioeconomic and ecological threats—an agricultural ecocosmopolitanism, as it were.

The conclusion of *A Thousand Acres* lacks the Practical Farmers' optimism, sadly. The novel's characters have little choice but to sell the farm and drift away, incapable of participating in a world of vertical integration and transnational corporate conglomeration, premised on the ideals of "trade liberalization" and "decoupling." Rather than launch a final assault on the forces that have decimated the country's agrarian mythos, the novel's end shows that the Cook descendents (like counterhegemonic groups such as CARP and FLPA) present no match for the confluence of the U.S. military and global trade organizations, such as USMEF and APWG. Instead of a final screed lamenting a broken trust, the novel dissolves into a puddle of resignation and submission, befuddled by environmental contamination, familial disintegration, social and communal alienation, and national-transnational economic collapse. In profound ways, the novel and the archives considered in this essay capture these contradictory discourses. Most crucially, these discourses engage and reconceptualize ecocriticism and offer new energies to an ongoing eco-cosmopolitan trajectory.

Just as these grassroots environmentalists and capitalist elites have sought to consolidate and disseminate divergent though urgent national campaigns on behalf of small-scale farmers, so too does *A Thousand Acres* function to crystallize and deploy a consciousness-shifting national reimagining of U.S. agriculture, patriarchy, and the Midwest. Yet Iowa State's archives highlight that these carefully crafted visions depend on the granular accumulation of images, symbols, and ideologies expressed in the texts of grassroots environmental activists. As Heise suggests, the success of eco-cosmopolitanism shall depend on "finer-grained distinctions," the complications of recognizing yet questioning national cultures and the impacts of such constructions on diverse environmentalisms.<sup>51</sup> These texts bring to the forefront the challenges human subjects face in articulating and narrating environmental relationships—even despite their intimate proximity to these landscapes. What's more, they expose the struggles of rural people to embrace a planetary consciousness—a global awareness that, as this essay shows, can involve the continued ecological devastation of the landscapes these activists hold dear. Indeed, Ginny's hard-won mastery of a complex environmentalist voice mirrors that by dozens of rural Iowans, whose voices and activism are captured in Iowa State's archives, a convergence that encapsulates great promise as well as great liability. These challenges demand the close attention of ecocritics, not only to deeply engage appropriate texts, but to engage them with a framework that expands the orchestra and zeros in on the critical problems of global agriculture, planetary health, and human rights. In sum, if we are to make good on Heise's call for "effective aesthetic templates by means of which to convey such a dual vision of the earth as a whole and of the different earths that are shaped by varying cultural contexts" (210), we must turn not only to novels, poems, and plays and the theories we already understand, but to local people in their roles as workers, thinkers,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>51</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 60.

organizers, and creators as well, for both the conundrums they confront as well as the critical insights they bring to the deeply eco-cosmopolitan project we seek.

### Afterword

A reviewer of this essay raised a provocative set of questions:

[T]he thrust and the beauty of the paper is that ecocritics must take into account the voices of the folk. And yet it is written almost without exception from sentence to sentence in a language that the folk would not be able to penetrate without a graduate degree (I realize many folk do have university degrees), even though they would understand as well or better than most academics everything that is at stake and outlined so well in the paper. The crux of my question is this: why should academic ecocritics take the voices of the folk into account in our practice, on the one hand, and yet effectively withhold our voices from them on the other? Is that a dialogic or a monologic act? Is it an act of appropriation of voices?

The reviewer's questions fascinate me for several reasons. First, they compel me to question my own training, training that has formed my scholarly voice—yet training that might not be up to the task of making my scholarly writing accessible and meaningful to a broader audience. Second, they compel me to reiterate my own perspective of literary studies as being inclusive of all texts, as being more rightly the study of narrative, produced by individuals inside and outside the academy, in infinite forms. (My preparation in graduate school inculcated this broad conception of literariness—indeed, my graduate school made possible my time in Iowa State University's archives—a conception I have found that many of my current colleagues do not share, exemplified when I recently proposed including *Silent Spring* [1962] in a senior seminar in literature: "But it's not literature!" several of my colleagues scoffed.) Last, these questions underscore the urgency of maintaining the clear relevance of the humanities, best accomplished, in my opinion, by more, better, and richer collaboration and commingling among all of society's institutions, from higher education to local grassroots groups to scholarly presses to governmental agencies. In this conviction, I second Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), where she writes that without the humanities, "nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements."<sup>52</sup> We need more dialogical acts, that is, because we must recognize the completeness of all human beings—and because all human beings, in their completeness, have something to teach us as we work to teach each ensuing generation.

In sum, I will continue to strive to develop a scholarly prose that can signify inside and outside the circle of literary critics. In the meantime, I hope we in the environmental humanities will continue to identify ways we can share as broadly as possible what we do,

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<sup>52</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

whether it is by disseminating our work online, hosting community reading and writing groups, and using service-learning in our classes, just to name a few.

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