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New Agrarianism and American Children's Literature

Emily C. Cormier

University of Connecticut - Storrs, emilycormier@gmail.com

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New Agrarianism and American Children's Literature

Emily Cardinali Cormier, Ph.D.

University of Connecticut, 2015

This dissertation explores the ways in which New Agrarian theory opens new interpretations of the child's farm novel in both American Literature and Children's Literature. It examines both large-scale relationships—such as between culture and agriculture—as well as intimate relationships—between members of a family and the land upon which they live—contending that there is a direct relationship between the health of a community and the health of its soil. The farm novel in Children's Literature is a rich site of inquiry for New Agrarians because it works on both scales: intimately depicting the workings of farm families, while fitting such families into larger national narratives about rural community.

This dissertation intervenes productively in Ecocriticism and New Agrarianism, where works for children have often been slighted by scholarship, as well as in Children's Literature, where ecocriticism has excluded the working farm child, and the relationship between farm life and nostalgia has yet to be critically addressed. This project also intervenes in New Agrarianism by questioning the assumptions of white privilege and heteropatriarchy upon which some of this theory is built. Additionally, this work adds a necessary perspective to both African-American Children's Literature (which has often focused on the urban) and Black Agrarianism (which has not yet considered works for children). Fundamental to this analysis is considering to what extent nostalgia or an attachment to the Pastoral has shaped farm novels for children.

New Agrarianism and American Children's Literature

Emily Cardinali Cormier

B.A., Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, **2000**

M.A., University of Connecticut, **2014**

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2015

APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

New Agrarianism and American Children's Literature

Presented by
Emily Cardinali Cormier, B.A., M.A.

Major Advisor

Katharine Capshaw, Ph.D.

Associate Advisor

Margaret R. Higonnet, Ph.D.

Associate Advisor

William H. Major, Ph.D.

University of Connecticut
2015

For Ken, Theo, and Charles

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1. Introduction: Myth-making and the American Farm Novel for Children

There are few images so evocative of a virtuous and healthy upbringing as that of the happy, capable farm child, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and chewing on a stalk of long green grass in the sun. Despite the fact that history tells a different story, radically different if one considers race, gender, and class, the farm maintains its position in American culture as an ideal place for child-rearing. Emerson suggests so much in his 1858 essay entitled “Farming” where, posing as a disillusioned city-dweller, he muses: “Well, my children, whom I have injured, shall go back to the land, to be recruited and cured by that which should have been my nursery, and now shall be their hospital” (Emerson 134). In this, Emerson suggests that those who are deprived of a nursery in the country, and instead raised with “town life and town vices” will be rendered ill, only to be cured by a return to the farm. In such moments we see an oft-repeated ideological handshake, as it were, between glorification of the farm and belief in such a thing as an ideal childhood. One cultural artifact of such a confluence is the child’s farm novel.

The child’s farm novel opens surprising new avenues into understanding the intersections between nostalgia, personal history, gender studies, and national mythology when located within the emerging field of New Agrarianism. Critics use New Agrarian cultural theory to understand and articulate the relationship between farming and human community. This theoretical framework considers farming practices, technologies, and land management not as a backdrop to human communities, but as the primary (but often unrecognized) way we can understand human relationships, both intimate and large-scale. Children’s literature that emerges from an agricultural community (or is written about

historic farming communities) is uniquely suited to New Agrarian analysis in part because children's worlds are circumscribed by the home and the nuclear family. The literature that emerges is consequently packed with details about how a family works together, and how that family fits into the larger agrarian society of which it is a part. I have selected works for this project that showcase a variety of agricultural scenarios, in order to investigate how family and community relationships develop according to changes in farming practices.

Laura Ingalls Wilder's early works account for a large portion of my study, as there is no author who even approximates her influence on perceptions of American farm life for children. Wilder, along with Montgomery, are hugely popular, perhaps because they bear witness to historical change and thereby gain an adult audience. Wilder's first three novels, *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Farmer Boy*, and *Little House on the Prairie*, also offer three disparate farming situations where readers have an opportunity to directly witness how changes in agricultural practice also signal shifts in family and community relationships. I argue that Wilder's works—at once memoir, fiction, and national mythology—demonstrate the losses sustained, both personal and national, as an older agrarian order faded away. In my analysis of Mildred Taylor's work, I underscore the problematic assumptions of white privilege associated with the agricultural imperative in the United States. In her novel, *The Land*, Taylor refuses to participate in nostalgia for a time of vicious iniquity, but concurrently suggests that black experience on the soil cannot be defined solely by the history of enslavement. This project also situates L.M. Montgomery in her specific agricultural moment—one of transition from diversified livelihood farms to industrialized, market-driven farms—and I argue that such a

transition has the potential to offer women greater autonomy. However, an analysis of both Montgomery's journals and her first two novels in the *Anne* series suggests that the heteropatriarchal shadow of an older agrarian order was still too heavy to offer women meaningful alternatives to traditional marriage. As a whole, this dissertation argues that a reading of children's farm novels is incomplete without also understanding how specifics about agricultural history shape gender, labor, and community. Additionally, reading these works within the framework of New Agrarianism connects them to a larger spectrum of American farming literature that includes works intended for an adult audience.

Agriculture in the American Literary Imagination

Since long before American independence, European settlers of North America have been focused on cultivating what was perceived as a vast, fertile, and largely uninhabited land. That it had been in cultivation by native inhabitants long before European settlers has somehow been erased from the popular narrative of the history of American agriculture. When people write of the early American farmer, people often think of the farmer in the early republic, as rendered by Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, or even Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. Such literary representations of farming in the early republic have worked to solidify American perceptions of what it means to be a farmer, and what farming means to our national identity. It has even been argued that farming itself was the primary way citizens of the early republic cohered as a group during the Revolutionary era; through dedication to farming, they distinguished themselves as a unified people.¹ A relationship with

farming “impart[ed] a degree of unity to a people fractured on the bases of religion, ethnicity, region, and style of living” (Danbom 4).

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, written primarily for a European readership, painted a picture of North America as a place of fertility and promise to those who were willing to work the land. As early as 1782, de Crèvecoeur insinuates that goodness naturally comes from farming on American soil:

Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and clothe them all; without any part being claimed either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord. (660)

The farm child here is able-bodied, helpful, and “frolicsome.” Thus we see in some of our earliest American literature the close association between a healthy childhood, a healthy farm, and American identity. But, this passage also rests on a multitude of privileged assumptions about the fictionalized “farmer” in Crèvecoeur’s work: he is of white European descent, he is a landowner, he is the male head of a family in a strongly heteropatriarchal society, he is literate, he is not a slave, he is able-bodied, and certainly one could find more marks of privilege even than these. But this “farmer” is not a fair representative of those farming the land in the early republic. Importantly to my project, though, he fully embodies the *mythic* American farmer, who is living out what I will call the “agrarian ideal” throughout the course of this book. I use the term frequently in the work that follows; when I write of agrarianism I mean to evoke a kind of farm that lives in the American literary imagination—the farm that is both self-sufficient and connected

to other farms with interdependent economic ties—the farm where diligent work always translates into security.

If any figure in American literary history embodies the complexities of the agrarian ideal, it could be Thomas Jefferson, whose commitment to keeping America an agricultural nation was a mainstay of his political thought. However, his personal involvement with slavery suggests the extent to which his agrarian ideal was based on a brutal inequality. Nevertheless, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson expresses an idea that has resonated in American culture and literature for centuries:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts he thus made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which He keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. (Jefferson 737)

In this, Jefferson sweepingly correlates moral superiority and spiritual vivacity with farmers. Part of what keeps the farmer from corruption, according to Jefferson, is his ability to sustain himself without dependence on a larger economic system. According to Jefferson, virtue arises from those who depend on “their own soil and industry [...] for their subsistence” rather than those who “depend [...] on the casualties and caprice of customers” (737). The notion is that the farmer can and does live outside the fluctuations of the market, and it is this kind of economic independence that prevents him from vice. Jefferson explains: “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition” (737). While this is part of

Jefferson's overarching political position that large-scale manufacturing should be kept in Europe, he makes his point by evoking the idea that farmers embody a virtuous "subsistence" and eschew "subservience" that leads to greed and immorality. Thus, even while participating in the most exploitative labor system possible, Jefferson solidifies two major tenets of the mythic American farmer: that he provides for his own needs without depending on the market to do so, and that such occupation gives rise to virtue. I have found the limitations of this agrarian ideal (sometimes called Jeffersonian Agrarianism or Jeffersonian Yeomanry) in my project. I have discovered a persistent blindness to the privilege and oppression within such an "ideal," and have found different limitations depending on historical context and location. The cultural work that this ideal performs, particularly within Children's Literature, is to mask inequalities and instead reinforce myths of both American farming and childhood itself.

While we can attribute much in the way of myth-making to the writings of early Americans, over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries agriculture continues to change in response to technologies that not only changed farm labor itself, but also transportation systems to move farm products. The invention of the threshing machine and eventually the tractor had changed the labor from human and animal powered, to machine- and gas powered. This, in combination with an increasingly accessible system of canals and railways, created a farming culture that was increasingly specialized and less diversified. Additionally, the distance between producer and consumer continued to widen during this time frame. The farming communities of the early republic bore little resemblance to those in the mid-twentieth century. Twentieth-century farms had much in common with the factories so despised by Jefferson, and the

distance between twentieth-century farmland and the population it supported had grown considerably. Crèvecoeur's fictional farmer, and Jefferson's yeoman farmer, though both mythic from the start, had grown increasingly so, as they were replaced with business models and market-savvy farmers more knowledgeable about machinery and subsidies than sheep and soil.

New Agrarian Theory Emerges

Suffice it to say that towards the end of the twentieth century, the mythic American farmer who knew his land and worked on it alongside other human beings, whether they were family members, enslaved people, or hired help, was clearly a mythic figure of the long past. While there are things to celebrate about the advancements in both society and technology that brought farming to change radically, New Agrarians wonder what societal problems were created as a result of this shift towards industrial agriculture. This group of thinkers, writers, activists, and farmers contemplate the close relationship between culture and agriculture, the moral and ethical imperative of soil preservation, and the relationship between how we use the soil and how we live in community. The most prominent and prolific among these is Wendell Berry, whose essays, poems, fiction, and lectures have, since the 1960s, shaped the movement. The popular cultural movement to buy local produce from local farmers (a long-standing practice in some areas anyway) since the beginning of the twenty first century has gained such momentum that farmer's markets are no longer difficult to find. This return to eating seasonally and locally has finally become not a nostalgic gesture but a global value. The number of farmers markets that cater to this particular interest has increased in the United States nearly five-fold

between 1994 and 2013.² Such a widespread cultural interest has started to trickle into academic discourse, and in 2011 William Major published *Grounded Vision: New Agrarianism and the Academy*, the first full-length study of New Agrarianism's importance in academic discourse.

In the introduction to *Grounded Vision*, Major calls for scholars to pay attention to New Agrarianism as a theoretical perspective whose wider inclusion in academic departments may have relevance that extends out from the text and into the workings of daily life. Major calls his book, "...in part a work of advocacy," which he hopes will encourage others to recognize the value in this theoretical approach. Quite plainly, he writes: "I would like to see today's agrarian theory receive further attention from literary and cultural critics" (11). There is a sense of urgency in this field that is similar to other modes of critical inquiry—feminism, queer theory, race theory—because while each of these can offer new ways of reading texts, they also reveal that the ways we think, write, and teach about these topics have real-world consequences. New Agrarian theorists seek to understand how our choices about food, land, water and soil conservation are related to our choices about our interpersonal relationships, our wider communities, home economies, and larger economies. These structures also map narrative choices in literary texts insofar as authors of farm fiction write not only about farm production and land use, but also about how family members interact with one another and with their larger communities. Questions of race, religion, and privilege are vitally important to address in this burgeoning field, particularly when the movement's most prominent voice is Wendell Berry, whose life has been profoundly shaped by white maleness, Protestantism, and privileged access to education and land.³ Children's Literature can bring new ideas to

New Agrarian literary criticism by emphasizing the uniquely formative and culturally pervasive roles that farm texts for children have in shaping perceptions of agrarian life.

As a mode of academic inquiry, I consider New Agrarianism itself to be a branch of Ecocriticism, the field of study that explores literary representations of the relationship between humans and their environments. While studies in literature and the environment start to crop up in the early 1970s, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) is considered by many to be the seminal work in contemporary Ecocriticism, and, along with Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), crystallized Ecocriticism as a mainstream theoretical approach in literature. Like many other ecocritics, Buell's focuses particularly on *Walden* and its legacy in American culture. The emphasis in Buell focuses on how humans interact with the "natural" world, that is, the world more or less "outside" of human civilizations. The field has since grown to include voices on environmental racism, ecofeminism, animal rights, and activism, among others. Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), though written long before ecocriticism was named as such, is a key text in my project because of the way Marx understands America itself to be an amalgam of myths and a storehouse of dreams, most of which are associated with the vast, fertile, and "untouched" land. I pair Annette Kolodony's *The Lay of the Land* (1974) with Marx's book, as she investigates the correlation between characterizing American land as feminine and its colonization and destruction. The ecocritical perspective in Marx and Kolodony recognizes farming as the primary relationship between humans and their environments. While both texts emphasize the Pastoral, they hint at the Georgic as a force in American literature. The

Georgic, as a counter-trope to the Pastoral, takes its name from Virgil's *Georgics*, a work detailing the toils and benefits of agricultural life.

Where the Pastoral idealizes the life of shepherds, the Georgic describes the hard work of farming. The Georgic may also extol the virtues of such work, but unlike the Pastoral, it dwells on the circumstance that the country life is a life of labor. Two key texts that recognize the importance of this trope in American literature are Stephanie Sarver's *Uneven Land: Nature and Agriculture in American Writing* (1999), and Timothy Sweet's *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in American Literature* (2001). Sweet offers his readers an understanding of the relationship between the environment and the economy in early American Literature. As a result, Sweet primarily considers literary representations of land use and economy as early as the sixteenth century, and continuing into the mid-nineteenth century. Sarver's work considers land use as well, but is focused more concretely on farming itself. She starts her analysis where Sweet ends his—the mid-nineteenth century—and carries it through the early twentieth century. Where Sweet prefers the term Georgic, Sarver embraces the term agrarian, and pays particular attention to the agrarianism of Hamlin Garland and Liberty Hyde Bailey. The literature selected by Sweet and Sarver could not be comprehensive, thus there are many relevant texts unexplored. In *New Agrarianism and American Children's Literature*, I add the child's farm novel as an important window into further understanding our culture's literary representations of land use to the growing body of work this topic.

Ecocritical Perspectives in Children's Literature

What is striking about the child's farm novel in American Literature is that it attempts to marry the pastoral with the georgic, and in so doing it creates a critically important moment where we can witness both the colonization of childhood and, at times, the hyper-idealization of American farm life. As these novels focus on the world of the child, often confined to the homestead, these works also offer a particularly rich site to analyze how farm families are depicted. New Agrarians pay attention to family life, and such writers find marriage, intergenerational family relationships, and parenting just as relevant to farming as plowing and fertilizing. New Agrarianism as a field is deeply interdisciplinary. As Stephanie Sarver notes in the introduction to *Uneven Land*, she was likely to find books about agrarianism shelved with history, science, agriculture, literature, sociology, or any number of different places. But, her search might have come up short if she had looked on the shelves of childhood studies, or children's literature. While New Agrarianism has been the topic of some recent critical attention, farming in literary studies it has not, to date, recognized the cultural influence of children's farm novels.

Although children's farm novels have not, as a group, been given critical consideration, they are part of a category of children's literature that has received a great deal of attention, dating at least as far back as the Jean-Jacque Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) in the eighteenth century: contemporary scholars of nature in Children's Literature pay particular attention to representations of activism, ecopedagogy, children and animals, children as nature, children's eco-political awakenings, and children's encounters with wilderness. Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd's collection of essays, *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* (2004) is a landmark book in the field whose essays

“underscore the consensus belief across narrative genres that even if the child has a privileged relationship with nature, he or she must be educated into a deeper—or at least different—awareness” (7). While my work focuses exclusively on children’s farm novels, Kidd and Dobrin’s volume only fleetingly mentions farming.⁴ Instead, they cast a much wider net, with essays concerning a variety of ecocritical and ecopedagogical approaches in Children’s Literature and Childhood Studies. Kidd and Dobrin see their book as a “reader” that “examines the ways in which literature, media, and other cultural forms for young people address but are also shaped by nature, place, and ecology” (14). My work is considerably more narrow in its focus, as I concentrate on one literary form (the farm novel for children), and within that one form I argue that each novel’s particular kind of farming is directly related to both intimate and community relationships that are depicted.

In the mid-nineties, both *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* and *The Lion and the Unicorn* published special issues on the topic of Children’s Literature and the Environment—both focusing almost exclusively on literary representations of contemporary environmental activism or children’s wilderness encounters. In the introduction to *The Lion and the Unicorn*’s special issue, *Green Worlds: Nature & Ecology*, Suzanne Rahn traces what she sees as the “the connection between children and the natural world” starting with an excerpt from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” a poem depicting a child who is raised with a close connection to the earth and the change of seasons. Her introductory essay documents the different ways of understanding the connection between nature and childhood, focusing on literary landmarks for each. She finds early hints of environmentalism in volumes of *St. Nicholas Magazine* from the years 1870 to 1890, including an article by Charles Frederick Holder

entitled “How Some Animals Become Extinct” (Rahn 153-154). This kind of writing, intending to inform children of an ecological crisis in order to spawn awareness and spur action, is one of the major branches of children’s environmental literature. Rahn’s essay gives readers a taste of what environmental literature for children was conceived to be in the nineties—that is, an offshoot of mainstream environmentalism combined with a “young naturalists” approach, where we become activists as a result of our intimate encounters with nature. For many, this is the core of environmental children’s literature.⁵

Still, others in Children’s Literature do not necessarily associate activism with environmental literature for children; they are less interested in didactic “messages” embedded in texts, studying instead texts that depict children in nature unassociated with any conservation or environmental movement. I think especially of an essay like “E.B. White’s Paeon to Life: The Environmental Imagination of *Charlotte’s Web*” by Lynn Overholt Wake, which despite all of her observations about White’s affinity for animals and her ability to locate a story in a very specific place, notably does not tie his work in with any particular desire to join a movement. Quiet observation and immersion in one’s natural environment, in many cases, can link a children’s text with ecocriticism. That this appears to be the exception, not the rule, perhaps has something to do with the belief both that children, as “our future,” must be imbued with an awareness of environmental crises, and also that Children’s Literature can (particularly when one considers the long and varied history of Children’s Literature) be laden with “life lessons”—indeed in some cases the didactic imperative was, historically, the only reason to publish for children at all. But even contemporary literature for children can be heavy-handed in doling out “messages” for the young, particularly environmentalist messages.⁶ It is my sense that the

best literature for children—environmental or otherwise—must avoid the impulse to create lessons instead of art.

A more recent collection of essays edited by James Holt McGavran, *Time of Beauty, Time of Fear: The Romantic Legacy in the Literature of Childhood* (2012), includes several essays that trace the Romantic image of the child in nature, or the child of nature, in both modern and historical Children's Literature. It is perhaps this Romantic legacy of childhood—the legacy that a child's rightful place to grow up is the countryside, where s/he can learn about life through observing nature—that propels the pervasive concept of an “ideal” childhood. McGavran's introduction explains how the Wordsworthian child of nature, whose memories are “fostered by beauty and fear” still dictates a prescription for a perfect childhood today where a parent “would rather his daughter have a childhood free to explore, learn, and even suffer than to keep her cooped up in the superstructured spaces of contemporary society” (xii).⁷ In this essay collection, Claudia Mills's chapter entitled “Rousseau Redux: Romantic Re-Visions of Nature and Freedom in Recent Children's Literature about Homeschooling” offers readers a tremendously important snapshot of how Rousseau's *Emile* shaped the trajectory of both children's education and literature since its publication in 1762, through contemporary thoughts on alternative education. Mills succinctly writes:

Rousseau's insistence on the natural innocence of the child, his rejection of original sin in favor of the original goodness of the child until corrupted by society, arguably inspired the long-popular trope of the redemptive child who transforms unhappy and embittered adults: *Heidi*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *Anne of*

Green Gables, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Pollyanna, to name only a few.

(171)

Mills connects Rousseau's philosophy here with several children's farm novels, suggesting that children are "naturally" agrarian. Mills goes on to explain that while the legacy of *Émile* was not as easily found in Children's Literature as the twentieth century wore on, in more recent years there has been a resurgence that has gone hand-in-hand with an uptick in families who homeschool not for religious reasons, but in order for their children to be freed from the constraints imposed on them by the "teaching-to-the-test" mentality that has taken over education in the past decade. Mills's essay reveals a kind of ecocritical approach in contemporary Children's Literature that is not tied to a "save-the-earth" movement, but instead linked with an earlier tradition where the child's physical environment is thought to be highly formative—and where the favored environment is in the great outdoors.

What Mills and others suggest, then, is that Children's Literature offers readers an opportunity to consider the role of the idealized childhood in the formation of culture, and that the child-in-nature has its roots properly in the legacy of Rousseau as much as (or I would argue more than) in the kind of Environmentalism that Rahn sees forming in Children's Literature toward the end of the nineteenth century. This notion of an idealized childhood plays significantly into my project, but where a Wordsworthian child escapes the smog of industry for the cottage in the vale, the idealized American version of the same has no London from which to escape. Instead, the ideal American childhood blends fresh air with farm labor creating our own image of the healthful and wholesome child-rearing environment. Farming literature for children replaces the European pastoral

idyll with an American georgic narrative. Both promulgate the idea that there is a model childhood to be had, but each is a product of the culture from which it springs. The idealization of farming as crystallized in American culture by Jefferson and De Crèvecoeur also forms the basis of the idealized American childhood.

But as scholars, community members, parents, teachers, and others know, the ideal childhood is a cultural construction that does not reflect lived experience. McGavern explains: “Few [...] recognize how deeply the sense of crisis—of repeated threats to children and childhood across time, class, race, and gender—is embedded in the Romantic concept itself; to phrase it alternatively, carefree childhood is a myth. “(xv). In my work, I argue that the intersection of the mythic carefree childhood and the mythic Jeffersonian agrarian holds significant import in how we understand the child’s farm novel and its cultural fallout. In this work I seek to understand how each author’s fictional rendering of a particular agrarian moment—whether pre-industrial farming, frontier farming, southern reconstruction farming, or traditional farming communities in transition—tells us something of the cultural losses and gains that are so intimately tied to how farms operate. Some of these novels are georgics. As such, we see families at work, and by looking at their attitudes toward work, the social and political conditions within which that work takes place, how those who work are valued by their families and the communities at large, and how the quest for personhood is shaped by the expectations of agricultural life, we have an opportunity to see that the farm novel embodies *both* a idealized place in our imaginations, and a window into lived experience. It is the form of the child’s farm novel that permits idealism as well as realism. Novels are not history, and the cultural expectation of the early twentieth century—that children’s authors

present even difficult topics in a palatable form⁸—suggests that novelists reveal and conceal with their audience in mind.

Nostalgia in American Children's Farm Novels

How lived rural experience translates into novels for children, and why when we talk about farming and childhood scholars tend to use the words *mythic* and *idealized* has much to do with another central concept in my work: nostalgia. Each text I write about, to varying degrees and with the exception of Lois Lenski's *Phebe Fairchild: Her Book*, is based on the author's lived experience of a farming community, either through personal experience or family stories. Laura Ingalls Wilder writes about her husband's childhood in rural New York, and also (more famously) about her own childhood; Mildred Taylor tells the passed-down stories of her grandparents and great-grandparents; L.M. Montgomery draws on what she knows about being a young woman in a small agricultural community from her own lived experience. None of these works is considered non-fiction or memoir, although Wilder is often mistakenly considered to give a true account of her own upbringing in her *Little House* books. Each author is writing about a lost past. To some extent—whether personal, familial, or on the larger scales of racial or national identity—one could argue that any adult writing about childhood or youth is. That nostalgia seeps in to farm novels for children is hardly surprising, seeing how much it dictates modern attitudes toward early American farm life and childhood itself. The charge of nostalgia is more easily leveraged against Wilder than Taylor, and in my final chapter, the terms “romantic” and “pastoral” apply more aptly than “nostalgic” to L.M. Montgomery's work. Despite, or perhaps because it is unevenly applicable to

these farm novels, the idea of nostalgia carries significant weight in how this project is framed.

If, as many critics tend to do, we use the term nostalgia as a way of dismissing literatures—voiding their cultural significance using contemporary biases against what may be considered too sentimental, too scrubbed-clean, or even mawkish—we negate the productive potential of nostalgia itself. If we categorically dismiss that nostalgia itself is multivalent, then we see nostalgic works as reductive of lived experience and worse, as poor pieces of literature due to their seeming inability to grapple with the existential reality of time moving forward, and the futile exercise of reliving the past. It is possible, however, that nostalgia is more than that; it is also possible that nostalgia is not an either/or. It is impossible, I argue, to say of an entire piece of literature that it is “nostalgic” or it isn’t. Furthermore, to do so is dead-ending a potentially fruitful confluence of questions about narrative, meaning-making, historical fact, and story-telling. Works of literature in my study can, by turns, be nostalgic and not, and I would argue they avoid being categorized as entirely one or the other. Looking at how nostalgia is employed by the authors, whether intentionally or not, is a far more interesting intellectual experience, and one that requires the employment of a considerably more complicated view of the word itself. Svetlana Boym’s landmark book on the meanings and uses of nostalgia, *The Future of Nostalgia*, offers a differentiated view of how nostalgia is used in different contexts and for different ends. Boym evades absolute definitions of nostalgia, but in her spiraling explorations of meaning, she is able to parse out two general types: reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia. Her repeated explanations of these terms and their uses come from different angles, explaining them

one way early in her book then later in another way. This continual defining and redefining showcases the malleability of the word itself.

Restorative nostalgia is perhaps closer to a mainstream understanding of nostalgia: it seeks to restore a lost home, whether real or imagined. That lost home is often a perceived site of tradition, wholeness, and Boym asserts that it “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (xviii). Boym points out that restorative nostalgics also “do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about absolute truth” (41). Here, Boym reveals that nostalgia applies even when an author believes her project is about historical accuracy. “Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps,” Boym writes, and “reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). Reflective nostalgia, then, covers very different and considerably more ambiguous territory. It is awash in filmy memory bits, and rather than “reconstruct[ing] monuments of the past” (as in restorative nostalgia), it “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41). Restorative nostalgia “delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately” and in this way “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (xviii). Especially important to my project is how nostalgia creates national and cultural mythologies, such as the mythic American farm, or the perfect American childhood. Boym writes, “Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory” (49)—the difference between, say, a medal of honor given to a soldier, or the letters written home. One can be read as a significant and recognizable symbol—a public

history, whereas the other records an intimate experience of an individual, and may have embedded within it multiple narratives of the war experience itself. Reflective nostalgia can be “ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary,” but restorative nostalgia “takes itself dead seriously” (50, 49). Both are important to my project, and I’m particularly interested in textual moments that play between the two.

Some of Boym’s other assertions about nostalgia suggest to me why New Agrarianism cannot be dismissed as a critical approach simply because it suggests that there is something valuable in our nation’s agrarian past, even while that past was imperfect. Boym writes that “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies about the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi). Here is where I see a potentially practical employment of nostalgia itself. I see humanity building to a moment of ecological crisis where to look back to older systems, consider what was better about those systems, and attempt to rebuild them in the future may be one way to avoid an ecological apocalypse. Agriculture will most certainly need to change. While this work is not intended as an agrarian jeremiad, it is imperative that scholars not fear being branded nostalgic when they write about moments in our agricultural past. While New Agrarians have not always been particularly good at distinguishing how their modern agrarian approach differs from older agrarian systems that oppressed people by gender, class, race, and more, this simply means more work needs to be done. If we avoid writing about agrarianism because we may at times seem or even *be* nostalgic, we also avoid the responsibility of owning shameful parts of that past. To include New Agrarianism as an important approach in literary studies is to ask for a reexamination of texts that have shaped our attitudes toward

rural communities, and may even shape the physical landscape of the future. A children's text particularly shapes such attitudes, as it is often a cross-read text—one that a parent and child read together. Works like Wilder's and Montgomery's also are known to attract families on literary pilgrimages to important sites mentioned in the stories, showing that children powerfully connect narrative to landscape. Children are often seen as “the future,” and as such have been symbolically connected with environmental movements. Children, too, can be particularly attuned to the need to voice concerns for those who cannot speak for themselves—the trees or the whales.

Chapter Summaries

My chapter “*Farmer Boy* and *Phebe Fairchild, Her Book*: Pre-Industrial American Farm Life” focuses on Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy* and the Depression-era economics that influenced her perspectives on farming and family labor dynamics. Throughout this chapter I argue that Wilder uses restorative nostalgia in order to suggest that traditional agrarianism offered more stability than modern farming practices. The New Agrarian movement shares with Wilder an urgent suggestion that past agrarian practices hold value for contemporary communities as well. The agricultural crises of the 1930s depression economy shaped Wilder's attitude toward the farming practices of an earlier era. In this way, the farm of *Farmer Boy* approximates what Boym might call the “perfect snapshot” of the past (49). In analyzing Wilder's detailed portrayal of family cooperation, I suggest that there is something intrinsically attractive about the relatively egalitarian labor structure of early farmsteads, particularly when put in relief with the households of the 1930s, when paychecks from work away from the home became the

primary source of financial security. This chapter ends with a coda that serves as a counterweight to Wilder's conservative perspective on farming. In the 1930s Lois Lenski writes *Phebe Fairchild: Her Book*, a story that also is set on a pre-industrial farm in early America. Lenski suggests that the changes to rural America would largely be positive, and opposition to new technologies and transportation systems is retrograde and associated with an unduly harsh and Puritanical worldview. Thus, the chapter closes by reaffirming that although Wilder's *Farmer Boy* is something of a hymn of praise to traditional agrarianism, it is not representative of widespread attitudes in the 1930s, but uniquely shaped by her own experience and political thought.

In “*Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*: Frontier Mythology and Nostalgia,” I delve more deeply into Wilder's nuanced employment of nostalgia in two canonical works of Children's Literature. Here, I argue that Wilder documents the shift from a stable agrarian community in *Little House in the Big Woods* to a narrative of masculine adventuring in *Little House on the Prairie*. Nostalgia, in this chapter, works to glorify Pa even while documenting the disastrous consequences of his poor decisions. New Agrarian thinkers have identified certain elements of agrarian community that signal health, wholeness and connection with the land; I employ some of their criteria in my analysis of Wilder's two texts. By using New Agrarianism as a touchstone, I am able to demonstrate the danger of abruptly breaking from agrarian community. I also underscore how Wilder's works shape the mythic American frontier and the myth of the “self-sufficient” farmer even in contemporary culture. Ultimately, Wilder shows how abandoning agrarian community proves deeply disempowering and even dangerous for the women and girls in these works.

In my next chapter, “*The Land: Recovering Black Agrarianism*” I turn my attention to the Reconstruction and challenge the New Agrarian notion of an idealized relationship with the land. I argue that the “authentic relationship with the land” touted by New Agrarians has inherent biases based on race and class, and that such biases negate the Black American experience with agriculture—its roots in slavery and its absence in contemporary cultural discourse. Nevertheless, Taylor's novels work to show that despite a deeply troubled history with agriculture, it is important to reclaim African-American connection to both landscape and agriculture, and ironically, New Agrarianism can offer a useful framework for doing so. I also show that Taylor's novel refuses to look to the agrarian past nostalgically, in a marked departure from Wilder's depiction of American farm life; it also sounds the alarm to New Agrarian writers who often look away from the problematic inequalities upon which agrarianism rests. However, I do argue that Taylor very selectively employs nostalgia in moments when her text suggests the importance of reclaiming the Black Agrarian past for future generations.

In each preceding chapter I have, at times, argued that *within* agrarian community women's contributions are as valuable as men's. While at times, particularly in Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, I allude to the overwhelming power of the patriarch, the narrative voice occludes any discontent with the family structure. My final chapter, “*Anne of Green Gables and Anne of Avonlea: Female Identity and Agrarianism*,” addresses how agrarian community has traditionally been oppressive to women, and how the transition away from agrarianism created a new space for women. At the time Montgomery was writing, there was both increased opportunity for women with industrialized agriculture, but also a devastatingly problematic patriarchal hangover from

an earlier way of life that had become outmoded. This chapter is unique in that it focuses less on the operational realities of farming and more on the social structure of rural farm communities, pointing out the necessity of having a broader horizon than the narrowly defined heteropatriarchal family. The narrative structure of nostalgia in many children's farm novels yields to a tension between romance and economic reality in Montgomery's work. I use Montgomery's journals alongside her fiction in order to argue that her unforgivingly harsh view of traditional marriage had much to do with women's economic oppression that becomes increasingly clear as a community moves away from agrarianism. Though not framed in terms of nostalgia, this chapter suggests the danger of looking into the past as a model for community cohesion. Montgomery dares to ask readers to consider what happens to a woman in such a community when she rejects the idea of marriage, or finds farm life objectionable? This brings to the fore the realistic problems that crop up for communities caught between agrarianism and industrial capitalism, particularly before feminism.

The works I discuss here are connected, at the most basic level, by their location in farming communities of North America, and their audience: children. Under such a broad definition the possibilities to continue the inquiry are many. Where Wilder clings to both an ideal childhood and an ideal American farm, Taylor reveals the absurdity of both. Where New Agrarian thinkers seek to re-value the home-based labor of all family members, Montgomery points out the oppressive nature of agrarian family structures. This project, then, is a series of inquiries into the shifting significance of the American farm novel for children, more than a singular argument about its meaning or place in

American culture. But to start the dialogue is a significant step to a more well-rounded understanding of why the farm continues to hold such a hallowed place in our cultural perception of a wholesome American childhood.⁹

2. *Farmer Boy* and *Phebe Fairchild, Her Book*: Pre-Industrial American Farm Life

Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy* (1933) is the reimagined story of her husband's childhood in a farming community in Northern New York. The book stands out from the others in her series in notable ways aside from the protagonist being a boy. Whereas Wilder's other books emphasize geographical movement, frontier life, and the nuclear Ingalls family, *Farmer Boy* emphasizes rooted local economy, northeastern life, and Almanzo Wilder's nuclear family. Ann Romines's landmark text, *Constructing the Little House* (1997), points out that one of the most significant ideological differences between *Farmer Boy* and the rest of the "Little House" books is that it most firmly adheres to "traditional, stable agrarian values" (37).¹ The only critical article published with *Farmer Boy* as its sole subject is Fred Erisman's "Farmer Boy: The Forgotten "Little House Book" (1993), which reads the novel as an important establishing text that more or less shows the cultural end goal of the frontier movement. He points out that although the book is different from others in the series, the paucity of critical attention is problematic.² Janet Spaeth's *Laura Ingalls Wilder* (1987) spends time with a critical discussion of each Wilder novel. Within her study, she argues that *Farmer Boy*'s achievement lies primarily in developing the "subtle" theme of Almanzo learning about becoming "big enough" (59). In Anita Clair Fellman's book-length study of Wilder's series, *Little House, Long Shadow* (2008), there is only one paragraph devoted to *Farmer Boy* where she points out that it "encompass[es] a minihistory of farm life in the eastern United States" (85). Erisman's assertion that *Farmer Boy* is the "Forgotten" Wilder book still largely holds true.

Like other critics, my interest in *Farmer Boy* starts with the observation that it stands apart from the other books in the series because it depicts life on a pre-mechanized, self-sufficient farm. I use the term self-sufficient here and throughout the chapter to emphasize that the Wilders produced most of their food, fuel, and shelter from their farm and land. The Wilders certainly participated in a cash economy as well. For the purposes of this chapter, I wish to emphasize the independence of the Wilder's "self-sufficient farm" within the context of the larger, interdependent agrarian economy. I do not mean to argue that the Wilder farm was able to operate outside of this economy. In my study I am interested in contextualizing the difference between the self-sufficient farm of *Farmer Boy* and the other *Little House* books in terms of the economic and political climate of the 1930s. I argue that Wilder's inclusion of this narrative is remarkable primarily in how it models relatively equal distribution of valuable work among men, women, and children. It is plain to see that all farm family members work; the writer's effort to make everyone's work visible has meaning. For although *Farmer Boy* takes place long before the other *Little House* books, it has, as critics like Erisman point out, a special significance in that it establishes early on in the series the kind of agrarian civilization that was considered the goal of the settling of the west. This being the case, I argue that Wilder's portrayal of the labor dynamics within agrarian family life are at the apex of nostalgia, where history and fantasy blend. In this moment the reader learns that Wilder has a deep longing for men and women to work together as equal partners, for children to recognize the value of their own labor, and for the reading public to reconsider the value of agrarianism.

Agrarianism itself has a long and, at times, considerably vexed history. Books like James A. Montmarquet's *The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-Gatherer to Agrarian Radical in Western Culture* and Mats Lundahl and Thommy Svensson's *Agrarian Society in History* offer a historical perspective on agrarian communities around the world and during different time periods. New Agrarianism, though, is a considerably narrower field, and much of its focus has been on the cultural effects of modernity on both rural and urban life in the United States. New Agrarians work toward a future where both community and family strive for a healthy relationship with the earth; one primary way they do so is by considering how to create a sustainable relationship between humans and their agricultural use of the environment. As a mode of inquiry in ecocriticism and literary studies, New Agrarianism looks at the movement toward sustainable alternatives to industrial agriculture, the community and family ethics associated with local economies, and the relationship between the agrarianism of the past and the agrarianism of the future. *Farmer Boy* has the potential to be a rich site of inquiry for New Agrarian theorists, in part because it relies on two historically distinct agricultural time periods: the pre-industrialized farm, which is more in line with New Agrarian ideals, and the post-industrialized farm, which is often viewed critically. A New Agrarian reading of *Farmer Boy* is enhanced by coming to a more complete understanding of its historical context, and in the course of this chapter I argue that farming practices and policies directly influence community and family life. In *Grounded Vision: New Agrarianism and the Academy* (2011), William Major hopes to

...bring agrarian ideas into sharper delineation and dialogue within the academy, not, of course, as quaint and effete longings for the halcyon days of yore, but as

an important and overlooked countercultural set of ideas and practices that consider and dramatize the ineluctable relationships among humans, culture, and land. (43)

What is key in Major's outlook is that agrarianism is at its core an "overlooked countercultural set of ideas and practices." The idea that New Agrarianism is "countercultural" pushes back against the assumption that interest in our agricultural past is inherently retrograde and irrelevant. One vital way to bring New Agrarian ideas to bear on literary studies and to explore their vitality is to look at some of our most formative and mainstream literature, like Wilder's, through this new lens. I integrate the ideas of New Agrarians like Shannon Hayes, Wendell Berry, Helen and Scott Nearing, and Gene Logsdon, to show the relationship between current agrarian thinkers and a canonical writer, and to suggest that New Agrarians can help elucidate the meaning in the details of farming literature. That is to say that a New Agrarian reading of this book emphasizes that Wilder's story of a functioning mid-nineteenth-century farm is not an irrelevant one. In highlighting what was best about this farming period, she anticipates contemporary New Agrarian thought by suggesting deliberation with regards to technological advances, and awareness of the value of familial cooperation and interdependence.

Wilder wrote about the agrarian community of *Farmer Boy* in a time when farm life, even modernized farm life, was in decline. In an effort to alleviate poverty across the nation, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal offered opportunities for work and a plan to stabilize farm prices, but as Ann Romines points out, Wilder believed that New Deal policies "threatened" the small family farm (37). The New Deal was intended to improve life for farmers by preventing markets for staples (wheat, corn, hogs, tobacco, rice, milk,

and cotton) from being flooded with commodities, which would cause prices to drop dramatically.³ In part this was achieved by policies put in place by the Agricultural Adjustment Act, or the AAA: “Under the AAA, prices were to be raised by reducing output and bringing supply in line with demand through a program of production controls” (520 Fite *Economic*). Additionally, many farmers came to rely on “voluntarily signed contracts to curtail production” in order to “receive direct payments from the federal government” (520 Fite *Economic*). However, such opportunities for relief were offered only to commercially-minded farmers who produced vast staple commodities to begin with, rather than small “traditional” family farmers who produced diversified crops and livestock primarily for their family’s consumption. Thus, as R. Douglass Hurt points out, “Not all commodities were covered by price-support and acreage reduction programs, and large-scale farmers benefited more than small-scale agriculturists” (94). In *Farmer Boy*, Wilder’s portrayal of the nearly self-sufficient small family farm rejects the large-scale commercial operations that led to such desperate measures on the part of the Roosevelt administration. In many ways, *Farmer Boy* is already countercultural at the time of its publication.

Without a mechanized and commercialized farm there may never have been a New Deal for farmers, and the nostalgia with which Wilder writes suggests she encouraged a reevaluation of the commercialized farm. The mechanized and commercial farm is one that focuses on the production of cash crops: crops like wheat, corn, or cotton that are to be grown far in excess of what the farming family can consume and brought to market for sale.⁴ The cash from the crops would provide the means by which the farming family could purchase the goods, including food, to sustain them throughout the year until the

next crop came in. While the farm in *Farmer Boy* does participate in the market economy, it first provides for its own sustenance, then brings surplus to market. The New Deal was aimed specifically at the commercial farmer who was driven into destitution and starvation when his products couldn't be sold, or his monoculture crops failed, not the farmer who planted for family sustenance first, and cash second. The farmer who ascribed to traditional agrarianism, like the fictionalized version of Almanzo Wilder's father, may have been immune from some of the more desperate situations of Depression era farmers because his sustenance, his food, fuel, and shelter came largely from his own farm and from bartering with similar farmers in the area.⁵ At every turn, Wilder's novel about farming seems to lament the loss of the small family farm, suggesting that farmers wouldn't need to rely on the government if agriculture had not become dominated by commercial interest.

Wilder is not only lamenting the loss of the small farm itself, but also the family labor structure that efficiently ran such a pre-industrialized farm. By 1930 roles of women, children, and men had shifted notably:⁶ farm women who previously were producers of staple goods, were more and more consumers of commercially produced items; men were increasingly looking for labor away from the farmstead in order to earn additional money to purchase machines like tractors; children were less functionally important to family labor dynamics. I argue that such cultural shifts, well in motion by the 1930s, made Wilder acutely aware of all that was "lost" in the decades between 1860 and 1930.⁷

It is with this in mind that Wilder composes *Farmer Boy*, a text that glorifies a way of life long since left behind in reality, but even to this day remains alive in the American imagination. Wilder relies in no small part on nostalgia in her works, and *Farmer Boy* is

no exception. While in my second chapter I delve into what I call “multiple, competing nostalgias,” which are at play in many of her novels, in this chapter, nostalgia is used in a more straightforward manner, using what Svetlana Boym calls a “restorative nostalgia,” which “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (41). Such nostalgia, Boym asserts, “characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths” (41). In the case of *Farmer Boy*, Wilder paints a glowing picture of her husband’s childhood home in order to build up the agricultural past as being a time of security and abundance, in hopes of encouraging her Depression-era readers to look toward models of the past in order to make the best of their present situation. While restorative nostalgia is often thought of as ineffectual, that doesn’t prevent those who use it from believing in its transformative power. In fact, what Boym points to in restorative nostalgics very aptly applies to Wilder: “The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth” (41). Seen through Boym’s perspective, Wilder creates a “fantas[y] of the past determined by needs of the present” which she hopes will “have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi). Throughout the course of this chapter I suggest that Wilder works in this mode of restorative nostalgia in order to persuade the reader to reconsider older agrarian practices.

The chapter is divided into three sections, each of which argues for reading *Farmer Boy* as a text through which Wilder promotes, for both practical and nostalgic reasons, a return to an older system of farming. Each section also explains that Wilder, as a Depression-era writer writing to a Depression-era audience, shapes her narrative to

address concerns of the time. While *Farmer Boy* may simply provide nostalgic escape for some readers, it also offers practical economic advice with an anti-New Deal undertone. In the first section, I argue that the economic climate of the 1930s and the unprecedented spread of commercialized and mechanized farming both inform Wilder's choice to depict alternatives to mainstream market economics in *Farmer Boy*. The second section examines shifts in farm labor during the years between the 1860s, when *Farmer Boy* was set, to the 1930s, when Wilder composed the text, in order to argue that earlier patterns of family labor may have been more empowering for women than those typically found in a 1930s household. The third and last section reads *Farmer Boy* through the lens of widespread changes in attitudes toward childhood and labor, asserting that in *Farmer Boy* Wilder highlights the economic contributions of farm children as a way to encourage the 1930s child reader. Together, these sections comprehensively claim that the gender roles and labor dynamics present in *Farmer Boy* can be read as a complex Georgic that presents a seemingly outdated mode of life as one that is actually somewhat egalitarian in terms of economics and gender equality when compared to modern farm life. Throughout these sections I call on the perspectives of New Agrarians to suggest that even many years after Wilder, there is a continued interest in mining our agrarian past in order to find ways to improve modern life. I ultimately close this chapter with a coda which reveals the malleability of the mythic American farm by putting Wilder's *Farmer Boy* in relief with Lois Lenski's *Phebe Fairchild, Her Book* (1936). In this final part of the chapter I use Lenski, a noted leftist writer for children,⁸ as a counter-voice to Wilder, suggesting that the 1930s author who looks into the agricultural past of the United States

can use the mythic American farm and the mythic American childhood for different ideological ends.

I. Market Economics and Readership in the 1930s

The economic security of the Wilders in *Farmer Boy* sharply contrasts with the repeated financial disasters depicted in the other *Little House* books, which focus on the Ingalls family. In looking carefully at the market decisions and exchanges that occur in *Farmer Boy*, I argue that Wilder offers a picture of economic security and stability in order to present her political position on self-sufficiency in the face of New Deal economics. In this section, I assert that Wilder writes about the threshing machine in order to show how mechanization threatens to change the face of labor on the farm. This would be a forgone conclusion to the vast majority of her readers, but Wilder asks her readers to consider some philosophical questions that lie behind replacing human power with machine power: Is faster better? How is the family dynamic changed with the introduction of machines? What was lost when we lost the tradition of hand-threshing? This section also suggests that the lessons that young Almanzo learns are lessons pointed at Wilder's readership as well. Because we observe the Wilder household in a time of agricultural and economic flux, we notice a change in equality between the sexes, particularly in the public arena where the work of women and children may not gain public recognition and accolades are more readily given to the patriarch than the matriarch. Although nostalgia shapes much of this novel's narrative, this is not a fully idealized depiction of the livelihood farm.

Wealth and security are the hallmarks of *Farmer Boy*. Romines reads *Farmer Boy* as a story of male-controlled economics,⁹ but her argument is deeply imbedded in twentieth-century culture where cash is the most valuable commodity. I argue that although cash is one important commodity in *Farmer Boy*, it is far from the only valuable commodity. In a time when labor was often repaid in labor, and tinware was bartered for rags, it is a mistake to assume that cash held the same importance in the era of *Farmer Boy* as it does currently. The self-sufficiency modeled by the Wilder family in *Farmer Boy* was typical for early American families, which were “to some degree, self-sufficient” (Fite, *American Farmers* 3). Just how these families maintained self-sufficiency (within interdependent agrarian community, of course) and why it eventually died out is a question of both new technologies and decisions made with respect to the new technologies.

The way that household labor evolved is particularly relevant to understanding why *Farmer Boy* relies so heavily on agrarian values. Wilder’s nostalgia for that time (during which she didn’t actually live) suggests a desire for a more equitable distribution of labor that had been lost. Wilder no doubt knew the Depression-era slogan, “Don’t take a job from a man!” which suggests that citizens viewed wage labor as the proper domain of men, not women. Additionally, the slogan assumes a suburban or urban capitalist economic structure which was somewhat different from the local economy of a rural farming community. Certainly, the “job” that was not to be “taken from a man” was not plowing, harvesting, herding, or any of the occupations of farmers. It referred to blue and white collar jobs in or near cities. But the sentiment that men’s work should take economic priority likely influenced rural people like Wilder, even though rural men and women were less likely to be in competition for wage-labor. Rural job opportunities for

men decreased with every technological advance.¹⁰ The threshing machine and the tractor created factory jobs for the manufacturers of such machines, creating, as Sue Headlee calls it, a “tremendous stimulus to the capitalist manufacture of machinery” in the US (5). However, with mass produced machinery the need for seasonal day labor lessened.¹¹ Rather than having a number of hired men, farms would “pool their resources in an effort to take advantage of the large-scale machinery that had become available” (Fitzgerald 120). Male labor was in less demand, and farms were becoming industrialized with specialized equipment that saved labor for the farmer who raised a small number of cash crops, rather than a large variety of crops for self-sufficiency.¹² Industrialization eliminated rural jobs,¹³ thus instead of women taking jobs from men, perhaps Wilder saw that it was industrial agriculture that actually took jobs from men. According to Gilbert Fite, “it took 39 man-hours to produce 40 bushels of corn in 1855, but by 1894 only 15 hours were required” (*American* 15). The small farm that focused on relative self-sufficiency, like the one in *Farmer Boy*, was rapidly becoming extinct.¹⁴ Fite notes that “farmers moved quickly into commercial operations during the early nineteenth century, and self-sufficiency declined rapidly” (Fite, *American* 3).¹⁵ The New Deal, according to Wilder, discouraged self-reliance, and the independent spirit that she saw as the power behind the small family farm (Miller *Becoming* 199). To wit, a farm like the one in *Farmer Boy* would have been out of compliance with AAA regulations, notwithstanding the fact that most crops never went to market.

The threshing machine serves as a useful example of how machinery had the potential to impact male labor in *Farmer Boy*. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the threshing machine came into use on American farms, and by 1830, a manufacturer by

the name of T.D. Burrell started mass-production in Geneva, New York.¹⁶ The threshing machine referred to in *Farmer Boy* was probably similar to Burrell's, which "simply discharged a mixture of straw, chaff and grain into one common heap and it was no small job to shake out the chaff from the grain" (Van Wagenen 42). This machine was in wide usage, and merits the most deliberate discussion of new farm technologies in all of *Farmer Boy*. Threshing, the process of removing grains or seeds from straw, becomes the focus of a father-son talk in which the former explains to the latter why the family does not use a threshing machine to thresh the grain:

Almanzo asked Father why he did not hire the machine that did the threshing.

Three men had brought it into the country last fall, and Father had gone to see it. It would thresh a man's whole grain crop in a few days.

"That's a lazy man's way to thresh," Father said. "Haste makes waste, but a lazy man'd rather get his work done fast than do it himself. That machine chews up the straw till it's not fit to feed stock, and it scatters grain around and wastes it.

"All it saves is time, son. And what good is time, with nothing to do? You want to sit and twiddle your thumbs, all these stormy winter days?"

"No!" said Almanzo. He had enough of that, on Sundays. (307-308)

Father, rather than arguing for the economic advantages or disadvantages of the threshing machine, points out that the threshing machine represents (and creates) a lifestyle by which he is unimpressed. Father seems uncommonly fascinated with an almost masochistic protestant work ethic, and rather liberally uses the term "lazy." However, his decision represents an adherence to a way of life that was fast becoming extinct, and perhaps unadvisedly so. The crux of Father's argument against using the threshing

machine is that its supposed advantage of saving the farming family time is worthless to him. Indeed, earlier in the book the reader will recall that at the end of a long Sunday afternoon when the family “did nothing at all,” “Almanzo was glad when it was time to do the chores” (94). By suggesting that inactivity is the bane of young Almanzo’s existence, Wilder is attempting to cheer her Depression-era readers on to being happy workers, even when the work is difficult. Certainly Father knew that a cold winter evening spent warming oneself with swinging the flails to hand thresh the grain perhaps amounted to more than simply separating the grain from the straw. Wilder looks at a new time-saving and labor-saving device and rightfully questions whether to save time and labor is actually desirable.

It is a salient question, and one that is on the minds of many New Agrarians. With regards to labor-saving devices, New Agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry writes, “I should ask, in the first place, whether or not I wish to purchase a solution to a problem that I don’t have” (74).¹⁷ Berry’s attitude is typical of New Agrarians, who wish to interrogate the need for new devices, rather than accept their usefulness *carte blanche*. Wilder’s text also shows that individual choice plays a vital role in whether technology is to be accepted or rejected, and that choice largely dictates one’s relationship to the larger economy. In *Farmer Boy*, Father points out that the thresher does a faster, but not better job. Indeed, it wastes valuable straw upon which the sustainability of the farm to some degree depends. Essentially, Father rejects stockpiling capital as the primary impetus for work. Work, though arduous, is also celebratory and joyful, as in this passage describing part of Christmas day festivities: “from the farms came the joyful thud-thud! thud-thud! of the flails” (313-314). Work itself is a virtue and a source of self-fulfillment. Paul B.

Thompson writes, in his observations about Wendell Berry's New Agrarian fiction: "Work deepens and forms the self, giving it unique and authentic identity" (79). The joyful noise of the flails reminds one that manual labor often gives rise to natural opportunities for creativity through song and story, as New Agrarians have suggested. Gene Logsdon, a New Agrarian and proponent of combining work and creativity, eschews machinery when possible, explaining that he relishes the opportunity to hear the birds:

I never use a power tool when a hand tool is better. Most of the woodcutting injuries I hear about come from trimming small branches with a chain saw [...] Smaller branches [...] are easier and faster to trim with a sharp ax. Also quieter. You can even hear tufted titmice calling their incessant "Peter-Peter-Peter" when you are swinging an ax. (179-180)

Like Logsdon, Father's rejection of the threshing machine suggests the ability to question the place of technological advancement and holistically consider humanity's relationship with technology, work, and the natural world.

In order to understand more fully the Wilder family's relationship with the market, let us take a close look at their market activities and monetary exchange in the text. As Romines has pointed out, *Farmer Boy* is a veritable marketplace in miniature form.¹⁸ There is more talk of money in the text than in perhaps any other *Little House* book. Yet, I've been arguing over the course of this chapter that it is a book that also best represents the pre-industrial farming situation in American Literature. My emphasis on money in this chapter has much to do with both the shift in agriculture that was on the horizon for mid-nineteenth century farmers, as well as the unstable Depression economy of the time

during which this book was written. The preoccupation with cash and bartering, as well as the detailed discussions of money management, suggest that *Farmer Boy* is Wilder's veiled suggestion regarding what farmers should do to protect themselves from the devastating market fluctuations of the 1930s. As Roosevelt proposed governmental policy and assistance, Wilder suggests to her audience that an older farm economy is the best way to protect oneself and one's farm. New Agrarian writers reflect on Depression-era approaches to farming similarly. Here, Ronald Jager writes of the small family farm in that era:

It was a place of many and varied enterprises, of many small hedges against total failure, and internally bound with a certain tight logic. Beans, corn, potatoes, hay, wheat, oats, sugar beets, string beans, cows, pigs, horses, chickens, dogs, cats, woodlot, swamp, pastures, pond—all of that and more packed into eighty acres. For most farmers at that time and place it would have seemed chancy to break out of that diversified and modest scale.

In retrospect one concludes, and the record confirms, that throughout the country this idea and ideal of farming was then very much keyed, as well it might be, to the mentality of the Great Depression... [...] Theirs was a farming style designed as much to avert or face disaster as to achieve some abstract notion of success. (26)

In the above passage, Jager outlines the attitude toward modest scale and diversification with which Wilder would have been familiar. This is, with some variation in crops and acreage, the Wilder's farm in *Farmer Boy*. Wilder's attitude toward money also emphasizes modest scale and diversification. In the novel, she takes a threefold approach

to writing about money: 1) she offers frank financial advice (usually in the form of father-son talks); 2) she shows moments when the family does interact with the market; and 3) she reminds readers of alternative economic systems that may still be viable, though less common in the 1930s.

Unlike Pa from the Ingalls family, whose role as a loving and entertaining father trumps all other parental roles, Father in *Farmer Boy* exists almost solely as the mouthpiece of fiscal and farming advice. Almanzo is constantly in the process of learning how to be like his father. Engaging in the market, for the Wilders, enables them to elevate their social status. This allows them to have luxuries like a parlor with a haircloth sofa, white sugar (in addition to maple), and Sunday clothes made of fine cloth, rather than homespun. Since money affords them luxuries like these, as well as security, Father wants to ensure that Almanzo understands the value of money. In the form of father-son talks, Wilder herself offers readers frank financial advice, part of the threefold approach to money and the market in *Farmer Boy*. Unlike his town cousin Frank, whose father the shopkeeper deals in money all day, Almanzo's daily work separates him from money almost entirely. In order to explain the meaning of capital to him, Father translates money into terms with which Almanzo is familiar.¹⁹ Almanzo admits that he doesn't know what his father means when he asked, "Do you know what a half dollar is?", and Father simply explains, "It's work, son ... That's what money is; it's hard work" (182). Like a school teacher with a painfully long answer to a question, Father asks Almanzo to go through the litany of raising a crop of potatoes from planting the seed potatoes to "pick[ing] them over all winter" (184). When Almanzo finishes recounting the labor of one crop of potatoes, his father tells him that the labor of a half bushel of potatoes is equal to a half

dollar. Almanzo's original intent in asking for money at the Independence Day celebration is to buy a five cent glass of pink lemonade, like his cousin Frank had. Not surprisingly, with the half dollar given to him, comes a lesson in investments²⁰:

“It's yours,” said Father. “You could buy a sucking pig with it, if you want to. You could raise it, and it would raise a litter of pigs, worth four, five dollars a piece. Or you can trade that half-dollar for lemonade, and drink it up. You do as you want, it's your money.” (184)

While the money is rightfully Almanzo's, for we learn in the novel that indeed he did much of the labor involved with raising the crop of potatoes, the money is also part of a whole family effort. After all, Alice helped with planting too, and everyone pitched in as they prepared the crop for market. Thus, as Almanzo “held the half-dollar for a minute” before going off to buy his pig, it is a half minute likely spent debating whether the pleasure of joining the boys for pink lemonade was worth the hard work he and his family put into the potato crop, and worth more than the work and reward of raising a litter of pigs. Almanzo buys his pig, and presumably makes the profit promised by his father, and continues to participate in communal values, and deny himself a momentary pleasure. Short term personal deprivation can lead to the longer-term benefit of financial security.

Almanzo and his father represent farmers who are on the cusp of becoming, as William Conlogue suggests, “businessmen more than ‘Jeffersonian yeomen’”(12). I say “on the cusp” because still, the Wilders closely fit Jefferson's yeoman farmer who “owned a small piece of land that [the] family farmed to provide for themselves the essentials of life—food, clothing, shelter—plus surplus commodities for export to the

“mobs of great cities” (Conlogue 11). While Wilder’s attraction to this Jeffersonian ideal was in part a response to New Deal, it was also likely a response to her own problematic reliance on cash crops rather than diverse crops early on in her marriage,²¹ as well as the inability of her parents to provide financial security through cash crops.²²

As a result, the family economy in most of the *Little House* books is clearly not centered on saving money, so much as having enough to scrape by or get out of debt. The Wilders in *Farmer Boy*, on the other hand, regularly drive their money into town to deposit it in the bank, which leads to Wilder’s second approach to money and the market in *Farmer Boy*: savvy engagement with the market. Because the market is a reality for the Wilders, they learn how to manage it; likewise, New Agrarians ultimately must live in a market-driven economy as well. Two founders of the New Agrarianism, Helen and Scott Nearing, were abundantly clear about their economic goals in *The Good Life* (1954, 1989), one of which was “to set up a semi-self-contained household unit, based largely on a use economy, and, as far as possible, independent of the price-profit economy that surrounds us” (30). Nevertheless, part of their self-reliant way of life included selling products on the market: “We [...] sold our syrup and sugar on the open market” (33).²³ Engaging with the market is usually a vital part of any livelihood farm. In the novel, the Wilder family is directly paid on the market for three commodities: potatoes, butter, and horses. For each instance they are given a significant sum that they promptly put in the bank. Each transaction is recounted differently: with the potatoes the whole family pitches in, and Father drives them into town; with the butter, the buyer comes to the home and Mother gets a high price without bargaining; with the horses, the buyer also comes to the home, but haggles for a long time before Father gets the price he wants. I wish to

argue that each transaction highlights a different aspect of farm economy, and together they offer a subtle criticism of industrial farming. The criticism is indirect, however, relying on the appeal garnered by the unity of family and security of resources on a small-scale farm. The simple fact that the money made comes from three different types of agriculture, each of which relies on some combination of the work of men, women, and children—crops, dairy, and livestock—tells the reader much about the wisdom of diversifying, both in terms of crops and labor.

The potato crop brings in five hundred dollars, and provides a fine example of a cooperative family effort. The potatoes, as I've mentioned earlier in the chapter, are planted and harvested by Almanzo and Alice, with the help of their older siblings and father. When the Wilders learn that the New York potato buyers are in town, the whole family (with the curious exception of Eliza Jane) is set to action, filling bushel baskets from the cellar and bringing them to the wagon (116-117). Father takes three loads to the train, and upon returning on the last day says, "Five hundred bushels at a dollar a bushel ... I told you when potatoes were cheap last fall that they'd be high in the spring" (117). Although to this point the potato harvest has seemed much like a whole family effort, Wilder writes, "That was five hundred dollars in the bank. They were all proud of Father, who raised such good potatoes and knew so well when to store them, and when to sell them" (117). The concluding remark on the potato success credits Father alone. There is something unsettling in the erasure of the children's efforts here. The suggestion is that all work done on the farm is a credit to the patriarch, thus subtly abnegating the collective effort. In part, I believe this final assertion of Father's sole responsibility for the success is perhaps an honest nod to a man who has put time and effort into teaching his children

well and making informed business decisions. Certainly, he deserves a lot of credit for this. More to the point, I also believe that it is the public nature of the final potato transaction that creates a problematic inequality. The reason that the family so readily credits Father for the potato harvest is because he is the public face of the family. If the family is “proud” they are so because they know that others have witnessed the business deal. Father is admired, then, for his presence at the exchange of money, more than his efforts in the labor of the potato harvest. In *Farmer Boy* pride is clearly associated with public approbation, which is why the county fair is so important to Almanzo and his siblings.²⁴ Almanzo’s pumpkin wins first prize, but his sisters are also recognized: “Driving home that night, they all felt good. Alice’s woolwork had won first prize, and Eliza Jane had a red ribbon and Alice a blue ribbon for jellies. Father said the Wilder family had done itself proud, that day” (274). They are “proud” because of the public arena within which they have been praised.

The public market and the public self are important to consider when thinking of why Mother in *Farmer Boy*, who is economically vital to the home, does not get the same kind of recognition as Father. When comparing the potato crop that Father sells to the butter that mother sells, it is important to note that the butter buyer comes to the homestead. To sell her butter, Mother never has to leave the farm. While this could be read as a testament to the importance of her daily work at the home (that might not have been easily left behind for a day of butter transport), it also limits the public recognition of her skill as a butter maker. It is true that transporting butter is a much more delicate task than transporting potatoes, likely requiring a special kind of wagon that the Wilders did not own, but the situation can also be read on another level. In the privacy of her home,

“Mother did not do any bargaining at all. She said proudly, ‘My butter speaks for itself.’ From the top of every tub, Mother’s butter was all the same golden, firm, sweet butter” (238). Not only does Mother avoid a public money exchange, she also does not have to negotiate, thus eliminating the need for her to talk about money at all. Although ostensibly the reason she needn’t bargain is because her “butter speaks for itself,” the implication is that to do so would undercut her womanliness. However, as I’ll discuss momentarily, Mother is fully able to bargain when it is necessary, as with the tin peddler in Chapter Twelve. Thus, her non-bargaining in the case of the butter is not necessarily due to her status as a woman, but perhaps due to her pride in her accomplishment. Father, on the other hand, bargains firmly with the horse buyer, but the reader is left to wonder why. The horses are said to be very fine, and likely to be as fine as the butter, thus the haggling could be attributed to gender difference. If the buyers feel more inclined to negotiate man-to-man, then are women marked as ineffectual in business affairs? If so, as farms shift to rely more heavily on the market, women, again, lose standing.

During the transition from Jeffersonian yeomanry to industrial agriculture, contact with the market increased dramatically, as did the importance of that contact. By the 1930s, most, if not all farms were dependent on cash crops and the money exchange associated with them.²⁵ In *Farmer Boy*, Wilder reminds readers of the older art of bartering for goods, where Mother, safely outside the realm of money, negotiates well. By highlighting bartering, Wilder offers a third and final suggestion to readers: remember alternative economic systems. Wilder is not alone in engaging with this older system; during the Depression, “bartering” was on the rise (Danbom 199). Bartering continues to interest people now—it is seen as a way to reduce interaction with what Shannon Hays

calls an “extractive economy,” which is defined as one “where corporate wealth [is] regarded as the foundation of economic health, where mining our earth’s resources and exploiting our international neighbors [is] accepted as simply the cost of doing business” (13). Hayes calls bartering “a golden opportunity to be effortlessly generous, and [it enables] everyone ample opportunities to satisfy their needs while directly recognizing that their unique contributions and skills have value to someone else in their community” (211). But bartering goes beyond supplying material needs, it also “builds relationships,” according to Hayes (211). Thus, when in *Farmer Boy* Mr. Brown, the tin peddler, comes to trade, he dines with the family, shares an evening of conviviality, and then they put him up for the night. It is not until the next morning that the trading begins. It is Mother, not Father who trades, and she does well:

“Well, ma’am, I’ll trade you the milk-pans and pails, the colander and skimmer, and the three baking pans, but not the dishpan, and that’s my last offer.”

“Very well, Mr. Brown,” Mother said, unexpectedly. She got exactly what she wanted. Almanzo knew she did not need the dishpan; she had set it out only to bargain with. Mr. Brown knew that, too, now. He looked surprised, and he looked respectfully at Mother. Mother was a good, shrewd trader. She had bested Mr. Brown. But he was satisfied, too, because he had got plenty of good rags for his tinware. (139)

Mother participates in business here, but without the exchange of money her role in the economy is more subtle, and thus more acceptable to an audience of Depression-era readers, whose gender-biases likely influenced their worldviews. Interestingly, the peddler’s dinner and lodging are not mentioned as a part of the exchange, but certainly

are a part of the deal. This bartering system, less easily quantifiable in monetary terms, is painted in a positive light: “They were both having a good time, joking and laughing and trading” (138). The excess material from Mother’s cloth making, the “good, clean rags of wool and linen,” provide the family with tinware. This system, almost extinct by 1933, valued women’s labor as an integral part of an alternative to the male-dominated cash economy. Again, Wilder portrays the conditions of pre-industrial farm life in a very positive light, and suggests that women had greater economic significance in such a system.

II. The Impact of Industrialization on Women’s Household Work

As industrialism encroached on rural farming life, the work required to run a farm changed accordingly. This section continues to consider *Farmer Boy*’s 1933 publication date as significant in terms of reading the novel’s depiction of a highly gendered labor system. I assert that such a system appears to be favored by Wilder because of the standing it offered to women.²⁶ My goals in this section are to establish that the domesticity of an agrarian woman had tremendous value within the agrarian economy, and that as technology encroached, that value diminished. Additionally, I argue that while Wilder personally disavowed nostalgic ruminations, *Farmer Boy* nevertheless relies on a restorative nostalgia that builds up the agrarian past as a site of economic empowerment for families, and women in particular. I also suggest that, like Wilder, New Agrarians grapple with the question of meaningful domesticity in an era where homemaking no longer requires the skilled labor it once did.

Romines correlates the fervid feminine domesticity present in *Little House in the Big Woods* with the early Depression push to keep women out of the workforce.²⁷ *Farmer Boy*, I argue, presents a similar suggestion: women are best “employed” in housekeeping, and a good housekeeper makes for a prosperous and well-managed family. While proficient housewifery is vital in *Farmer Boy*, it is a markedly different kind of housewifery than that of the 1930s. Thus, Wilder’s enthusiasm for women’s work in the home, and her promotion of domesticity in the *Little House* series (and in *Farmer Boy*, particularly) need not, and should not, be read as an unreserved “huzzah!” for the cause of keeping women in the home of the 1930s. More accurately, and also a bit more complexly, Wilder’s advocacy is for the housewifery of a bygone era: a sort of housewifery that ceased to exist as such once commercialization and mechanization of farm life took hold. Here we see Wilder working squarely within “restorative nostalgia,” a term Svetlana Boym uses to describe nostalgia that “stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (XVIII). Wilder here appears to be relying heavily on nostalgia, taking a marked turn from a position she wrote about years earlier as a journalist for the *Missouri Ruralist*. Wilder’s feelings are clear in the following passage where she writes that longing for the past is not productive:

Love and service, with a belief in the future and expectation of better things in the tomorrow of the world is a good working philosophy; much better than, ‘in olden times—things were so much better when I was young.’ For there is no turning back nor standing still; we must go forward into the future, generation after generation toward the accomplishment of the ends that have been set for the human race.

(254-255)

Wilder eschews the idea that the olden days were better in this 1921 column. However, earlier in the same column, she cites an economic collapse as proof that the olden days weren't better: "we would have suffered worse in those good old times after the civil war when the coarsest of muslins cost 50 cents a yard and banks failed over night, leaving their worthless money in circulation" (254). In the early years of the Depression Wilder may not have felt as confident in the present and future as she did in the early twenties. Furthermore, Boym points out that "restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition" (xviii). Thus, even while Wilder distances herself from those who see the olden days as better, she nevertheless may have presented them in such a light. Wilder freely admits that "events of older times and of our childhood and youth are enveloped in such a rosy cloud, just as at that time the future glowed with bright colors," but she also cautions against a "morbid longing for the past" that could be "dispelled by facing the plain facts" (254). One is left to wonder in which category Wilder herself might place *Farmer Boy*. Do the "plain facts" about farm life "dispel a morbid longing for the past," or are they "enveloped in [...] a rosy cloud?" (254). This is a particularly vital question when considering how to interpret Wilder's portrayal of the "olden days."

If one considers the unusual nature of "restorative nostalgia"—that the nostalgic person will herself deny being nostalgic—then we may begin to understand how Wilder uses nostalgia in *Farmer Boy*. Read this way, the suggestion Wilder makes in *Farmer Boy* is not so much that women should be perpetually in the home, but instead that older farming communities operated in a way that integrated male and female labor in the household and placed value on producing and sustaining a household's needs more than a

cash-based economy. Women are decidedly domestic in *Farmer Boy* and most other books in the series, but they are so in a time when men and children were decidedly domestic as well. If Wilder asks readers of her era to reconsider the value of domesticity, she also asks readers to recognize that domesticity itself is not a static concept, but one that is in a constant process of redefinition. For although in *Farmer Boy* Wilder is clearly working in a mode of restorative nostalgia, and in this text seeks to stabilize and idealize the past, Wilder is also a realist who many times suggests that new devices for the home are a great improvement for women especially.²⁸ The particulars of domesticity may shift with technological changes, but productive work that is valuable outside the capitalist economy should not be eliminated.

To gain a better perspective on the circumstances of life and the division of labor in the early to mid-century family farm, some historical context is useful. In the typical division of labor on a pre-industrial farm, women generally looked after the household production: “cooking, spinning, weaving, making clothing, molding candles, and a score of other household tasks” (Russell 315). Farming households changed dramatically between 1850 and 1930: “Men’s work was removed from the house and female-dominated home manufactures (such as spinning and weaving) declined. [...] ‘Domesticity,’ which entailed devotion to bringing up children and thrift housekeeping, took the place of the woman’s direct contribution to the family livelihood” (McMurry 56). The changes were ideologically significant because they changed the labor dynamic within the home. In her book, *More Work for Mother* (1983), Ruth Schwartz Cowan explains that “labor-saving” technologies, touted as easing the burden on the housewife, often shifted more work onto women, and created an uneven distribution of household

labor between the sexes. In her history of technological advances that altered household management, Cowan examines America from colonial times to the late 20th century. In her first detailed example, Cowan explains how the shift from hearth cooking to stove cooking significantly reduced the *male* duty of fuel collecting, but significantly increased the variety and complexity of meals, thereby adding to women's labor.²⁹ All the while, the stove was marketed as a tool to help the housewife. Cowan explains how industrial advancements broadly shifted household labor expectations:

As the nineteenth century wore on, in almost every aspect of household work, industrialization served to eliminate the work that men (and children) had once been assigned to do, while at the same time leaving the work of women either untouched or even augmented. Factories made boots and shoes ... so men no longer had to work in leather at home. Factories also made pottery and tin wares, so men no longer had to whittle. Piped household water meant that children no longer had to be burdened with perpetual bucket carrying. The growth of the meat-packing industry, coupled with the introduction of refrigerated transport ... meant that men no longer spent much time in butchering. Virtually all of the stereotypically male household occupations were eliminated by technological and economic innovations during the nineteenth century, and many of those that had previously been allotted to children were gone as well. But not so with the occupations of women. (63-64)

Cowan goes on to explain how manufactured cloth increased the laundry loads for women, while not decreasing the amount of sewing (64). As cotton became more common than linen or wool, and was easily washable, it added to the laundry burden as

well (65). More readily available cloth meant that wardrobes expanded, and with more clothing and linen available, standards of cleanliness gradually shifted. Household linens previously cleaned once a season, perhaps, were now changed more frequently. Clothing that may have only ever been brushed clean, was replaced with clothing that required regular washing. The ripple effect of manufactured cotton cloth is replicated in numerous other examples of industrialized portions of women's work that increased rather than decreased the burden on the housewife. Cowan's work is important to understanding Mother's work in *Farmer Boy* because she offers a detailed historical explanation of the relationship between "labor saving" technologies and labor dynamics within a family. Cowan's work gives historical context to my argument that in *Farmer Boy* Wilder may be suggesting older agrarian family life was less burdensome and less repressive for women than twentieth-century farm life.

Although by the mid-nineteenth century most households had entirely shifted from homespun cloth to manufactured cloth, the Wilders in *Farmer Boy* (set around the year 1867) had not made that shift entirely. However, readers can catch glimpses of increased industrialization in the homestead: "Father hauled the fleeces to the carding-machine in Malone, and brought home the soft, long rolls of wool, combed out straight and fine. Mother didn't card her own wool anymore, since there was a machine that did it on shares. But she dyed it" (164). Slowly, cloth-making shifts from skilled home-based labor to an engagement with the industrial-capitalist system. In the previous chapter, Father, Lazy John, Royal, and Almanzo spent an arduous few days preparing and sheering the sheep. The work towards the final product of clothing is shared, albeit divided by gender. The raw product, sheep's wool, is handled by the men, while the last step of the process,

sewing, is done by women. The passage shows how machinery replaced one of the women's tasks (carding the wool), but the process still depended on both male and female labor. As machines increasingly take over, the next labor to be relieved would be male, with store-bought wool and cloth. The last labor to be relieved would be the women's labor, as ready-made clothing for the masses was not widely available until the early twentieth century. So while the mechanization of the carding process did indeed relieve some of Mother's work, ultimately the bulk of the labor relieved through mechanization was male in the many years that passed between making homespun cloth and the advent of ready-made clothing. Wilder's text suggests that clothing was produced by the labor of all family hands during the *Farmer Boy* era, which sharply contrasts with the female-centered labor that developed as machines replaced male labor. What was once the product of a family's skills and labor later became solely a product to be purchased, which removes value from home-based production and values instead outside work that brings home a paycheck (usually male). *Farmer Boy* occupies a liminal space; its self-sufficiency is on the edge of obsolescence.

It is true that, as Romines suggests, Wilder embraced a traditional role for farm women, but that role was in many cases far more economically empowering than the role that "modern" farm women were expected to take. In *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (1990), Jeanne Boydston looks at the place of household labor in the economy of colonial America. Although *Farmer Boy* is set in mid-nineteenth century America, not the "Early Republic," the rural character, isolated geography, and adherence to older value systems in the text make it more closely resemble a farm from an earlier era. Scholars in the 1970s increasingly paid attention to

the role of women in history, pointing out that for families in the Early Republic, “each member contributed work of equal importance to the group’s survival ... Under such conditions ... women’s reproductive work, as well as her productive work, was valued” (Gorden and Buhle, qtd. in Boydston 2). Boydston points out that these conditions disappeared as industrialization took hold.³⁰ Industrialization encroaches and is both resisted and embraced as the book closes. Important to my argument that *Farmer Boy* looks back to a time when women were more, not less valuable to the economy, is Boydston’s analysis of what industrialism meant for women. She writes, “With the removal of productive labor from the family to the factory ... women lost the basis for earlier claims to economic and social standing. In the demise of the self-sufficient household lay the decline of women’s status”(2).³¹ Some New Agrarians, too, see a relationship between removing productive work from the home and women feeling oppressed by homemaking. Consider Emily Matchar’s *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (2013),³² in which she attempts to understand the motives and possible results of what she calls the “New Domesticity” (shaped in no small part by New Agrarianism’s push for a lifestyle more connected with agriculture and less reliant on corporations³³). Matchar points out that “The kinds of kitchen work once associated with Depression-era farmwives—making curds and whey, preserving sauerkraut, grinding flour—are now thoroughly unremarkable pastimes for young people flush with today’s DIY back-to-basics spirit” (2). Matchar suggest that the “de-skilling of the American Homemaker, in process since the Industrial Revolution” is the reason why “Homemaking has become... boring” (39). Women who embrace New Agrarianism, in part, look to the work of farm women of the past in order to re-vision themselves within

an economy that is not reliant on corporations and paychecks; they look for ways to become self-reliant and productive without becoming a part of a larger system that degrades the environment in favor of boosting the bottom line.

A text like *Farmer Boy* makes it clear that homemaking skills were truly *skills*, and there was no time for the boredom with home-making Matchar claims to have taken the place of skilled labor in the twentieth century. The work Mother does to prepare for feasts such as the one at Christmas (323-325) is year-round, skilled, and labor intensive. Importantly, in families that labor together motherhood is less likely to be mistaken for servitude, because each member of the family is working toward a common goal. Unlike in families where children are not expected to work, and men's work takes place in an office or factory far from the home, in farm families work overlaps and family members interact frequently. Of course, there are many scenes where women and girls are serving food to men and boys. This is established early on in the narrative: "The kitchen was full of hoopskirts, balancing and swirling. Eliza Jane and Alice were hurrying to dish up supper. The salty brown smell of frying ham made Almanzo's stomach gnaw inside him" (24). As is typical of the entire novel, Almanzo, served by his mother and sisters, becomes transfixed with the meal that is laid out before him, and the experience of eating is described in sensual, loving detail. It is also notable that the adoration Almanzo feels for his mother is often wrapped up in her culinary skill. As the meal time approaches, the "pretty" dining room is described in detail, and then Mother is described:

But to Almanzo the most beautiful sight was his mother, bringing in the big willow-ware platter full of sizzling ham. Mother was short and plump and pretty. Her eyes were blue, and her brown hair was like a bird's smooth wings. A row of

little buttons ran down the front of her dress of wine-colored wool, from her flat white collar to the white apron tied round her waist. Her big sleeves hung like large red bells at either end of the blue platter [...] The smell of the ham was almost more than Almanzo could bear. Mother set the platter on the table. (27)

In this passage, there is a clear correlation between the prettiness of the dining room, the physical pleasure of anticipation, and Mother. The description of the abundant food and the feminine beauty are suggestive of sexuality and fertility, as well. The “willow-ware platter” is blue and white, just as Mother’s eyes. The ham is undoubtedly plump and desirable, just as Mother is “plump and pretty.” Just as the ham is presented on a platter that is both useful and decorative, Mother’s dress is given detailed attention, and her sleeves, in effect, become part of the very same platter upon which the ham rests: “Her big sleeves hung like large red bells at either end of the blue platter” (27). Mother and the ham melt together in an apex of childhood desire, creating an image of what Bruno Bettelheim might call “the good mother, who offers her body as a source of nourishment,” mimicking the original relationship established when a mother nurses an infant (161). As Almanzo finishes eating an enormous amount of food, he is not “full” as one might suppose. Instead Wilder writes, “He felt very comfortable inside”(29), suggesting that the meal has not only satisfied his physical need for nourishment, but has also served the more holistic purpose of creating a sense of security and well-being.

This is only the first of many variations on the familiar situation of Mother and the girls preparing and serving a tantalizing meal which Almanzo devours with abandon. While there are certainly many Freudian levels at which this can be read, the cycle of anticipation, eating, and satisfaction that Almanzo repeats throughout *Farmer Boy* can

also be read, as Romines suggests, in terms of the economic security of his family, provided largely by Mother's skill, intelligence, and labor on the farmstead³⁴. Almanzo is "comfortable" in the rhythms of his family's economic life that are all present in the meal that, though delivered to the table by Mother and his sisters, was nevertheless prepared by the labor of all hands. Taking a brief look at the makings of this meal may be instructive of the point that it is too simplistic to conclude that because Mother and the girls cook and serve the meal, there is an unequal labor dynamic. Present on the table are the following items: cheese, headcheese, jams, jellies, preserves, milk, baked beans, fat pork, ham, potatoes, ham-gravy, bread, butter, turnips, pumpkin, plum preserves, strawberry jam, grape jelly, watermelon-rind pickles, pumpkin pie, and tea (25-29). It is likely that the only finished product purchased, rather than produced at the farmstead, is the tea. While perhaps some white sugar (if maple is not used) and some spices are store-bought, each item is created by the labor of many hands on the farm. Because Mother also engages in the marketplace and brings cash to the house through butter, even the store-bought items are procured through joint effort. The livestock is cared for and slaughtered by Father, Royal, and Almanzo, and cooked by Mother and Eliza Jane. The jams, jellies, and preserves are likely the product of Almanzo and Alice's fruit-picking, and Mother and Eliza Jane's cooking. The potatoes and turnips were planted by Alice and Almanzo, in a field plowed by Royal and Father, and prepared for dinner by Eliza Jane's and Mother's hands. The full table becomes a symbol for familial interdependence and hard work. Almanzo's consumption is more than just a Freudian moment where the mother is his sole source of nourishment; it is part of a satisfying symbiotic relationship between labor and consumption of which everyone, Almanzo included, is a part.

The overflowing tables of the Wilder farmstead don't appear magically in the text. The text of *Farmer Boy* often emphasizes the labor intensive processes that precede the meal. Throughout *Farmer Boy*, women's labor is recounted in as much detail as men's, even though this is the narrative of a young boy's life. In his book, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (2001), William Conlogue points out that "working as they do within a male and urban-defined agriculture, farm women often go unseen and unappreciated"(65). Furthermore, he notes that "to be visible is to be valued," particularly in a culture where the idea of the yeoman farmer is exclusively male (65). Children's farm novels like *Farmer Boy* make women's work within the household extremely visible, oftentimes more so than men's work. Consider the following passage:

[Mother's] hands were flying and her right foot was tapping on the treadle of the loom. Back and forth the shuttle flew from her right hand to her left and back again, between the even threads of warp, and swiftly the threads of warp criss-crossed each other, catching fast the thread that the shuttle left behind it.

Thud! said the treadle. Clackety-clack! said the shuttle. Thump! said the hand-bar, and back flew the shuttle. (61)

Not only is women's work accounted for in detail in this passage, but the onomatopoeiac words used emphasize that Mother's household work correlated with industrial noises. Literally, Mother is the owner, overseer, and laborer in the "factory" of her home. If it seems as though bringing industrial imagery into a farm setting changes the idyllic image of rural life (especially given the aversion to technology seen in this novel), perhaps this is precisely what Wilder would have wanted. After all, Wilder rejects the notion that

country life is filled with ease and simplicity. Instead, she continually works toward creating picture of farming life with its toils and joys, believing that a rural existence, even with its demand for hard work, was a more meaningful life.³⁵ However, since the family owns all means of production from raw material to end product, her labor frees the family from being overly dependent on the fluctuations of a capitalist market economy. Nevertheless, as Conlogue points out, culturally, this kind of work remained “invisible” even while clearly contributing to the economic stability of the family. Wilder’s novel corrects that by prominently featuring Mother’s work, which typically would have been hidden from the public eye. Conlogue writes, “For women to claim an equal place in agriculture, farmwork must be fully acknowledged” (65). The room where the weaving is done is cheerful and stocked with the items needed to do productive work:

Mother’s workroom was large and bright, and warm from the heating stove’s chimney. Mother’s little rocking-chair was by one window, and beside it a basket of carpet-rags, torn for sewing. In a corner stood the idle spinning-wheel. All along one wall were shelves full of hanks of red and brown and blue and yellow yarn, which Mother had dyed last summer. (61)

What I emphasize here is that having a physical space within a house is important on both the literal and metaphorical level. Literally, one often needs to be separated from others in order to focus on their work. Metaphorically, having a space that exists solely to enable your work is a testament to that work’s vitality. The space set aside in the Wilder household is a physical statement proclaiming that Mother’s work was serious, and deserved a dedicated space. It is notable, too, that Mother’s separate space is filled with material that resulted from interdependency and a family working together. Familial

interdependency, then, does not prevent individuals from solitary work; in this case the family tasks of sheep shearing and yarn-dyeing are what enable Mother to work alone on weaving.

Farmer Boy is not solely self-sufficient, however, and certainly there are goods that are acquired through purchase. In fact, there is one “boughten” item of great significance that Almanzo finds in his Christmas stocking: “A boughten cap! The plaid cloth was machine-woven. So was the lining. Even the sewing was machine-sewing. And the ear-muffs were buttoned over the top. Almanzo yelled. He had not even hoped for such a cap”(316). This is the very same kind of cap that his cousin Frank was wearing earlier in the novel, which Almanzo envied: “This Sunday morning [Frank] was wearing a store-boughten cap. It was made of plaid cloth, machine-woven, and it had ear-flaps that buttoned under the chin ... Almanzo had never seen a cap like that. He wanted one”(91). This desire stems not from need, for Almanzo already had a “snug and warm” (92) cap made by his mother, with “cozy earflaps that tied under his chin” (3). Almanzo desires to participate in the consumer economy of which his town cousin, Frank, is a part. Although he knows that the “fifty cents” that Frank’s father spent on the cap would be a “foolish waste of money” since his mother’s cap was so warm, he nonetheless finds machine-made items alluring, particularly for the social and economic standing they represent (92). Interesting, too, is that here we see a boy who is consumed with commodity fetishism, where so often women are indicated in driving the economy by chasing fashion.

Since at the end of the book he gets his cap, what does this suggest about the Wilder family’s direction? Moreover, what does it mean about Mother’s place in the domestic

economy if her skilled labor is being edged out by “boughten” goods that are status symbols for children like Almanzo? There is no indication in Wilder’s text whether Mother or Father purchased the cap. The Santa Claus ruse employed in other *Little House* books is not at play, as it is clear that the socks are filled by the parents (each child receives, among other things, a hand-made item from Mother). Whether Mother or Father purchased the cap, or whether another relative did (perhaps the store-keeping Uncle), it is clear that the Wilders are somewhat complicit with (and perhaps even excited by) the store-bought economy. If we look at the cap as a symbol of what will eventually happen to the entire outfit of clothing for a person in the Wilder household at that time, we can start to see how much more valuable money becomes than skilled household labor. Slowly, the skills that Mother can pride herself on, as they showcase her talents, will become replaced with items that instead showcase purchasing power. The person, then, whose work translates more readily into cash, ultimately will wield the greatest economic power in the household. While Mother’s skills at clothing the family aren’t yet obsolete at the end of *Farmer Boy*, the reader (even in the 1930s) recognizes that Mother’s work does indeed get edged out by the emergence of affordable factory-made clothing. It is little wonder that Wilder waxes nostalgic in *Farmer Boy* on a time when the inherent value of home-based labor, rather than earning power, was the outward “status” symbol of the home, particularly because she saw that value change, as she suggests at the end of *Farmer Boy*.

III. Economic Roles for Children Change

Like colonial women, children played significant roles in the economic life of the agrarian family. In Wilder's *Farmer Boy*, each of the family members was important to the smooth functioning of the farm, inside and out. In considering the farm as the site of production, it is vital to recognize that the labor of children was of great significance. Writing in 1916 of the properly run household, Wilder emphasizes the place of children: "Each child has a particular part of the work to do. Each knows what his work is and that he is responsible for that work being done as it should be" (*Little House in the Ozarks* 129). Childhood, in this text, is also where some of the gender lines do not yet dominate all aspects of work, creating a site of nostalgia for the loss of exchange along gender lines. The Wilder family had four children: a set of older children, Eliza Jane and Royal, and a set of younger children, Almanzo and Alice. As such, the book shows labor expectations of younger children as well as older children, boys as well as girls. In this section, I argue that *Farmer Boy* shows strong examples of children as economically critical family members, particularly when compared with the economic disenfranchisement children faced by the 1930s.³⁶ Next, I take a close look at the perceptions of child labor, farm labor in particular, in the nineteenth century (the *Farmer Boy* era) versus the 1930s when the text was composed and published, noting that children were expected to contribute to family economics in the nineteenth century and discouraged from doing so in the twentieth century. The cultural expectation that children should not help support the family, and the idealization of childhood, displaces childhood labor onto women, a circumstance that fuels Wilder's nostalgic depiction for children working harmoniously with adults in *Farmer Boy*.

As clothing making was one of the first home-manufacturing items to disappear, unsurprisingly, a large part of *Farmer Boy* gives the details of this out-moded form of household production. This process is wonderfully symbolic of how the children actively work with the family to provide for their basic needs. The process of making woolen cloth starts with the care and husbandry of the sheep, an inter-age process itself, and the chapter “Sheep Shearing” contains nine detailed pages of description of the stage where the sheep are prepared for sheering. The men and boys must drive the sheep to the washing pens, wash the sheep with “brown soft-soap” and rinse them in the river (while they themselves were “waist deep in the swift water”) (155). The next day, when the sheep are clean and dry, the shearing and stacking begins. The labor is intense, and Almanzo “was working fast, running upstairs with the fleeces. They were so heavy that he could carry only one at a time” (158). Thus, when Father takes the wool to the carding-machine and brings it home, and Alice, Eliza Jane, and Mother start the next part of the process with the knowledge (on the part of the reader) that the boys and men have already put time and labor into the task. This is a meaningful display of inter-age family interdependence in the agrarian economy of *Farmer Boy*. In other words, not only does it fly in the face of a simplistic “separate spheres” mentality, it also shows the essential nature of children’s work. Furthermore, the home-based labor was also skilled in a way that much of industrial labor was not. This is the time and skilled labor that would be eliminated as soon as the household transitioned from homespun to ready-made cloth. With ready-made cloth, much of the labor saved is adult male labor and children’s labor, with the work of sewing clothes still falling to women. Children, then, are no longer economic participants in clothing-making; purchased cloth reduces household

cooperation, homestead self-sufficiency, and meaningful work for children. But in *Farmer Boy* we see clothing that is the product of skilled labor by each member of the family, no matter the age or sex.

In *Farmer Boy*, even the “female” task of dyeing the wool requires cooperation of the children, regardless of sex:

Alice and Eliza Jane were gathering roots and bark in the woods, and Royal was building huge bonfires in the yard. They boiled the roots and bark in big cauldrons over the fire, and they dipped the long skeins of wool thread that Mother had spun, and lifted them out on sticks, all colored brown and red and blue. (164)

Cowan’s assertion that in pre-industrialized households labor was shared more equally is played out in meticulous detail in *Farmer Boy*. Wilder’s own childhood didn’t have such strong examples of labor parity; particularly not with children participating in making clothing. The cloth was purchased (or traded for) and the clothing then made by women’s labor. New Agrarianism calls for a re-valuation of similarly cooperative modes of family life, particularly when family cooperation leads to a household better able to live by sustainable principles. Wendell Berry writes, “...growing and preparing food at home can provide family work—work for everybody. And by thus elaborating household chores and obligations, we hope to strengthen the bonds of interest, loyalty, affection, and cooperation that keep families together” (*Gift* 155). Berry sees a relationship between the necessity of families working together, and the family’s ultimate happiness and endurance. From a New Agrarian perspective, the family working together in *Farmer Boy* can be read as good for the economics of the farm, but also good for the stability of the family. For Berry, there is a strong care-taking and emotional component to a family

working together; he writes that “household chores and obligations” lead to “affection.”

Nowhere is this made more evident than in the Saturday night bath scene in *Farmer Boy*:

[Almanzo] did not have to empty his tub, because if he went outdoors after taking a bath he would catch cold. Alice would empty the tub and wash it before she bathed in it. Then Eliza Jane would empty Alice’s, and Royal would empty Eliza Jane’s, and Mother would empty Royal’s. Late at night, Father would empty Mother’s, and take his bath, and next morning he would empty the tub for the last time. (82)

The task is at once solitary and cooperative; it shows that for the rare treat of privacy, each family member serves another, regardless of age. Emphasized in such a passage is the notion that no one is “waited on” in the family unit; every person has a task and a responsibility. Some early New Agrarians, such as Ralph Borsodi, who strongly encouraged “his fellow citizens to return to a family-centered life on the land” (Carlson 55), believed that homesteads that worked together would be more cohesive and stable. “Restoration of the working home,” according to Borsodi, was the only antidote to the “social catastrophe” of urban, unstable homes, where children themselves are “economic catastrophes” (Carlson 62).

The lives of the Wilder children are marked with work, which was not uncommon for children in the nineteenth century. However, American attitudes toward children changed markedly between 1870 and 1930. Viviana Zelizer points out that the nineteenth-century American child was perceived to be economically “useful,” whereas the twentieth-century child was seen as economically “useless.” She asserts that “the twentieth-century economically useless but emotionally priceless child displaced the nineteenth-century

useful child”(209).³⁷ Although once an integral part of household labor, the twentieth-century child became a sentimental object of affection. Thus, at the publication of *Farmer Boy*, Wilder had witnessed a cultural shift in the way children and childhood were viewed by American society. Laws regarding child labor changed along with changing attitudes toward childhood,³⁸ although this shift may not have been as pronounced in rural areas where children were not generally working in factory conditions. Zelizer points out that “farm labor ... was almost blindly and romantically characterized as ‘good’ work” (99) and not subject to the same censure as other forms of labor, factory and mill work in particular. As an example, Zelizer offers Senator Beveridge of Indiana’s 1906 comments on child labor on farms: “I do not for a moment pretend that working children on the farm is bad for them” (Abbott, qtd in Zelizer 77). Not incidentally, this romanticization³⁹ of farm labor coincided with a sharp decrease in small, family run farms of the sort depicted in *Farmer Boy*. So, as the numbers of children actually working on small family farms decreased, the romanticization of their labor increased. This romanticization suggests a population who was actively mourning the loss of the Jeffersonian vision of America as a patchwork of active family farms, devoid of the industrial smog of England and Europe. Thus, child labor on farms appears to more closely adhere to the image of pastoral America, making it an “all-American” kind of labor. Labor on the fast-vanishing small family farm was idealized above the more common commercial operations. Labor specialists and lawmakers who focused on child labor noted that “good” farm labor was different from “exploitative” farm labor, and made this differentiation the basis for child labor laws, and “commercialized agriculture joined the ranks of illegitimate occupations [for children], while the

legitimacy of work on the home farm was idyllically preserved” (Zelizer 79). *Farmer Boy* falls very comfortably within the “home farm” category, even while rural children in the 1930s may not have experienced the “idyllic” work described in the text.

Farmer Boy certainly contributes to an idealized vision of farm labor for children. I describe the labor in *Farmer Boy* as idealized because the rewards of work are emphasized, and any extreme hardship is not.⁴⁰ Wilder creates a world in which child labor is both valuable and idealized. If, as Zelizer asserts, the 1930s were a time of seeing children as sentimental objects of affection (which practically prevents them from contributing to a household), then *Farmer Boy* challenges that notion in showing children to be economically valuable family members. The children in *Farmer Boy* are taken care of, but not doted on, nor painted in a sentimental light. Instead, *Farmer Boy* shows us children who are strong, determined, willful, smart, and serious. In countering the image of what Zelizer would call the “useless” child with the resourceful, hardworking “useful” child, it is possible that Wilder is tapping into an alternative (albeit still somewhat sentimental) image of the child in the 1930s: the Depression-era child whose earnest efforts might relieve some of his/her family’s poverty. The excitement her books incited in the young reading public may speak to a unfulfilled desire on the part of children whose own contributions to household labor were, by the 1930s and beyond, more important for the character-building they supposedly offered, than for the genuine help they were to a household.⁴¹ That is to say, children may have wanted to feel more useful, particularly if they saw their parents and siblings suffering deprivation in the Depression. Although the tone of *Farmer Boy* is nostalgic, the image of the farm child is not sentimental. Instead, the farm child represents what the plucky 1930s child longed for,

and Zelizer claims was no longer possible: an economically useful place in the family. Children want to perform tasks, to imitate their parents, and to work with them. As homesteads ceased being the primary locus of production and children were no longer expected to work alongside of adults, a bridge between childhood and the sense of accomplishment that is part of becoming an adult disappeared.

While it is true that the post-1930s “useless” child is allowed more time for play and study (which by modern standards we think of as a good thing), the “useless” child is also economically disenfranchised. However, in *Farmer Boy*, children are economically important, and that economic importance potentially translates into a childhood that is less easily demeaned. There are many examples of children’s economic importance in *Farmer Boy*, as in most texts set on farms.⁴² In the chapter “Cold Snap,” (163-172), July temperatures unexpectedly dip below freezing. The whole family, children included, is roused in the middle of the night to save the corn crop by watering each fledging plant by hand, thereby thawing it enough to save it before morning. The work is intense, but there is a genuine sense of duty and importance associated with it:

The Sun was coming to kill the corn. Almanzo ran to fill his pail; he ran back. He ran down the rows, splashing water on the hills of corn. His shoulders ached and his arm ached and there was a pain in his side. The soft earth hung on his feet. He was terribly hungry. But every splash of water saved a hill of corn. (172)

Almanzo works through his pain and hunger to save a family crop. The family stands together as the sun rises and observes what they have done: “He stood and looked at the cornfield. All the others stood and looked, too, and did not say anything. They had watered three acres. A quarter of an acre had not been watered. It was lost” (172). Each

member of the family helped save the corn crop, and the chapter ends with the simple sentence, “But most of the corn was saved” (172). A chapter like “Cold Snap” illustrates that children were enormously important to the economic survival of a farming family. If Mother and Father worked alone, it is likely that two acres or more would have been lost. In such a situation, all in the family are equal and everyone’s contribution is vital. Although Almonzo didn’t seem to have much choice in the matter, a child who works arduously and uncomplainingly at the side of his parents has a greater claim to respect than one who is comparably idle.

Farmer Boy stands out as a beacon of security and plenty among books of uncertainty and deprivation because Wilder believed that her Depression-era audience would be particularly hungry for a story of a family whose livelihood wasn’t dependent on the larger economy. Wilder’s “boy” novel is not so much the story of a boy on a farm, but the story of a mother, father, and children all working together to eek an existence out of the cold land of northern New York. Her novel suggests how the industrialization and commercialization of farming that took place between 1860 and 1930 changed the essential labor dynamics within the farming family, taking meaningful work and reward away from women and children, and creating a power structure that gave social and economic recognition to men alone. Through *Farmer Boy*, Wilder implies that in the agricultural progress made between the 1860s and 1930s, something empowering was lost: the ability for families to work together and create a stable life for themselves relatively free of market fluctuations. With some nostalgia and much detailed description

of farm life, *Farmer Boy* offers readers a taste of the stability and success of agrarianism at its best.

Coda: “Beautiful to look at, but dreadful to live through”

Wilder is but one 1930s author who wrote about an earlier era of American farm life. Lois Lenski also wrote prolifically about farming life in different regions, and in *Phebe Fairchild, Her Book*, Lenski depicts pre-industrial Connecticut farm life. This text is a striking comparison to *Farmer Boy* because it depicts a remarkably similar kind of farm, but does so with a very different attitude toward it. In this closing coda to my chapter, I put Wilder’s work in relief with Lenski to highlight how each author’s vision of America influences her depiction of what is essentially the same kind of livelihood farm. As this chapter has explicated, Wilder was politically conservative. Lenski, however, embraced leftist politics and, like Wilder, her political leanings informed her works for children.⁴³ In *Learning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*, Julia L. Mickenberg describes an emerging leftist Children’s Literature in the 1920s and 1930s, much of which is concerned with introducing children to the modern and mechanized urban landscape.⁴⁴ As an analysis of Wilder and Lenski demonstrates, the city was not the only site of ideological contention in Children’s Literature at the time, the farm held that potential as well. I will briefly examine Lenski’s portrayal of early farm life in terms of children’s labor contributions, the economic interdependence of the family and the community, and attitudes toward encroaching industrialism, arguing that Lenski associates early American farm with an out-dated and harsh puritanical order. The purpose of this coda is to emphasize how keenly the author’s

own attitudes shape farm narratives for children. The family farm has a mythical presence in the story of American identity; novels depicting early farming life tell us much not only about the authors writing them, but about how each author understands the role of the farm in the formation of American culture.

It is important to emphasize that in *Phebe Fairchild, Her Story* Lenski unambiguously aligns pro-farming opinions with biblical imperative. In our first introduction to the farm, Phebe has just made the long journey from New Haven, where she lives in the city and her father is a sea-faring merchant, to rural Northwest Connecticut and the farm where her father was raised and her extended family still lives. Her grandmother greets her rather coldly with this proclamation:

Your pa gone to sea again? Jes' as I thought. Well, I hope ye like it. Sarves ye right for pickin' out a sea-farin' Father. No sense to it at all. I always said it was only a fool couldn't get his living out of the land. What'd the Almighty make the good land fer, if he didn't want us to use it? Ain't the good Lord said, 'Dust thou shalt eat all the days of thy life' and 'Cursed is the ground fer they sake, in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life'? Can't eat dust on the ocean, I guess. (15-16)

Although we later learn that Grandmother is biased because she has lost too many loved ones to the ocean, the reader is nevertheless troubled by her immediate assertion that Phebe's father is a fool—and worse—his chosen occupation is against God's wishes. Lenski, thus, aligns farming with a narrow-minded, prejudicial kind of biblical virtue. Grandmother also interprets fancy clothing and ornamentation, as well as non-religious books like *Mother Goose* (the “Her Book” part of the title *Phebe Fairchild, Her Book*) as things that foster immorality. While it is Phebe who ultimately “teaches” the family that

such things are not evil after all (rather than Grandmother teaching Phebe to adhere to a stricter worldview) it is telling that Grandmother and the older farming family are clearly representative of an older culture that was, in Lenski's view, overly moralistic. Whereas Wilder continually shows the virtue of this kind of farming family (albeit without the religious overtones), Lenski shows the oppressive nature of the older agrarian culture. In this coda I'll focus on the passing of the homespun cloth era, as the reader encounters depictions of weaving, sheep-shearing, dyeing, and spinning cast in two very different lights from these two authors.

If Wilder depicted early farm life as a time when children's participation in the economy held more meaning and importance, Lenski tells a different story. For example, Phebe wants to help making candles, even though she has already been told in a voice that that "high pitched and shrill," "No children underfoot today; run along!" (54). Her offer is decidedly rebuffed: "You'd drop taller over everything. I can't stand no sech bunglin' work" (54). Lenski refuses to depict a domestic economy like Wilder's where everyone is industriously working, regardless of age. Children in this text do occasionally help, but during the most crucial domestic tasks, where proper timing is vitally important, children are not welcome. There is a sharp difference between Wilder and Lenski in this regard, which comes to light most clearly in the sheep shearing passages. Earlier in the chapter I emphasized that the process of taking the raw material (sheep fleeces) and turning them into wool cloth was a moment of family unity. It was a show of cooperation between adults and children, as well as men and women. Lenski's sheep shearing scene differs dramatically, emphasizing again the comparative uselessness of Phebe's effort to contribute to the process.

Just as when she asks to help with candle-making, Phebe is treated as an incapable nuisance. Note how Phebe is a passive onlooker, and how Lenski emphasizes the difference in age between the workers and Phebe:

Sheep shearing was serious business. Uncle Jothan and several men from the neighborhood had their hands full. [...] A few days before Phebe had watched them [the sheep] being washed in the brook. Tim in his hip boots, used a long stick to herd them into the enclosure which ran into the water. It took Seth and Tim both to hold the sheep and wash them. [...]

“Oh, please! Don’t do it! Don’t do it! You’re hurting... them! Her voice burst out in a wail.

“Take that child out of here,” said Uncle Jothan sternly. “Who said she could come?”

“Timothy picked up Phebe as if she were a sack of grain, lifted her off the ox-cart and set her down outside the door. She still held her *Mother Goose* in her hands. The tears rolled down her face.

“And you don’t like ‘stealing oranges’ one bit, Tim?” she cried.

“No, I don’t! Now clear out!” Said grown-up Tim, as he went back to his work.

(207-209)

In this passage Phebe’s status as a child is foregrounded: she is not only unhelpful, but actively hindering the work of the day with her presence. The working men in this passage are associated with action and duty; they are “serious,” they have their “hands full,” they “herd” and “hold,” they speak “sternly,” they are “grown-up,” and, most importantly, they “work.” But Phebe is characterized as silly and passive: “she watched,”

“her voice burst out in a wail,” she is lifted “as if she were a sack of grain,” she “held her *Mother Goose*” while “tears rolled down her face,” and “she cried.” This passage is fantastically significant when we consider that each author is attempting to recreate a time and place for child readers where childhood itself was different. The question should not be whether one author is more historically *accurate* than another, but why such depictions are so very disparate. If Lenski portrays the early American farm as a place where childhood itself is neither valued as a special time for play and nonsense (as indicated by the long-running anti-*Mother Goose* narrative), nor as a place where children are economic contributors, then the past she portrays is a picture of a bygone farming era where childhood was distinctly unpleasant. Indeed, Lenski’s narrative hinges on the circumstance that Phebe’s own father ran away from the farm life because he hated it so much: “... the farm became a hateful place. [...] She remembered that her father had felt the same way. He had hated the farm, too, and run away from home” (147). It is clear that in visiting the farm of her father’s childhood, she not only feels the unhappiness of his childhood, but also perhaps the sadness of a life so circumscribed by rules and work that there was no time for the pleasure of something like *Mother Goose*.

The farm that Phebe and her father disliked so much essentially became obsolete as industrialism and transportation created a different kind of economy. This circumstance suggests that Wilder and Lenski, both writing with hindsight, are commenting on whether such changes improved life or not. Wilder’s novel suggests that the cost of these changes was high: that the older agrarian order was more economically stable, and more economically empowering for children and women. Lenski’s novel, though depicting essentially the same type of farm, emphasizes the interconnectedness of the early farm

household with the wider community and a variety of trades. Wilder, on the other hand, is more insular—favoring descriptions of the Wilder family as self-sufficient within a relatively small agrarian community rather than participants in a larger national economy. One gets the impression that the Wilders rarely ventured off the farmstead, whereas the Fairchilds were frequently exchanging goods and services with others. The work of making cloth, whether from linen or wool is largely done in the home in both *Farmer Boy* and *Phebe Fairchild*. In the former, the work falls almost entirely on members of the Wilder family, with the exception of “carding wool,” which was done by a factory. In Lenski’s novel, though, nothing is sent to a factory. Instead, they employ the help of a community member:

One morning in early spring Mrs. Abigail Tedbury came to spend the day. [...] she was not only a weaver by profession but a tailoress as well, and her services were greatly in demand. She was to help with the flax-spinning and then take the thread home with her for the weaving. When the linen was woven she would bring it back for the bleaching. Later, after sheep-shearing, she would return again for the freshly carded wool, which, when spun, woven and dyed, would be made up into winter clothes in time for Thanksgiving. (98)

Thus in Lenski’s novel, homespun cloth, the great symbol of the pre-industrial farming era, is shown to be the product of a collaboration between a family and a professional in the community. It is not solely the product of an independent and self-sufficient farmstead, as it is in Wilder’s text. Just as Wilder is eager to show all family members participating in the creation of homespun cloth, Lenski is equally eager to show that it is through community effort that the flax from the field or the wool from the pasture

becomes clothing. This subtle difference in the procurement of cloth speaks volumes to the different impressions that each author passes along about the nature of early farm life.

Lenski's is a farmstead that is inextricably tied to commerce, both locally and globally, but readers are able to glean an understanding that some in the older generation do not approve of this association. Throughout the novel, Grandma and Aunt Hannah serve as the mouthpieces for all things oppressive and out-of-date. It is noteworthy that the idea of the isolated farm where the whole family primarily attends to farming is promoted by these characters, who are often also harsh and frightening to young Phebe. When a young man in the novel wants to pursue decorative house painting for a living, Grandmother dismisses it, and what follows is an interesting description of the variety of occupations of this so-called farming family:

“Stuff and nonsense!” answered Mother. “Farmin’s more sense.”

“Well, Mother, ‘tain’t everybody that takes t’ it. There’s Dave and me, for instance.”

“You’d ‘a took to it soon enough, if your father’d lived longer.”

“Now, Mother, don’t start fussing about that. We’ve got a pretty good thing of it now—a regular partnership, all four of us workin’ together. There’s Jothan raising the farm produce and Thaddeus trading it for manufactured goods and for Dave’s imported goods, and me tending to the traveling and business end of it all for the lot! And it’ll be a lot easier once the Canal get’s going. Pretty fine, eh? Why, Thad’s doing a thriving business! He’s fitting out dozens of peddlers every season. All the young fellers in town are traveling with the goods. It’s the shortest way to wealth and respectability. (109-110)

What Lenski emphasizes here is the wisdom in a family working together in a variety of professions, whether farming or trading, or otherwise. Grandmother, though, resists this argument, equating a movement toward trade and away from farming as a road to perdition:

Grandmother shook her head. That's what I don't like. It's all right to sell the things that can't be made in the home. But when there's peddlers hanging' on every doorstep selling factory-made cloth and lace and soap and brooms that folks oughter be makin' themselves, I jes' wonder what the worlds' comin' to. Why, there's even sellin' dyes now, that anybody can gather right out in the woods, wild indigo, sassafras bark and pokeberry. Folks'll get mighty slack with nothin' to do, mark my words . . . (110)

Like the Wilders in *Farmer Boy*, Grandmother harbors deep suspicion of goods that can be obtained without what she sees as the requisite labor. Working continually, she contends, will save people from becoming “mighty slack”—suggesting that one’s moral character depends on not taking short-cuts. Whereas Wilder puts this opinion in the mouth of the well-liked character Father in *Farmer Boy*, Lenski puts such an attitude on the much less likable figure of Grandmother in *Phebe Fairchild*. In so doing, she marks such opinions as narrow-minded, whereas Wilder presents them as sensible.

Wilder’s depiction of the old agrarian farmstead, if not universally appealing, certainly is stable, comfortable, and relatively happy. Her concerns about the age of industry appear to be that they would destabilize what she saw as a secure and independent lifestyle. Lenski, however, sees industrialization largely as a move in the right direction. It is only through Grandmother that Lenski voices an opinion that might be close to

Wilder's: "Everything goin' out of the home. Everything from shops and fact'ries to canal boats—all calculated to take people's minds off stayin' to home and tendin' to their duties. Folks'll git mighty slack if they do so much gallivantin'. The good Lord meant 'em to stay in the same place" (289-290). However, it is evident that Lenski does not agree with Grandmother, particularly when it comes to how the factory will change women's labor in the home. Note that none of the women worry that ridding themselves of some work will create moral defect among them:

"It's bound to come sooner or later, I suppose," said Betsy softly. "But I hope not in Mother Fairchild's time. These changes are hard on the old people."

"Well, 'twould red us of a sight of work," broke in Hannah. Take flax, for instance. It's even worse than wool, it's so slow. Why it's sixteen months from the time you plant it till you get your summer cloth."

"You're right, Hannah," said Betsy. "This crop was sowed last March. First there's growing it, then thrashing and rotting and breaking it—besides the dressing. And when the men's work is done, it's only the beginning of ours."

"I think I dislike the dyeing most," said Lucreita, after a pause. "It's such messy work. It sticks to your hands like the mischief."

"I hope we can get this batch ready for bleachin' by the end of May," said Hannah. "We can put it out there to the south of the little apple trees—the Golden Sweets and the Seek-no-further. The grass is thick there to lay it on. Land! How I hate to think of all that sprinklin' and turnin'!" (102-103)

The exhaustive list of tasks associated with homespun in Lenski's novel is often depicted through complaints about how difficult or unpleasant the tasks are. The labor saved, then,

is presumed to be a welcome change, and the “old people” are presumed to be the only ones not able to cope with these advancements. As Phebe says of witnessing her aunt weaving a coverlet in on the loom in an upstairs room: “The shuttle whizzed, the lathe jarred, the treadles clattered, shaking the house’s frame and Phebe’s own to the very core. “The Bachelor’s Fancy” was beautiful to look at, but dreadful to live through” (53).

It is interesting to note that despite the many hardships she writes about in the novel, in her forward, Lenski calls this a “civilized, prosperous, and hopeful period” (vii). This seems mostly based on the observation that “Commerce was flourishing, the use of canals was at its height, the West was rapidly opening up and possibilities for future development were unbounded” (vii). For Lenski, hope is tied with “commerce” and “development.” She nevertheless sees that “Many Puritanical customs and notions prevailed [...] especially in regard to the upbringing of children; but a faint ray of light, symbolized by *Mother Goose*, portended a changed attitude for the future” (vii). Lenski does not point out in her forward that she also strongly associates the livelihood farm with “Puritanical customs and notions,” thus eliding the fact that she also portrays leaving such a farm life behind also as a “faint ray of light.” Lenski’s *Phebe Fairchild, Her Book*, can be seen as something of a counterweight to Wilder’s *Farmer Boy*. Where Wilder sees the joy and reward in a hard working childhood, Lenski sees farm children of an earlier era as lacking access to some of childhood’s pleasures. A reader of *Farmer Boy* is much more easily seduced into a world of plenty and security, while a reader of *Phebe Fairchild* is more likely to be relieved she didn’t live in such a time period. The 1930s, then, didn’t universally create writers like Wilder who saw the older agrarian order as a more equitable and secure time. It also produced writers like Lenski, whose glancing

back into another era resulted in a giant sigh of relief that she wasn't subjected to such a childhood herself.

3: *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*: Frontier Mythology and Nostalgia

Laura Ingalls Wilder has arguably had the most influential literary perspective on perceptions of frontier life and farming of any American author. The television series, though maudlin and only very loosely based on her *Little House* books, is in some part responsible, but from the time of publication to now Wilder has had an enduring audience of young readers, and the parents of young readers.¹ Wilder dominates *because* she wrote for children, and in doing so reached the dual audience of both parents and children, but also because she chose to create a gentle version of the “settling” of the American West.² In other words, Wilder’s success hinged in no small part on her ability to harness American love for the mythic agrarian and frontier past and package it for consumption. But her success also depended on using her own nostalgia to foment a national nostalgia for a country no longer in touch with its agrarian and frontier roots.

The first two books of the Ingalls family narrative are undoubtedly the most popular, but they starkly differ in how they are situated with regards to agrarianism. This chapter shows that *Little House in the Big Woods* is the novel of a family rooted in agrarianism, but in *Little House on the Prairie* depicts a family who starts to abandon many key agrarian values. Wilder explores how individuals, families, and communities are challenged to find meaning and value as agrarian life becomes increasingly fragmented. To interpret these novels, I found fruitful intersections between Wilder’s first two *Little House* books and the agrarian writings of Gene Logsdon, Gary Snyder, Kimberly K. Smith, and Wendell Berry. This chapter goes beyond simply exploring the connections

between agrarianism and Wilder's first two *Little House* books, however, and I assert throughout that there is undercurrent of discontent in the change between *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* that is best revealed by explicating how the shift away from agrarianism left the Ingalls family continually at risk. Complicating Wilder's position is her own inability to write critically about her father, instead choosing to sublimate any negative feelings about his choices and create the always-adored character, "Pa." I contend that there are key moments of agrarian concern in the two novels, where Wilder renders *Little House in the Big Woods* as a place of security, and *Little House on the Prairie* as a place of vulnerability. Wilder's works, rich in detail, allow one to recognize that the following elements of agrarian life reveal much about the community itself: the value of the handmade, the virtue of *sophrosyne*, connectedness to the land, the place of technology, and the importance of storytelling. I argue that the way Wilder writes about these details, as well as how she documents the disempowerment of women and girls,³ reveals a deep criticism of Pa's choice to abandon the safety of the agrarian community in favor of westward adventuring. Throughout these topics are inextricably shot through with nostalgia, and Svetlana Boym's theories of restorative and reflective nostalgia suggest how we might navigate Wilder's many nostalgic modes. Comprehensively, I argue that the change in lifestyle between *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* is emblematic of a pervasive sense of rootlessness, loss, and disempowerment in American culture.

Making Meaning of Handcrafting

Wilder spends an enormous amount of time in *Farmer Boy* detailing the finely handcrafted items that comprise the household and are used every day. Whether it is clothing, food, toys, farming equipment, homes, or barns, it seems that nearly everything the Wilder family uses in *Farmer Boy* is handcrafted—usually from materials wrought from the farmstead itself. This is the definition of the livelihood farm in its fullest, and the kind of agrarianism that we never fully see in any of the Ingalls family books.⁴ Nevertheless, the handmade abounds in the Ingalls family narrative as well, and examining how Wilder writes about the handmade in *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* tells us much about how she situates each within an agrarian framework.⁵ Handmade items hold cachet in agrarian culture for a number of reasons.⁶ Firstly, there is the agrarian push to use the market outside the home as sparingly as possible so that the family can strive to meet its own needs through its own resourcefulness. Eric Freyfogle writes,

The agrarian concern for economic stability and durability accounts in part for agrarians' insistence that the household remain what it typically was in the United States until well into the twentieth century—a center of economic production, meeting its needs from within so as to reduce dependence on the market. (xxiv)

It is this idea of “reducing dependence on the market” that shifts between *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*. There are examples throughout both texts that show a family that spends time both making items and buying them. Looking at the Christmas scenes in each book is a useful way to understand how market dependence shifts between the two novels. In *Little House in the Big Woods*, Wilder describes the shelf that Pa is making for Ma as gift:

He made the tiniest shavings, cutting very slowly and carefully, making whatever he thought would be pretty. At last he had the pieces finished and one night he fitted them together. When this was done, the large piece was a beautifully carved back for a smooth little shelf across its middle. The large star was at the very top of it. The curved piece supported the shelf underneath, and it was carved beautifully, too. And the little vine ran around the edge of the shelf. (61-62)

As with most of Wilder's descriptions of handmade items, this excerpt is but a snippet of the larger description. Wilder has an interest in expressing that this process of crafting a functional gift for a loved one happens "very slowly and carefully." The importance of the gift is not only its beauty and function, but also the time put into creating it.

Christmas comes to the Big Woods in hand-crafted items—mittens for Pa, and a handmade doll for Laura. The only store bought items are the peppermint sticks all the children find in their stockings.

The girls receive peppermint sticks again the following year, but in *Little House on the Prairie* the homemade Christmas gifts are missing, and Christmas is a time of great anxiety for all. Their Christmas gifts depend almost entirely on their access to the town. They realize that they will have no gifts if "Santa Claus" can't make it over the river. Whereas in *Little House in the Big Woods*, the pages preceding the description of Christmas morning itself are filled with anticipatory joy and handcrafting, the same days in *Prairie* are filled with phrases like "Laura was anxious" and "Mary was afraid" and "They knew they would have no Christmas, because Santa Claus could not cross that roaring creek" (240). When, finally, Mr. Edwards risks his life to cross the creek and deliver the gifts that he received in town from "Santa Claus" they ultimately do find a

peppermint stick, a tin cup, a little white cake, and a penny in their stockings. While Ma alludes to “white sugar” early on in the chapter, suggesting that she made the cakes, the rest of the gifts are not handmade, and there are no gifts at all for the adults. This is markedly different from the joyful and handmade Christmas in the Big Woods, and underscores the instability that marks their new life on the prairie. The dependence on store-bought items for Christmas is particularly poignant for both the adult and child reader. Although one can acknowledge that their isolation has more terrifying aspects, like when malaria strikes, the inability to rely on holidays bringing joy and excitement carries its own emotional heft. One also must contemplate why it is that handmade gifts have been abandoned for this Christmas. Their absence, perhaps, marks a problematic gap in leisure time. Since “settling” on the prairie, Ma and Pa have had to work ceaselessly in order to provide the very basic needs for their family: shelter, food, and fresh water. While they use a great deal of handcrafting to attain these ends, the mix of labor and leisure that they had in the Big Woods is presumably gone. One tenet of the New Agrarianism is to “integrate ... work and leisure in harmonious ways” (Freyfogle xv). Examples of this abound in both *Farmer Boy* and *Little House in the Big Woods*, but are scarce in *Little House on the Prairie*.⁷

The integration of work and leisure that is essential to agrarianism is hard to pin down. It means that the work of the day itself will be filled with storytelling, singing or other ways to entertain oneself. Prominent agrarian Gene Logsdon writes of his farm upbringing:

Not only did this life press us with an eternal round of chores, but it also provided a kind of circus atmosphere of entertainment. On top of it all [...] was a propensity

for singing. Above the cackles, mooings, and squeals of the barnyard, a visitor might be startled to hear a bellow of human song, or a more feminine lilt from the kitchen. (5)

Singing and entertaining is enmeshed in the workday. But mixing labor and leisure also means an active “down time”—one that integrates some kind of work into the evening hours. In an essay published in January of 1920, Wilder challenges her husband’s assertion that “People used to have time to live and enjoy themselves, but there is not time anymore for anything but work, work, work”(65). As the essay moves along, Wilder is able to draw examples to the contrary from her husband’s early life on a farm in northern New York. After Almanzo recounts how much work his father had to do every night in order to sell 500 bushels of potatoes, she asks what his mother did every night while his father was sorting potatoes. He responds:

Oh, she sewed and knit ... She made all our clothes, coats, and pants, undergarments for Father and us boys as well as everything she and the girls wore, and she knit all our socks and mittens—shag mittens for the men folks, do you remember, all fuzzy on the outside? She didn’t have time enough in the day to do all the work and so she sewed and knit at night. (*Little House in the Ozarks* 65)

Throughout the essay, Wilder gets her husband to recount many of the activities that later she renders in such detail in *Farmer Boy*, thus proving to him that the “old days” did not afford people more time to “enjoy themselves.” As she and her husband sit before the fire with “the day’s papers and the late magazines ... scattered over the table” she remembers that her own mother was “always sewing or knitting by the evening lamp,” and that she “never had done so, except now and then in cases of emergency” (65). The “moral” as the

essay closes is revealing in terms of how technology and “labor saving” machines may have changed attitudes toward work. Wilder concludes that “It may well be that it is not our work that is so hard for us as the dread of it, and our often expressed hatred of it. Perhaps it is our spirit and attitude toward life, and its conditions that are giving us trouble instead of a shortage of time”(66).

As seen in the passages above, Wilder juggles several nostalgias at one time. On the one hand she is attempting to address her husband’s nostalgia for a past when people had “time to live and enjoy themselves” with evidence that his memory of that time elides much of the work that was happening, in favor of remembering that they “enjoy[ed] themselves.” But even as she “corrects” her husband’s memory, she plants a “corrected” version of the story in the minds of her readers in order to foment a type of restorative nostalgia that claims to be the bearer of “truth,” and the correct version of the past (Boym xvii). She relies on this in order to glorify the past when technology had not yet “forced” people to detest work.⁸ Her hypothesis, “Perhaps it is our spirit and attitude toward life, and its conditions that are giving us trouble instead of a shortage of time,” relies heavily on her own belief that there is a past time when life was better. In this way, Wilder hopes that *through* nostalgia, she can provoke change in the present and future. Svetlana Boym claims that “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi). Wilder’s use of nostalgia in this, and many other incidences in her writing, instead is as much about longing for the past as it is about advice for the future. Wilder embraces the idea that by looking back, we can move forward.

Sophrosyne and the Agrarian Mind

Perhaps one of the most troubling shifts between *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* is the degree to which Pa's desire for adventure and westward movement dictates the family choices. While it is hardly unusual for a patriarch at the time to make unilateral decisions, it is illuminating to examine the implications of Pa's choices in the context of the cultural shift away from agrarianism. In an agrarian reading of a Wendell Berry novel, *The Memory of Old Jack*, Kimberly K. Smith draws on a lesser-known Greek virtue in order to understand the book's protagonist: a virtue called sophrosyne. She defines it simply as "the virtue that prevents hubristic overreaching," and notes that it "carried the connotation of prudence, pragmatism [...] or good management—which made it a virtue associated with domesticity" (*Wendell* 136). Not surprisingly, Smith sees sophrosyne as an essential agrarian virtue, writing that "...emphasizing sophrosyne rather than self-sufficiency and freedom of action changes the moral core of agrarianism in important ways: The moral value of farming becomes not its promise of freedom and power but its tendency to teach self-restraint and prudence" (*Wendell* 137). Smith makes a compelling choice to posit "self-sufficiency and freedom of action" as virtues that are not necessarily aligned with farming. This challenges the commonly held notion that the livelihood farm and the agrarian lifestyle are at their core about independence. While much about agrarianism is about independence, this often means independence from dominant economic structures rather than independence with regards to personal choices or one's ego—the difference between the freedom *to* and the freedom *from*.

Pa's independent spirit propels his family across the nation, but in *Little House in the Big Woods*, Pa's independence and love of adventure take place within a relatively safe agrarian structure. In other words, sophrosyne embodies the community in which they live and works to quell Pa's hubris, and Pa's hubris provides some of the plot-driven excitement that drives the narrative forward. This is a balance that allows for the home-away-home narrative that is so endemic to Children's Literature to play out. That is, Pa repeatedly leaves the home, has an adventure, and returns home to tell about it. While Pa's ability to provide well for his family (as evidenced in the food they store to live comfortably through the winter, his secure family ties, his skillful homesteading) contributes to sophrosyne, his tendency toward risk-taking and venturing dangerously away from community exhibit his hubris, and to some degree foreshadow the future narrative of the *Little House* books.

The first chapter of *Little House on the Prairie* is instructive in how it establishes Pa's single-minded approach to moving his family westward. On the first page of the novel, Wilder writes, "Pa said there were too many people in the Big Woods now" (1). The one who decides how many people are "too many" is Pa, even though there is scant evidence for overpopulation of the Big Woods. The next paragraph goes on to establish repeatedly that Pa's observations alone are the basis for the family's move:

Wild animals would not stay in a country where there were too many people. Pa did not like to stay, either. He liked a country where the wild animals lived without being afraid. He liked to see the little fawns and their mothers looking at him from the shadowy woods, and the fat, lazy bears eating berries in the wild-berry places. (2)

It is significant that the phrase “He liked” starts two sentences, making it unsurprising that the decision to move depends on what he “likes” as well:

One day in the very last of the winter Pa said to Ma, “Seeing you don’t object, I’ve decided to go see the West. I’ve had an offer for this place, and we can sell it now for as much as we’re ever likely to get, enough to give us a start in a new country.”

“Oh, Charles, must we go now?” Ma said. The weather was so cold and the snug house was so comfortable.

“If we are going this year, we must go now,” said Pa. “We can’t get across the Mississippi after the ice breaks.” (2-3)

Pa declares that they are leaving, rather than discussing it. The irony of him saying “Seeing you don’t object” is, of course, that Ma does object (“Oh, Charles, must we go now?”) but it appears to be immaterial to Pa. This “discussion” ends and the next paragraph begins with “So Pa sold the little house. He sold the cow and calf” and ends with “Ma helped him...” (3). Pa’s role is clear, as is Ma’s. He gives the orders, and she carries them out. While clearly this is an example of a patriarchal power structure in the family, it also suggests the degree to which Pa revels in striking out on his own, embracing the unknown, and (most importantly for my argument) leaving established community behind. Pa is a spirited frontiersman, an expert marksman, a savvy fur-trader; Pa is not a farmer.

Pa actively rejects *sophrosyne*,⁹ impulsively leading his family in pursuit of an independent life, but the vision for that life is inchoate at best. While it is clear that Pa wants to be on the cutting edge of the frontier and away from large numbers of people, it

is unclear where that place could be, or whether Pa is chasing the idea of a place that never could exist with any permanency.¹⁰ In this way, Pa appears to suffer from a kind of nostalgia. He longs for a place in his imagination where he can live off the land and away from people, but his fantasy about that kind of existence cannot become a reality unless he surrenders to the idea of living in community. Smith observes that:

The work of farming, Berry constantly reminds us, is difficult. It is usually too much for one person, and mistakes are lasting and sometimes deadly. The only safe way to approach this difficult labor is carefully, with humility and prudence rather than an overconfident sense of self-sufficiency. (*Wendell* 137)

Unfortunately, the Ingalls family suffers great losses as a direct result of Pa's inability to embrace *sophrosyne*, and his "overconfident sense of self-sufficiency." This is not to say that Pa never asks for help from the few neighbors he has—on the contrary, he often will trade work—but the emphasis is on trading evenly so that no one "owes" another, rather than working together to establish a community where needs are met and labor exchanged over a lifetime. For example, when he borrows nails from his neighbor, Mr. Edwards, he and Ma talk about their discomfort with the situation:

Mr. Edwards had lent him the nails. They had met in the woods, where they were both chopping down trees, and Mr. Edwards had insisted that Pa borrow nails for the roof.

"That's what I call a good neighbor!" Pa said when he told Ma about it.

"Yes," said Ma. "But I don't like to be beholden, not even to the best of neighbors."

“Nor I,” Pa replied. “I’ve never been beholden to any man yet, and I never will be. But neighborliness is another matter, and I’ll pay him back every nail as soon as I can make the trip to Independence. (Wilder *Little House on the Prairie* 124-125)

Pa makes a distinction between being beholden to someone and showing neighborliness. The difference between the two is not immediately clear to the reader.¹¹ Perhaps it is associated with the length of time that elapses between receiving a favor or item, and repaying it in kind, or perhaps it is in only borrowing when you know you have the resources to repay quickly. Either way, it appears as though there is a focus on setting the balance to zero.¹²

Later on in the novel, the night before Pa must head into town, he voices remorse for having borrowed the nails, which he sees as the main reason to head into town:

“We could get along alright, if I didn’t [go to town],” said Pa. “There’s no need of running to town all the time, for every little thing. [...] I wish I hadn’t borrowed those nails from Edwards.”

“You did borrow them, Charles,” Ma replied. [...] “We need more quinine. I’ve been sparing with the cornmeal, but it’s almost gone and so is the sugar. You could find a bee-tree, but there’s no cornmeal tree to be found, so far as I know, and we’ll raise no corn till next year. A little salt pork would taste good, too, after all this wild game. And Charles, I’d like to write to the folks in Wisconsin. If you mail a letter now, they can write this winter, and then we can hear from them next spring.”

“You are right, Caroline. You always are,” Pa said. (207)

In this passage Pa clings to the idea that complete self-sufficiency is a possibility when he wishes that he “hadn’t borrowed those nails,” but is he also regretting that they now have a roof? The roof was only possible because of the nails, after all. Instead, it seems as though he wishes that it were possible for him to truly operate outside of any system of interdependence.¹³ Although Ma, too, regrets that they borrowed, she is able to contextualize it and goes on to point out that the trip to town is not for “every little thing,” but for some very important food items, medicines (quinine was used to treat malaria, the “Fever ‘n’ Ague” of Chapter 15), and to keep family ties by communicating. Ma exhibits one aspect of *sophrosyne* essential to the agrarian life: “to ‘know thyself’—in other words, to know one’s proper place in the cosmic order, to know what it means to be human as opposed to divine or bestial” (Smith *Wendell* 136). Ma not only knows that family survival depends on recognizing the need to stay connected, well-fed, and healthy, but she is willing to set aside the “ideal” of never borrowing from anyone in order for them to have a proper roof promptly, and the supplies that they need when they need them. Ma is able to locate herself and her family within a system of interdependence, a system Wendell Berry sketches out as the vital web that holds agrarian communities together:

...the best of human cultures [...] have this unity. Their concerns are not fragmented, scattered out, at variance or in contention with one another. The people and their work and their country are members of each other and of the culture. If a culture is to hope for any considerable longevity, then the relationships within it must, in recognition of their interdependence, be predominantly cooperative rather than competitive. (*Unsettling* 47)

In other words, rather than repaying the nails in order to stay even (making it seem like a competition), you repay the nails as part of a much longer project of group cohesiveness and interdependence. While Pa initially attempts to differentiate between being “beholden” and exhibiting “neighborliness,” his preoccupation with settling the nail score and the regret he voices about borrowing in the first place both suggest an ardent desire to live outside of these systems. A virtuous agrarian, Smith points out, knows that “Wisdom consists in knowing one’s place in this system and not trying to seize power above one’s place—to control the forces of nature, for example, or to live outside of community, completely autonomous and free” (*Wendell* 138). However, for Pa it is precisely his goal to “live outside of community, completely autonomous and free.”

Here, I would like to point out that although in *Little House on the Prairie* and the books that follow, Pa cannot tame his imprudent desire to continue westward, always seeking a more “free” life, he exhibits the ability to embrace *sophrosyne* in *Little House in the Big Woods*. Furthermore, Pa’s hubris never prevents him from basking in the adoring gaze of his daughters in the novel, nor his daughter in real life, the author Laura Ingalls Wilder herself. The question, then, becomes, “Why?” Why does Pa gather accolades throughout the novels for being the provider and protector, when his poor judgment and hasty decision-making continually put the family in fatally dire situations? In one of her many ways of exploring the definition of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym writes that it is “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). I argue, then, that Pa is an exceptionally powerful example of multiple competing nostalgias as Wilder composes the novels; Pa is the tragic hero in the “romance” that Wilder has with her “own fantasy,” as it were. The longings within

Wilder's nostalgic vision are many, and they range from a personal nostalgia for elements of her own childhood to a more wide-ranging nostalgia for a national past and a universal American mythology that never existed in any singular form. "At first glance," Boym writes, "Nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress"(xv). For Wilder, nostalgia for childhood allows her to portray Pa as provider and protector, despite his errors in judgment and propensity to dismiss the crucial necessity of living in community. Dominant in Wilder's landscape of nostalgia for her childhood is the belief that, literally and metaphorically, "The wolves might howl, but they could not get in while Pa and Jack were there" (*Little House on the Prairie* 98).

The other nostalgia at play here is a bit more layered, for it deals with what Boym calls the "[desire] to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology" (xv). When nostalgia is not just as a feeling, but a feeling that has been turned into writing, which then has been turned into part of American cultural literacy, it ceases to be personal and enacts a type of power over the consciousness of a nation. It is fair to assert that Wilder's books have made this leap. Somehow, Pa stands out as the "rough and ready" example of individualism and self-reliance that is so lauded in American culture. Despite the fact that he removed his family from the security of a larger community, despite poor planning that landed him in Indian territory in the midst of a conflict on land they didn't have a right to, despite the fact that he almost drowns the family in a river, despite risking radon poisoning, etc., Pa and his trusty gun are what make Laura feel safe and secure. This is how Wilder's nostalgia "obliterate[s] history" and turns the story of

Pa into “mythology,” for it is only in the realm of myth that one’s failings can be turned into adventures and imprudence can be turned into bravery. Pa becomes, in a way, a symbol of what America would like to believe about its past, particularly the so-called “settling” of the West.

Westward Expansion and Native Displacement

Even Pa’s *relatively* neutral attitude toward Native Americans (compared with his neighbors, the Scotts, who proclaim “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” [*Little House on the Prairie* 301]) is part of American myth-making.¹⁴ Pa unambiguously accepts that as a white man he has a right to land in the west, telling Laura that “When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on [...] White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick” (*Little House on the Prairie* 237). Laura tries to understand the reasoning, saying, “But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won’t it make the Indians mad to have to—.” Pa cuts her off here and says “No more questions, Laura” (237). Pa recognizes that there is a point beyond which he can’t explain. Pa’s attitude is not one of hatred, but he seems to embody Manifest Destiny¹⁵; he believes that there is a God-given right of white people to populate the west.¹⁶ Wilder likes Pa to sound level-headed and fair, but he is more concerned with what he sees as progress than with seeing Native Americans as people with human rights: “He figures that Indians would be as peaceable as anybody else if they were let alone. On the other hand, they had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks. But an Indian ought to have sense enough to know when he was licked” (285). In creating Pa as the spokesperson for the Ingalls family attitudes

toward Native Americans, Wilder also retells the story of the west in the way it has often been told: “it’s sad, but what’s done is done.”¹⁷ Through Pa, Wilder is able to cast a shameful part of our American culture in a nostalgic light by being a voice-piece against the overt and blatant bigotry seen in Mr. and Mrs. Scott, while simultaneously embracing white privilege. In creating the character of Pa, Wilder employs a “restorative nostalgia” that “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition” (Boym xviii). So often in Wilder’s novels the drive toward American myth-making is so strong that it seems Wilder herself believes her narratives are more or less truthful representations of the building of America, whereas in truth they are fictions and crafts based on memory and emotion.

To the agrarian mind, a very troubling aspect of Wilder’s narrative is that the Ingalls family is settling on land in Indian Territory. The Ingalls family had settled squarely within the Osage Diminished Reserve, on land that was not open to settlers.¹⁸ Ownership, particularly intergenerational ownership, is what creates an interest in long-term soil fertility and care for the land. Moreover, in the agrarian mind, ownership is also thought to foment a spiritual understanding of land that becomes a part of community knowledge. While Gary Snyder may not use the term “ownership,”¹⁹ he nevertheless speaks to this idea, while also acknowledging that in destroying the bonds that Native communities have had with the land, displaced and destroyed native people have been deprived of their spiritual inheritance, while leaving a significant gap in understanding of sacred grounds for European-American settlers. Snyder explains:

I live on land in the Sierra Nevada of Alta California, continent of Turtle Island, which is somewhat wild and not terribly good. The indigenous people there, the

Nisenan or Southern Maidu, were almost entirely displaced or destroyed during the first decade of the gold rush. Consequently, we have no one to teach us which parts of that landscape were once thought to be sacred, but with much time and attention, I think we will be able to identify such sites again. Wild land, sacred land, good land. At home developing our mountain farmstead, in town at political meetings, and farther afield studying the problems of indigenous peoples, I hear each of these terms emerging. By examining these three categories, perhaps we can get some further insights into the problems of rural habitation, subsistence living, wilderness preservation, and Third and Fourth World resistance to the appetites of industrial civilization. (Snyder "Good" 195)

Snyder's efforts to identify the land based on bioregion rather than political boundaries exhibit an intentional rejection of the notion that ownership is about legislation. Instead, he suggests that ownership is a function of intimacy with landscapes and an ability to truly inhabit those regions as unique places. This is the mentality needed to create a sustainable agriculture that works with, not against, the natural climate, geography, geology, and biology of a distinct place. Snyder acknowledges the loss of native knowledge and hopes that redemption is possible. While Snyder may be considered a fringe voice of the New Agrarians he, more so than some others²⁰, acknowledges that in the European takeover of this continent, where Western-style agriculture was one of the first markers of "civilization," there were lasting erasures in knowledge of the land. The knowledge that was lost in the genocide of Native Americans was knowledge of soil and landscape created over generations of family and tribal relationships. This is not to say that indigenous populations always had an ecologically perfect or sustainable relationship

with the land, but it is to say that they had countless generations of interactions with the land and sustained, multi-generational knowledge.

Snyder highlights long-term familial relationships with the land—something sought by both New Agrarians and Native Americans. Vine Deloria explains a Native perspective:

Most tribes were very reluctant to surrender their homelands to the whites because they knew that their ancestors were still spiritually alive on the land, and they were fearful that the whites would not honor the ancestors and the lands in the proper manner. If life was to mean anything at all, it had to demonstrate a certain continuity over the generations and this unity transcended death. (172)

The multi-generational continuity sought by tribes is inextricably connected with the soil. The soil itself was agreed to be composed of the ancestors, which is, of course, true from a soil science perspective as well: “Human beings were an integral part of the natural world and in death they contributed their bodies to become the dust that nourished the plants and animals that had fed people during their lifetime” (Deloria 171). This concept is seen again in this excerpt from an 1854 speech by Chief Seattle who is addressing the whites who are taking Native land with the Treaty of Medicine Creek:

Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. (Isley, et al. 31)

What strikes me about these passages is the degree to which the writers express the marriage of spirit and substance; in other words, the literal substance of the earth, the soil, is composed of the bodies of the ancestors, and because of that circumstance the soil is imbued with spiritual importance. This marks a major departure from the Christian concept of the spirit being removed from the body at death. Deloria implores his readers to “recall that for tribal people symbolism is not the communicative image of Westerners but the expression of a reality that Westerners often refuse to acknowledge,” clearly stating that “This conception of land as holding the bodies of the tribe in a basic sense pervaded tribal religions across the country” (173). And while much of New Agrarian thought is Western in tradition, oftentimes (most prominently in the case of Wendell Berry) Christian in worldview, the endpoint of their soil thinking is similar if not in religious terms, then in practical ones: soil, family and community are part of an interconnected web that is committed to long-term habitation of place.²¹

Take this understanding of the land and contrast it with this prevailing attitude in *Little House on the Prairie*, where a clash between settlers and Native Americans seems prescient and opinions about the possession of land are voiced:

[Mrs. Scott] said she hoped to goodness they would have no trouble with Indians.

Mr. Scott had heard rumors of trouble. She said, “Land knows, they’d never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that’ll farm it.

That’s only common sense and justice.” (211)

The idea here is that unfarmed land is wasted and worthless, and that the only thing to “do” with the land is to “farm it.” This not thought of as a cultural, religious, or political

imperative, but rather as “common sense and justice.” This passage is problematic in many senses, and to understand it from an agrarian perspective is complicated. On the one hand, agrarianism is a very Western understanding of what it means live on the land and create a community around farming. Thus, Mrs. Scott does speak to one aspect of agrarianism by implying that farming is, in a sense, the appropriate way to go about “settling” the land. On the other hand for people to benefit from the advantages of agrarianism, farming should take place on land where families can have a long-standing, multi-generational relationship with the land and fellow tillers of the soil. So, when Mrs. Scott proclaims that “treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that’ll farm it,” she seems to be willing to throw caution to the wind and settle on land that, realistically, they may be forced to leave because of where the government has drawn lines between Indian Territory and land available to settlers. Additionally, and extremely significantly, neither Mrs. Scott, nor Wilder, by extension acknowledges that American Indians were also cultivators of the soil and involved with intensive land-use. As Sharon Smulders points out, “Wilder does not contextualize corn and tobacco as products of agricultural ingenuity”(197). Frances W. Kaye more directly sums up how critics have *perceived* settler versus Native American land use in Wilder’s work:

We have two land-use systems in conflict, but the settlers’ system of using the land to support many people is humanly superior to the Osages’ system of neglecting the land during the growing season to go on buffalo hunts. This seems to be the frame of reference implicitly or even explicitly accepted by all the critics.” (132)²²

Mrs. Scott desires to establish a Western-style farming community, but is willing to risk not having long-term commitment to the land due to settling on land with ambiguous ownership status. In other words, Mrs. Scott ignores whether future generations (or even her own household of two) will be able to stay on the land. In this attitude it is clear that for some settlers, owning land is not truly about inhabiting it, but speaks to an “us versus them” mentality of ownership.

Here in Wilder’s novels we see a conundrum of the agrarian vision in the “New World:” the land itself, with which farmers ideally create long-lasting ties, is not the land of our ancestors. Each time a region of North America was “settled” by Europeans, the human-land connection was severed from one group (Native Americans) and supposedly re-established by another group (European Americans). This kind of wound, which in evolutionary and geological time happened in a flash, has never been adequately addressed.²³ What we are usually left with in mainstream American culture is a story that looks much like the Ingalls’s, where movement onto new land, rootlessness, and disconnection create the pattern that we call American life. This is a story whose synchronicity with the fall of agrarianism in our culture is remarkable. While the fall of agrarianism and the rise of industrialism are seen as going hand-in-hand (a point which I don’t dispute), there is also a willingness to dissociate the loss of native peoples and native understanding of the land with the ultimate failure of agrarianism and its replacement with industrialism. Part of this ignorance is a rabid clinging to the mantra that “you can’t stop progress” and an inability to see the value in recovery work, such as Snyder works toward.

Father-love and Nostalgia

An unfettered devotion to “progress,” is problematic for the agrarian. In Chapter One, I spend some time discussing Father’s rejection of the threshing machine in Wilder’s most agrarian novel, *Farmer Boy*. The thresher makes an appearance again, however, in *Little House in the Big Woods*, but this time it shows up in the tellingly-named chapter, “The Wonderful Machine.” Pa is unequivocally pleased with the technology. He says,

“It would have taken Henry and Peterson and Pa and me a couple of weeks apiece to thresh as much grain with flails as that machine threshed today. We wouldn’t have got as much wheat, either, and it wouldn’t have been as clean.

“That machine’s a great invention!” he said. “Other folks can stick to old-fashioned ways if they want to, but I’m all for progress. It’s a great age we’re living in. As long as I raise wheat, I’m going to have a machine come and thresh it, if there’s one anywhere in the neighborhood.” (227-228)

Whereas in *Famer Boy* the machine is seen as wasteful, since it renders the straw unfit for animals, in *Little House in the Big Woods* the machine is seen as a time-saver and makes the wheat more abundant and clean. Wilder is able to represent these two opinions of the machine fairly, but a closer look at how Wilder chooses to describe the sounds associated with threshing suggests a subtle difference in attitude on Wilder’s part. The sounds of hand-threshing in *Farmer Boy* have pleasant connotations: “THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD! It was like marching to the music on Independence Day. It was like beating the drum. THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD!” (308). However, when Wilder describes the sounds of the threshing machine in *Little House in the Big Woods* there is obvious anxiety: “All this machinery made an enormous racket, rackety-banging and clanging.

Laura and Mary held tight to each other's hand, at the edge of the field, and watched with all their eyes. They had never seen such a machine before. They had never heard such a racket" (223-224). The girls are clinging to one another and seem frightened. The machine is given the qualities of a part-animal, part-mechanical monster: "The hole looked like the separator's mouth, and it had long, iron teeth. The teeth were chewing. They chewed the bundles and the separator swallowed them. Straw blew out at the separator's other end, and wheat poured out of its side" (224). No matter how many indications there are in the text that the machine is menacing, Pa "was happy" with its arrival, and "Laura was proud of him" and "Everybody was glad it had come" (227, 228). The Ingalls family is undoubtedly just excited about the new technology as the Wilder family was secure in its rejection of it.

The fascinating element here, of course, is to consider Wilder herself as an author publishing these two very different reactions to the same technology about a year apart. Consider these two different narratives with regards to the relative success of each family: the Wilders are wealthy and secure, while the Ingallses face insecurities and deprivations of all kinds. In *Farmer Boy* Wilder's nostalgia is not for a personal past, since she is not writing about her own past, but for a bygone time—a time that she portrays as better, safer, cozier, and happier than any time since then. Her nostalgia is purely "restorative" in that it "manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past"(Boym 41). In this case the monument is the agrarian homestead. However, in *Little House in the Big Woods*, Wilder's nostalgia may be for childhood, and the ability to see "Pa" as a hero once more. Remember that after the threshing machine leaves "Laura was proud of him. It was Pa who had got the other men to stack their wheat together and

send for the threshing machine, and it was a wonderful machine” (228). Despite her wide-eyed, hand-clinging fretfulness, the chapter concludes with this unsullied patriarchal-adoration, the kind of which is only the stuff of vague childhood remembrances. And unlike the restorative nostalgia of *Farmer Boy*, Wilder’s nostalgia for her father and her own childhood is not always about “reconstructions of monuments of the past,” but instead can be a “reflective nostalgia” that “dwells in the imperfect process of remembrance” (Boym 41).

While Wilder wavers between these types of nostalgia in her novels, her devotion to her father as a paragon of the good provider truly contradicts the plotline of the narrative, where Pa’s choices bring the family to the brink of disaster repeatedly. Although it is unclear whether Wilder herself would have been able to see this as either ironic or nostalgic, Boym suggests that reflective nostalgia can embrace the “ironic” and “reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection” (49-50). Perhaps it is the nature of Wilder’s project, which is at once a personal narrative and a national narrative, at once a series about a long-ago childhood and a lost place and time, that creates an increasingly convoluted storm of nostalgia. Consider that Wilder ends *Little House in the Big Woods* with Pa singing “Auld Lang Syne” in this scene that follows:

When the fiddle had stopped singing Laura called out softly, “What are days of auld lang syne, Pa?”

“They are the days of a long time ago, Laura,” Pa said. “Go to sleep, now.”

But Laura lay awake a little while, listening to Pa’s fiddle softly playing and to the lonely sound of the wind in the Big Woods. She looked at Pa sitting on the

bench by the hearth, the firelight gleaming on his brown hair and beard and glistening on the honey-brown fiddle. She looked at Ma gently rocking and knitting.

She thought to herself, “This is now.”

She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now.

It can never be long ago. (237-238)

The heart-achingly complicated ambiguity Wilder leaves us with at the end of her first novel truly, as Boym says of nostalgia itself, “tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence” and “is about the repetition of the unrepeatable” as well as the “materialization of the immaterial” (xvii). For as she writes the ending to the first novel, Wilder knows the story to follow; “Now” is no longer “now,” but it has become “long ago.”

It is this ability to recognize and dandle the idea of the past—to play with it, sometimes as though it is near, sometimes as though it is far—that is attractive about Wilder’s handling of nostalgia in her works. Wilder herself seems to revel in the challenge of both giving the long-past some immediacy to her audience, while simultaneously preserving the “long-ago-and-far-away” feel that creates interest in the narrative. To wit, the book closes with her childhood voice saying “It can never be long ago,” although it opens with her adult voice declaring, “Once upon a time, sixty years ago...” (1). Wilder has a strong attachment to the world of the Big Woods and the security she feels in the presence of her family gathered in the warm firelight as the day closes. But it is hard to pin down whether she is resisting nostalgia or embracing it. For in

writing “now is now” Wilder attempts to preempt the passage of time, but she uses dramatic irony to show that while the child character Laura may not know it, both the reader and the adult Laura authoring the book realize that what happened in the Big Woods was indeed “long ago” and without the book to bring the stories to the present, they certainly could be “forgotten.” The notion that nostalgia is either reflective or restorative is less useful here, and I favor Boym’s more general assertion that “nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythic return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values [...] a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (8). In this case the adult Laura does indeed seem to “mourn” for “an enchanted world with clear borders and values”—in other words, the world of the safe home in the agrarian community of the Big Woods—even while the young Laura cannot yet anticipate the loss of this home. Through telling the story of the Big Woods, Wilder uses narrative to bring this history into the present, a storytelling technique that Pa uses throughout the novel as well.

Storytelling in Agrarian Life

One way of dealing with the competing ideas of “now” and “long ago” is through storytelling. Storytelling holds particular meaning in agrarian communities, where being rooted in a specific place means knowing the stories of the place and the stories of those who have lived there. Storytelling can accompany labor or leisure, and is lauded as an important way of fostering intergenerational unity. It is also seen as an entertainment of the past. As more print material became available, storytelling during leisure time

dropped off. As labor became mechanized, it became more and more solitary. According to Eric Freyfogle, storytelling is one of hallmarks of an agrarian community:

Agrarians have long celebrated the amenities of life, hospitality, conversation (especially storytelling), and good manners without professing extraordinary skill in them. Such amenities center on the home, and one of the chief contentments of agrarians is the sense of having a distinct home, knowing that home, and feeling centered by it. (xxxiii)

The act of storytelling, then, is a home-affirming act: it proclaims “this is my family’s story” and “this is my family’s home.” In Wilder’s novels, too, storytelling is associated with security and rootedness.²⁴

Exactly how is storytelling a home-affirming act? Why does the act of storytelling confer “the sense of having a distinct home, knowing that home, and feeling centered by it”? While Wilder’s novels detail the daily activities and adventures of the Ingalls family, there are four distinct stories, set aside with special titles, within *Little House in the Big Woods*: “The Story of Grandpa and the Panther”(40), “The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods”(53), “The Story of Grandpa’s Sled and the Pig”(87), and “The Story of Pa and the Bear in the Way”(109). By looking at these four storytelling moments in *Little House in the Big Woods* we can see that they share some common elements, many of which corroborate the notion that storytelling can also be a profoundly agrarian act. Each act of storytelling touches on these elements: physical intimacy between parent and child, indispensable information about the local area, discipline, and intergenerational connection. These are the elements that work together to make storytelling an agrarian, home-affirming act.

As an antecedent to each story, there is a moment of family gathering around the fire after supper. The stories are always told at the same time and in the same place. The stories, while clearly entertainment, are also an act of love and intimacy between parent and child.²⁵ Sometimes the family is jolly, and the story is an extension of feelings of joy and contentment: “When Laura and Mary begged him for a story, he would take them on his knees and tickle their faces with his long whiskers until they laughed aloud. His eyes were blue and merry” (39). Other times, it is part of a playful repartee: “ ‘Tell us about the Voice in the Woods,’ Laura would beg him. Pa crinkled up his eyes at her. ‘Oh, no!’ he said. ‘You don’t want to hear about the time I was a naughty little boy.’ ‘Oh, yes, we do! We do!’ Laura and Mary said. So Pa began” (52-53). It can also be an act of compassion, like the moment after Laura declares that she hates Sunday and anticipates a spanking: “But when she reached Pa, he looked at her sorrowfully for a moment, and then took her on his knee and cuddled her against him. He held out his other arm to Mary, and said: ‘I’m going to tell you a story about when Grandpa was a boy’” (87). These moments of physical closeness reinforce the bonds of love between parents and children, and also emphasize that intimate moments arise whether the family is joyful, playful, sad, or whether it is simply part of the routine, as in the time Pa tells the story of the “Bear in the Way”: “After supper Pa took Laura and Mary on his knees and said he had a new story to tell them” (109). The cumulative effect of placing these storytelling moments in the novel is that there are regular intervals where the reader sees family ritual and intimacy, giving the impression that the family unit is loving and cohesive.

However, the agrarian ideal of family life is not simply based on affection and solidity, but also upon identifying itself with older generations and bearing responsibility

within the family unit. The storytelling within *Little House in the Big Woods* often serves as a way for Pa to explain family relationships, as when he says, “I’ll tell you about Grandpa and the panther,” and Laura needs clarification: “‘Your Grandpa?’ Laura asked. ‘No, Laura. Your Grandpa. My father.’ ‘Oh,’ Laura said, and she wriggled closer against Pa’s arm. She knew her Grandpa” (39-40). Here we see that as the story begins there is an opportunity not only for Laura to recognize how extended families work, but also to reflect on “knowing” her Grandpa, and knowing him even further by gaining a glimpse into his life long before she knew him. A later story, “The Story of Grandpa’s Sled and the Pig,” offers Laura and Mary a chance to see the same Grandpa as a child himself. This story not only offers additional ways of knowing who their Grandpa is by understanding who he was as a child, but also offers the girls historical context by explaining the traditions of observing the Sabbath at that time: “When your Grandpa was a boy, Laura, Sunday did not begin on Sunday morning, as it does now. It began at sundown on Saturday night. Then everybody stopped every kind of work or play” (87). Several paragraphs follow, offering details of what it was like to not work or play for the Sabbath so the children can further understand their Grandpa through knowing about the restrictions he faced as a child that they do not personally face. In agrarian communities where the ideal is to keep farms and land in families, stories such as these reinforce intergenerational family connections and a sense of family history.

Additionally, through stories there is a clear sense that each family member has responsibilities that cannot be shirked without consequence. In other words, your duty is to know what it means to be responsible to the family. In each story there is a moment where someone neglects a duty and pays a price: Grandpa goes into the Big Woods

without his gun and is attacked by a panther (43); as a child Pa is distracted by playing in the woods, doesn't bring the cows in on time and is "thrashed" (58); Grandpa breaks the Sabbath by sledding and gets his "jacket" "tanned" (96); Pa carries too many furs into town, miscalculates his timing, and must walk in the dark without his gun (114). The value in these stories is layered, and helps to enforce a discipline that is intergenerational in nature.²⁶ While it is true that by modern standards the whippings that children endure for things such as playing when they are not supposed to seem cruel, they are somewhat minor in comparison with the consequences the adult men face for shirking responsibility. Both Grandpa and Pa make errors in judgment, just like their childhood selves, however the consequence of their neglect in both cases is to have a close shave with death. Grandpa is nearly killed by a panther: "At last the horse ran up to Grandpa's house. Grandpa saw the panther springing. Grandpa jumped off the horse, against the door. He burst through the door and slammed it behind him. The panther landed on the horse's back, just where Grandpa had been" (42). And although Pa ends up facing off with a burned-out log instead of a hungry bear, his situation makes him reflect on the fact that "Bears are hungry and cross this time of year; you know they have been sleeping in their dens all winter long with nothing to eat, and that makes them thin and angry when they wake up. I did not want to meet one"(110). Not having his gun forced him to attack the perceived bear with a stick, which though considered "brave" by Laura (115), is not likely to have saved him from a true bear attack. Thus, a type of discipline associated with familial obligation is enforced, and not solely in an unequal power dynamic. Because there are also stories of adults making mistakes the didacticism is somewhat mitigated by the circumstance that regardless of age, people "learn their lessons."

Storytelling is clearly a family-strengthening activity in the Ingalls household, and strong, functional families that can work together are an important element of agrarian community. But even more crucial is that members understand what it means to inhabit a specific place. In *Little House in the Big Woods*, storytelling also conveys vitally important information about the Big Woods itself. The stories can do this because the family has lived in the Big Woods for multiple generations. Thus storytelling becomes protective—a repetitious way to keep families in touch with the natural world’s rhythms and dangers. All of the stories are landscape-specific, and three of the four educate the children on their bioregion. Before the first story even starts, Pa gauges how much Laura knows, presumably to tailor the story to suit her changing knowledge-base: “‘Do you know that a panther is a cat? a great, big, wild cat?’ ‘No,’ said Laura. ‘Well, it is,’ said Pa. ‘Just imagine Black Susan bigger than Jack, and fiercer than Jack when he growls. Then she would be just like a panther’” (39). As the story proceeds, the girls learn how a panther screams: “‘Like a woman,’ said Pa. ‘Like this.’ Then he screamed so that Laura and Mary shivered with terror” (41). They also find out that panthers leap from treetop to treetop, can run as fast as a horse, have “enormous slashing claws” and “long sharp teeth,” and—inevitably—“could kill” Grandpa (41, 42). Stories also educate the children on what *not* to be afraid of, as in “The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods,” for even though the story starts with warnings about dark woods with wolves, bears, and panthers, we learn that Pa acts foolishly because he doesn’t know that the frightening sound he hears is simply the call of an owl (53-58). In the last story of the novel, Pa communicates that the changing of the season from winter to spring means not only that he should have altered his travel time, since he “found it hard walking in the soft snow” (109), but also

that the woods were more likely to be filled with aggressive “winter-starved” bears (111). If the Ingalls family hadn’t been living in the Big Woods, where all of these region-specific dangers were found, the stories would not have been as vital a part of the children’s upbringing.

As it turns out, storytelling does disappear from the next *Little House* book, even though the book is significantly longer. The disappearance of storytelling is one of the many way Wilder signals to the reader that the family has shifted away from agrarian living. The stories of the Big Woods no longer hold the same relevance when they are told out-of-context. In a definition of the agrarian farmstead, Freyfogle specifically mentions that it is the “locus and cultural center of a family’s life, the place where the young are socialized and taught, where stories arise and are passed down, where leisure is enjoyed” (xiv). It is significant that he mentions that the farmstead is not only where stories are told, but also where they “arise.” Again, being tied to place cements the storytelling tradition in local application. These regional stories need to be told in order for the children to be “socialized and taught.” However, in the absence of storytelling there is not simply a gap in knowledge, although that has significant implications as well. There is also a noticeable gap in leisure and fewer opportunities for the cuddling that is so much a part of the act of storytelling. One gets the sense that there is never a moment when Pa can sit by the fire and tell a story and cuddle his children because there are such pressing needs: a well to be dug, a house to build, a family to defend from potentially aggressive forces. The narrative is one of constant forward motion and very little rest at all. Wilder finds it worth mentioning in *Little House in the Big Woods* that Pa doesn’t tell stories in the summer: “In the summer evenings Pa did not tell stories or play the fiddle.

Summer days were long, and he was tired after he had worked hard all day in the fields” (185). However, the sense in *Little House on the Prairie* is that Pa is always too exhausted to tell stories after supper. This reaches an unusually fevered pitch when he is worried that war will break out between the settlers and the Indians, and he is constantly on guard:

Pa never stopped looking at the prairie all around, and turning his head quickly to toward the smallest noise. He ate hardly any dinner [...] One day his head nodded down to the table and he slept there. Ma and Mary and Laura were still to let him sleep. He was so tired. But in a minute he woke up with a jump and said, sharply, to Ma, “Don’t let me do that again!” (297-298)

This is an extreme example from the novel, but it is instructive because it points to another change between the two books. *Little House on the Prairie* provides a somewhat traditional plot structure with exposition, rising action, climax, and dénouement. The scene quoted above, I would argue, is from the climax of the novel where the building threat of war hovers over the threshold of the Little House itself. Wilder’s agrarian novels, on the other hand, have a staid, episodic quality to them, where small anecdotes and the regular passing of time and season drives the narrative forward.

The absence of storytelling in *Little House on the Prairie* does emphasize the new rootlessness of the Ingalls family, but there are still moments where the family is able to rest and foster attachment outside of storytelling. Music—singing and fiddling—offer some moments of both leisure and parent-child bonding that continue to cement the family unit, despite their remove from community. As Anne Phillips points out, one important aspect of song in Wilder’s works is that it “reinforc[es] the connection between

music and home” (152). Most interestingly, where the storytelling in the Big Woods emphasized rootedness in a specific landscape, the songs sung on the Prairie are more generic, romanticized, and removed from the daily life and surroundings of the family.²⁷ When the songs make mention of place, it is not the specific landscape of the prairie; instead it is generic, as in the lyrics to The Gypsy King: “I come and go as I please” or Old Dan Tucker who “goes to town” (69), or even references to heaven, as in when Ma sings “There is a happy land/ Far, far away,/ Where saints in glory stand,/ Bright, bright as day” (220). When specific places do appear in song, they are far-away, as in “...the waters/ Of the blue Juniata” (235) (a river in Pennsylvania), or the “California” of “Oh, Susanna” (333), or the American South as when Pa sings “In Dixie” (334). This emphasis on placelessness or distant places is not balanced by the storytelling rooted in specific, well-known landscapes as in *Little House in the Big Woods*. Instead, the Ingalls’s music, Jan Susina argues, blends with the “other voices of the prairie”(158), and “create[s] a powerful image of the pioneer living in perfect harmony with the environment” (162). Thus, while the songs themselves represent distant places, the act of singing along with the animals, birds, wind and stars, as Susina suggests, declares that the family has joined the prairie itself. While Susina characterizes this in a positive light (“perfect harmony”), it also suggests the extent to which the Ingalls family has both lost human community, and as well as security in the Big Woods. For, in truth, the Ingalls presence on the prairie, both ecologically and politically was anything but “perfect harmony.”

Feminine Worth in Agrarian Community

I've spent significant time in this chapter establishing that the Ingalls family is part of a somewhat settled agrarian community in *Little House in the Big Woods* and the move away from it in *Little House on the Prairie* brings significant changes to the family. But, what is the significance of the move away from agrarianism? In the remainder of this chapter I demonstrate that this shift had a significant disempowering effect on Ma and Laura. Whereas agrarians have sometimes been accused of being patriarchal and too tied to gender roles, in the case of these two *Little House* books I argue that it is the agrarian community that supports and empowers women and girls, rather than the opposite.²⁸ Outside of the agrarian community, women are more vulnerable and less supported in their common humanity with men. Additionally, because Wilder wrote for children, her books offer unique opportunities to make domesticity and women's work visible. In this final section I argue that the agrarianism of *Little House in the Big Woods* provides stability and empowerment for women and girls, particularly when compared with what follows in *Little House on the Prairie*. This is evident through the visibility of Ma's work, and the social opportunities for the family, where there is a sense of female worth and camaraderie, support and leisure. This contrasts starkly with *Little House on the Prairie* where female camaraderie and leisure are all but absent. Additionally, in *Little House in the Big Woods* each member of the family is shown to be valued, and this is diminished when they briefly leave their farm to visit town. Here the girls encounter the problematic nature of being objectified by an outside world where the virtues of girls and women can lie chiefly in their appearance rather than their contributions to the family as a whole. Leaving the agrarian homestead opens women and girls to values of the marketplace, where notions of femininity are dangerously reductive.

But let us first return to the visibility of Ma's work in *Little House in the Big Woods*. In Chapter One, I detail the ways in which Mother's work in *Farmer Boy* is made visible, noting that "to be visible," according to William Conlogue, "is to be valued" (65). It is abundantly clear in *Farmer Boy* that Mother's work is essential to the functioning of the farm as a whole. The same is true of Ma's work in *Little House in the Big Woods*; hardly a chapter goes by without a detailed description of Ma's work. Here is an abbreviated list of examples: Ma renders lard and makes sausage and headcheese (17-18), Ma churns butter and stains it yellow with carrot juice (31-33), Ma bakes and prepares for hosting Christmas with guests (62), Ma milks the cow (103), Ma helps Grandma cook during sugaring (134), Ma makes cheese (186-192), Ma provides nursing skills when a child is attacked by yellow jackets (208), Ma makes hats (213-214), Ma takes "two or three days" to make hulled corn (218-221), and Ma cooks a large meal for visiting workers (226). This list doesn't include the moments when Ma is knitting or doing the daily food preparation, but there is a nod to the rhythms of Ma's work in the home early on in the text:

Each day had its own proper work. Ma used to say:

 "Wash on Monday,
 Iron on Tuesday,
 Mend on Wednesday,
 Churn on Thursday,
 Clean on Friday,
 Bake on Saturday,
 Rest on Sunday." (29)

To be sure, Wilder also spends significant time writing about Pa's work, but perhaps because Wilder herself is a woman and her narrative is about having been a girl, she spends slightly less time describing Pa's daily work, unless it is the work he does directly in the home, like making bullets (45). The novel gives snapshot after snapshot of the daily life for women and girls in an agrarian community. One obvious observation, and it is what has led to the disparaging of farm life for women, is that farm women are constantly at work.²⁹ However, it is also clear that women are capable and their work is valuable; the impression, as well as the reality, is that without the work of women, the agrarian life could not be.³⁰

Of course, it is the visibility of this work that makes it so remarkable in *Little House in the Big Woods*. For although Ma certainly works hard in *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder does not make it a primary part of the narrative. In *Little House on the Prairie* the Ingalls family story is no longer about the family in a community—it has morphed into a male-centered adventure tale. Not only does Ma's labor get swept under the rug in *Little House on the Prairie*, but her opportunities for social interaction are severely limited, much more so than for Pa, who trades labor with neighbors and takes trips into town. While they live in the Big Woods, the Ingalls family sees their extended family regularly, with the chapter "Dance at Grandpa's" being the pinnacle of their social year.³¹ Wilder emphasizes how much this means to Ma in particular: "'Hey, Caroline! There'll be a dance!' Ma smiled. She looked very happy, and she laid down her mending for a minute. 'Oh, Charles!' she said" (128). Here we see that there is something to break up the regularity of the farm life: something to look forward to, and most importantly, it is an opportunity to visit with extended family.³² The occasion for the dance, too, is a part of

an agrarian way of life. People are congregating because the maple sugaring is to happen. The dance and the work are a perfect example of an agrarian community that is able “to integrate its work and leisure in harmonious ways” (Freyfogle xv). In fact, the central dancer in the chapter is Grandma, Pa’s mother, who is not only in charge of the sugaring off process, but simultaneously is the winner of a jigging contest against her son:

Everybody made a terrific noise, shouting and yelling and stamping, cheering Grandma. Grandma jigged just a little more then she stopped. She laughed in gasps [...] Suddenly Grandma stopped laughing. She turned and ran as fast as she could into the kitchen [...] All the women were talking at once, and all the men teasing George, but everyone was still for a minute, when Grandma looked like that. Then she came to the door between the kitchen and the big room, and said:

“The syrup is waxing. Come and help yourselves.” (150)

It is clear that Grandma is running the show from almost every angle.³³ She is the prized dancer and it is her voice and demeanor that can make everyone “still for a minute.”

Labor and leisure are combined in this very matriarchal and community-oriented event.

Even the kind of dancing at this event hearkens to an agrarian lifestyle, where dancing is a community event. Berry points out that as agrarian society gave way to industrial

society, the “old ring dances in which all couples danced together,” were replaced by the “so-called ballroom dancing, in which each couple dances alone” (*Unsettling* 118). This

is representative, of course, of his larger argument that as agrarian community gave way to a market-minded economy, marriage gave in to the idea of “sexual love as ownership”

(119). Unlike ballroom dancing, the communal dancing, such as is seen in “Dance at

Grandpa's," affords women the dignity of not being seen as an object for "trade" as they appear to be in the exchange of partners during ballroom dancing (118).

As is seen in "Dance at Grandpa's," agrarian community has its own social codes. These codes, in turn, help people to understand how they contribute to a larger system. Once outside of that system, one has to contend with the values of the world. This becomes painfully clear to Laura when she goes to town with her family, and the storekeeper comments on the girls' appearance: "The storekeeper said to Pa and Ma, "That's a pretty little girl you've got there," and he admired Mary's golden curls. But he did not say anything about Laura, or about her curls. They were ugly and brown" (167). Almost immediately as they enter the town, the girls know what it feels like to be looked at and judged by an outsider, to be subjected to the "male gaze," as it were. Wendell Berry argues that this phenomenon of people battling with the idea that they do not live up to a "model" of beauty, is symptomatic of a culture that has disconnected itself from the many intersecting webs of relationships (between individuals, community, the earth, for example) that create culture. Berry writes that, "When all the parts of the body are working together, are under each other's influence, we say that it is whole; it is healthy. The same is true of the world, of which our bodies are parts. The parts are healthy insofar as they are joined harmoniously to the whole" (*Unsettling* 110). The difficulty he points to stems from the "specialization of our age" where not only is "fragmentation [...] a disease, but [...] the diseases of the disconnected parts are similar or analogous to one another" (110). Here he is arguing that the fragmentation of the self is mirrored in the fragmented relationship of humans to the earth, or humans to their community. One specific fragmentation of the self is "dissatisfaction with the body," which we see

developing in Laura as she finds her hair compared unfavorably with Mary's. In this specific fragmentation of the self,

the hardship is perhaps greater [...] because the body, unlike the self, is substantial and cannot be supposed to be inherently better than it was born to be. It can only be thought inherently worse than it *ought* to be. For the appropriate standard for the body—that is, health—has been replaced, not even by another standard, but by very exclusive physical *models*. The concept of 'model' here conforms very closely to the model of the scientists and planners: it is an exclusive, narrowly defined ideal which affects destructively whatever it does not include. (112)

As humanity becomes increasingly severed from understanding what "health" is in relation to the earth, we see an analogous disappearance of the idea that "health" is the primary measure by which we understand our bodies. Berry goes on to discuss this in terms of "young people" who are "made to feel forcibly, and to measure themselves by [...] the exclusive desirability of a certain physical model," noting that "Girls are taught to want to be leggy, slender, large-breasted, curly-haired, unimposingly beautiful" (112). For Laura, the desirability of golden curls is an example of "an exclusive, narrowly defined ideal which affects destructively whatever it does not include" (112). It is not that the storekeeper disparaged her brown curls, but seemed to omit praise for them since they do not fit within the "narrowly defined ideal." Laura internalizes the notion that her hair is "worse than it *ought* to be" (112).

The context in which this interaction takes place for Laura is emblematic of the fraught nature of being female in a community where the interrelationships between the

health of the body, the health of the community, and the health of the land are becoming fragmented. While it would be naïve to assert that physical self-consciousness arises exclusively in places where such fragmentation has occurred, I nevertheless find it notable that Wilder chooses to correlate Laura's feelings of physical inadequacy with the visit into town. It is clear that the storekeeper is not the one who planted the idea that Mary's hair is prettier; earlier in the chapter before they go to town Laura refers to her hair as "dirt-colored brown" and Mary's as "beautifully golden" (161). But the public nature of the shopkeeper's remarks suggests that "fragmentation" is acutely felt in the marketplace, where every object is assigned a value, and anything can be purchased for a price. Later, in private, when Aunt Lotty visits them at home, Mary asks her, "Which do you like best, Aunt Lotty [...] brown curls, or golden curls?" Aunt Lotty answers "I like both kinds best" (182). Pa also reassures Laura, but the notion that the "model" of physical beauty excludes brown hair dogs her. Mary takes advantage of her perceived superiority and taunts Laura: "Aunt Lotty likes my hair best, anyway. Golden hair is lots prettier than brown" (183). Laura is positively tormented by the notion that her hair is not pretty: "Laura's throat swelled tight, and she could not speak. She knew golden hair was prettier than brown. She couldn't speak, so she reached out quickly and slapped Mary's face" (183). For although she receives private assurances, her "knowledge" that golden hair is prettier has been corroborated by the perceived authority of the market outside the homestead. The emotional pain Laura feels upon hearing the insult, the physical pain she inflicts when she slaps her sister, and the pain she then feels when she is whipped for slapping her sister³⁴ all seem to be part of a circle of suffering springing from the circumstance that "physical models" of the body have usurped "health." Berry writes,

“Though many people, in health, are beautiful, very few resemble these models. The result is widespread suffering that does immeasurable damage both to individual persons and to the society as a whole” (*Unsettling*, 112). On a small private level, one sees this play out in the Ingalls household.

Wilder’s novels entice the reader with the promise of a safe, enclosed, national myth about Westward expansion. But there are ripples of discontent under the surface of her works which suggest that as the United States expanded west, and our country became wedded to industrialism and market economics, something was lost. By using New Agrarian theories, I have begun the project of understanding those losses: how hubris and erroneous belief in self-sufficiency gave momentum to destructive westward expansion; how the marriage of labor and leisure was replaced with the machine and the ever-hungry capitalist structure; how the work of women and their strength of position in a community can be diminished in a system that devalues healthy relationships between people, community, and the earth. The elements of established agrarian life present in *Little House in the Big Woods*—handcrafting, the visibility of women’s work, the virtue of *sophrosyne*, the connectedness of family and community, the importance of storytelling—are diminished significantly in *Little House on the Prairie*. This diminishment points to a transition from an agrarian-based society to a market-based one, and in reading the effects of that transition on the Ingalls family one can develop a picture of how this may have changed culture on a much larger scale. That Wilder’s works are written for children and often encased in nostalgia does not make them less vital to understanding the United States. In fact, her use of nostalgia makes her works more

inviting to the cultural critic, who can at once come to a clearer understanding of Wilder's specific texts, but also can better grasp the role Children's Literature has on mythologizing frontier life, farming, and childhood itself.

4. *The Land*: Recovering Black Agrarianism

There is no way of talking about the black agrarian experience without recognizing the history of oppression and exploitation associated with American soil. A text like Eric Freyfogle's *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life*, while certainly not purported to be an exhaustive survey of the field, offers a remarkably white-washed version of New Agrarianism for a full-length compilation. The introduction goes so far as to mention the Twelve Southerners' *I'll Take My Stand*, as a jumping off point for the essays in the book, pointing out that "the authors expressed alarm for the effects of industrialization and materialism on the mannerly, leisurely, humanistic culture they viewed as the South's greatest treasure," (xxxvii) without specifically or appropriately mentioning the glaringly racist and classist agendas that many of these essays promoted along with their agrarian manifesto. While Freyfogle does write that the agrarian ideals of *I'll Take My Stand* "have taken a severe beating," he does not provide the reader with any specific analysis of why that might be, and he certainly does not delve into the need for New Agrarianism to address questions of race. The introduction to his book lays out some important tenets of New Agrarianism, but its cursory claim that "New Agrarianism is out to rectify patriarchy and racism" is not sufficiently supported in the book that follows. As Janet Fiskio aptly points out, "The New Agrarianism [...] has tended to elide racialized disparities in its analysis of the problems of contemporary agriculture" (304). In this chapter I read Mildred Taylor's *The Land* as a text that offers readers an opportunity to understand the "racialized disparities" to which Fiskio refers. Taylor's historical fiction brings to life the difficulties of land-owning and farming for black

families in the South during reconstruction. Although *The Land* was published fifteen years ago, it has received nearly no critical attention, which signals that neither New Agrarian critics, nor Children's Literature scholars, nor African-American Literature scholars have taken an interest.

Nevertheless, scholarly discussion of black agrarian experience is emerging. Kimberly N. Ruffin's book, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010), for example, examines the absence of black experience in ecocriticism. She points out that "The results of omitting work from America's ecological narratives have been serious for African Americans. Until recently, this omission has left African Americans with a limited acknowledgement of the realities of enslaved life and the misperception that the enslaved were ecologically both mute and moot" (53). Ruffin's work examines a wide range of texts, from early narratives of the enslaved to modern writers like Marilyn Nelson, Octavia Butler, Alice Walker, Jayne Cortez, and Percival Everett. Ruffin examines how these contemporary authors write about African American experience with the earth, whether through religious practice, farming, historical recovery work, ecological jeremiads, or events like Hurricane Katrina, which have called for a renewed attention to environmental racism. Ruffin argues that

...as a theoretical frame, ecology helps illuminate how African American authors understand human beings as part of the natural world. It also puts readers in a position to better discern the interconnectedness of social and natural systems. Experienced with the triumphs and troubles of life among those at the bottom of human hierarchies, African Americans have a keen knowledge of the ecological implications of social systems; at the same time, their closeness to non-human

nature, both forced and voluntary, gives them an opportunity to reflect on how these social systems have ecological impacts for non-humans. (20)

Ruffin examines how African American writers place themselves and the stories of their “African American ecological ancestor[s]” (22) in relationship with the earth, and works toward reclaiming the “largely overlooked African American ecoliterary traditions”(10). In both her first chapter, “Toil and Soil” and in her later discussion of Marilyn Nelson’s *Carver*, she also spends time considering the vexed history of farming for African Americans. As a field, ecocriticism has given limited attention to the African American experience, and the inclusion of black experience in New Agrarianism has been similarly limited, but there is a wealth of information about the historical significance of Black Agrarianism, particularly in the south during Reconstruction.¹

For many free African Americans, both before and after the Civil War, being a land owner and farmer was the greatest chance for independence and self-determination.² Black Agrarian communities segregated from whites (such as fictionally represented in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, or Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) were particularly attractive to those interested in self-sufficiency and relative sovereignty. The unfulfilled promise of “forty acres and a mule” for every freeman after the war, while a painful reminder of injustice, nevertheless speaks to the many hopes that were pinned on the promise that agrarianism would be the pathway to citizenship, security, and the ability to provide for the basic needs of a stable family life.³ As Kimberly K. Smith explains, “Black agrarians argued that agriculture was man’s natural calling, and when conducted by free, responsible proprietor-farmers, it confers the moral, economic and spiritual benefits claimed by the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer” (Smith *African* 10). Yet,

for some, the experience of agricultural labor was so inextricably entwined with the violence and oppression of slavery that the agrarian life served as a repugnant reminder of the past. And as W.E.B. Du Bois discusses in the chapter entitled “Of the Black Belt” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “the hard ruthless rape of the land” was tied to the slave system: “The red-clay sub-soil already had begun to peer above the loam. The harder the slaves were driven the more careless and fatal was their farming” (Du Bois, *Souls*). Du Bois is far from alone in correlating the loss of soil fertility with slavery; one strain of the abolitionist movement “focus[ed] on the virtues of independent yeoman farmers and the deleterious effects of unfree labor, large-scale agricultural operations, and absentee owners on agricultural productivity and soil fertility” (Smith *African* 42-43). It is evident that slavery, peonage, share-cropping and the like contribute misuse of the soil itself, in addition to blatantly disregarding human dignity.

But what is the effect of such disregard for human dignity on the laborers themselves? Is it possible or probable that people with a history of agricultural enslavement will be able to embrace agrarianism as an empowering way of life? Kimberly Ruffin asks similar questions: “What does it mean when work, rather than leisure, is your central ecological experience? What does it mean when work is compounded by the inconvenient history of enslavement?” (27-28). Of course, it is impossible (not to mention undesirable) to attempt to answer such questions in a monolithic way. Yet Black Agrarianism as a positive force in African American history and culture has had prominent and vocal supporters from Fredrick Douglass⁴ who believed that despite an unjust past, agriculture still held promise for the black community, to (unsurprisingly) Booker T. Washington, who believed that educating people to work with their hands on the land was the most solid way to

citizenship and equality, to W.E.B. Du Bois, whose complicated attitude toward agrarianism nevertheless allowed for him to understand the benefits of small-scale farming and a self-sustaining agrarian community at least enough to hold it up as an ideal in his 1911 novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.⁵ The question for the modern reader, of course, is why did this strain of Black Agrarianism seemingly evaporate in the century following the publication of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*? And how did New Agrarianism develop as a worldview that scarcely recognizes Black Agrarianism as a predecessor, but instead still clings to the flawed theoretical perspectives of the essays by the Twelve Southerners in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930)? Black Agrarianism is represented in works devoted to the study of African Americans and Ecocriticism or Environmental History,⁶ yet it is underrepresented in works on New Agrarianism, perhaps because Black Agrarianism is seen more as a historical phenomenon than a current trend. One reason for this, of course, is the Great Migration.

During the Great Migration African Americans left the rural south by the millions, pushed by the brutality and inequality they faced during Jim Crow, and pulled by the promise of better jobs in the North. In leaving the South, most also left behind the agrarian lifestyle, for not only was this a migration from South to North, but also from rural life to city life. *The Land* shows in detail what a rural, southern existence might have been like before the Great Migration. Mildred Taylor's Logan family series follows a rural, agrarian African American family from reconstruction through the 1940s, squarely set both before and during the Great Migration. Mildred Taylor's most famous work, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, is the story of Cassie Logan, who must come to terms with living in a racist society. However, the agrarian community within which this

takes place is not a simple backdrop to Cassie's story. By taking a closer look at agrarian values and an agrarian land ethic one understands that this novel is about an agrarian family, first and foremost. The issue of race and discrimination has all but dominated the scholarship on Taylor's novels, with the notable exception of Michelle Martin's "Let Freedom Ring: Land, Liberty, Literacy, and Lore in Mildred Taylor's Logan Family Novels." Martin's article notes the seriousness of land ownership in the Logan series, but does not locate it within the context of agrarianism. By uniting Taylor's works with New Agrarian theory, I hope to offer insight as to why the last words of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* are "the land," and why her most recent novel was titled *The Land*. In this chapter I will focus on *The Land*, but the principles of New Agrarian theory can be aptly applied to much of Taylor's work.

Every one of Mildred Taylor's Logan Family books is ripe for a New Agrarian reading. As Michelle Martin points out "...true freedom does not come with manumission alone. For Taylor, African Americans in general and the Logan family in particular obtain freedom only through owning land ..." (372). Martin goes on to discuss the importance of land ownership in a time when most African Americans were sharecroppers. To the Logan family, land ownership is the sole way to family security and the nexus of community activism, which corroborates the assertion that "Agrarians hold tenaciously to the institution of private property, viewing it as part of the bedrock on which their world rests" (Freyfogle xxv). Freyfogle clarifies even further, adding that,

To own property is to make it one's own, to mix one's labor with it and attach it to one's moral domain. Only such an owner can envelope land with long-term dreams and link it to the maintenance and reputation of a family. For this reason,

not just government ownership, but also widespread tenancy arrangements worry the agrarian mind. (xxv)

In Taylor's novels "tenancy arrangements" are the norm for most of the characters. As landowners, the Logans are always outside the norm. In *The Land*, for example, the Perrys are sharecroppers, and Paul Logan faces some pressure from Filmore Granger to become a sharecropper rather than a landowner (224). But the struggle to cross over from being a farmer who sharecrops to an "agrarian" who can "envelop land with long-term dreams and link it to the maintenance and reputation of a family" is an unwinnable one for most families in Taylor's novel.

A New Agrarian is one who values community, is rooted in the land, cares for soil conservation and fertility, values physical labor, and is engaged in fostering a useful but not exploitative relationship with a specific piece of land.⁷ How can a family live on the land without exploitation, while recognizing that the fate of the family is tied to the fate of the land? This is the primary question in the Logan family series. Taylor is often recognized for her work on behalf of African-American children's literature, starting with her 1971 award from the Council for Interracial Books for Children and continuing with several Coretta Scott King Awards. To exclude her works from the category of ecocritical literature is a mistake that cuts in two directions, highlighting both the absence of Black Agrarianism in ecocriticism, and the absence of Children's Literature in ecocriticism.

In this chapter I consider how *The Land* reflects an agrarian worldview, and I explore how that has been complicated by issues of race. I reveal how Taylor crafts a meaningful relationship between her protagonist, Paul, and the land he loves, while showing that Paul's biracial identity complicates his attitudes toward the land. It is important to

recognize that this is an intentionally fostered relationship that also has a spiritual basis; this emphasizes that a genuine relationship with the soil is possible, despite a vexed history with agriculture. Furthermore, Taylor shows farming to be a choice for Paul, not a default. This chapter also argues that agrarian notions of masculinity and femininity, and the labor associated with these gender roles, cannot be read simplistically. Instead, reading these agrarian gender roles through the lens of a racist society that has oppressed men and women alike reveals the inadequacy of understanding gender as a fixed system, even within the relatively traditional framework of agrarianism. Finally, I argue that it is critically important for readers to consider that nostalgia, so heavily used in children's farm novels, is not a driving force in Taylor's representation of early Black Agrarianism. Indeed, Taylor's novel asks us to question a single-minded understanding of the very word nostalgia, since she selectively employs aspects of longing associated with nostalgia, which I argue is a way of fomenting a renewed interest in place for, in Taylor's own words, "future generations" (375). Using Svetlana Boym's framework of "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia, I argue that Taylor works against a nostalgia that presents an idealized version of the past, but nevertheless employs a kind of nostalgia when replanting the figure of the Black Agrarian in the collective memory in order to remind readers of the breadth of experience that is a part of African American history.⁸

There is a mutually constitutive relationship between members of the Logan family and the land they own. In this section I argue that it is imperative to recognize agrarian communities as social systems that have been determined by a specific relationship to the land; it is equally important to recognize how racism has prevented people from being able to have the kind of idealized relationship with the land that New Agrarianism works

to promote. Here I read *The Land* as a narrative that illuminates Ruffin's assertion that "African Americans have a keen knowledge of the ecological implications of social systems" (20); similarly, New Agrarians seek to understand the "ecological implications of social systems," but can fall short when they fail to fully acknowledge how race has dictated the terms of land use and ownership.

While *The Land* is the most recent of Taylor's works, it is chronologically the oldest, taking place shortly after manumission. This novel not only sets the stage for understanding the history of the Logan family land, but it also does important work in terms of shaping model members of agrarian communities, both male and female. Early on in *The Land*, we are given detail about Paul's deep connection with his father's land:

I loved my daddy's land. In the beginning I always thought of it as my land, too. I knew every bit of the place. I knew every rise and knoll, every cave and watering place, every kind of plant and tree. My favorite spots were the pond nestled in the woods and a hillside that overlooked the pasture and my daddy's house. The pond was surrounded by big old pines that allowed splinters of light to peek through, and its waters were filled with fish. The hillside boasted only a few trees, so it was sunny and open, and the pasture below was dotted with cows and horses grazing. On many days I would sit for hours alone at either place just gazing out over the land. (35)

The meditative gaze in this passage seems to foreshadow Paul's later experience when he first sees the land he would later own: "Gazing from the slope where I sat beside the rock, I felt I was sitting where God Himself must have once sat and been pleased with Himself" (159). Taylor uses the extended gaze to highlight Paul's spiritual connection

with the land. It is not love alone that ties Paul to the land, but also a sense that there is something beyond the scope of human understanding pulling Paul to the land. It is no coincidence that this spot later becomes the “praying rock” (350) where Mitchell is buried and Paul and Caroline decide to get married. While early on in the narrative one doesn’t get the sense for Paul Logan as one who works the land, one certainly understands his intimate knowledge of the land and his sense of ownership. Early in his childhood, there is “love” expressed for the land, in addition to a sense of entitlement (“my land”) even though Paul as adult narrator knows that the land was not and never would be his own. Paul’s love for the land is also clearly tied to his love for his father, which was uncomplicated early in his childhood: “...when I was a small boy, there seemed no one like him to me. I’m not ashamed to admit it. In those early days I adored my Daddy” (41). But, Paul’s mother is African American, formerly enslaved by his white, land-owning father, and while his father offered some level of support for Paul’s mother and their children, it was understood that the family land would be passed on to his white sons. But that first uncomplicated connection with the landscape is vital to our understanding of Paul; It is as if Taylor suggests that love of the land, and desire for connection with the land come first, while the practicalities of land ownership follow. In other words, if one foments the desire for land and connectedness first, then figuring out how to bring that somewhat romanticized vision down to earth through acquiring and working the land will eventually follow. In terms of a New Agrarian reading of this novel, it is important to note that the landscape that the child Paul falls in love with is a working landscape, “dotted with cows and horses grazing” (35). Paul doesn’t fall in love with pristine, untouched nature, although the image he falls in love is admittedly

romanticized. He falls in love with domesticated nature and the signs of domesticity (albeit a domesticity from which his race excluded him), noting to himself that his favorite view included “a hillside that overlooked the pasture and my daddy’s house.” Later, when Paul happens upon the land he would later buy, it is tempting to read it as Edenic as well, or at least undomesticated. However, in the midst of the more high-flying descriptors of this parcel of land, Paul walks “into the forest along a cow trail laden with dung” (159), signaling clearly that this is well-used farmland. Certainly, Paul longs to connect with the earth, and the connections he seeks are both spiritual and agricultural. Through these avenues he uses the land to replicate the original relationship he had with his father, before he understands that race divides his family in irrecoverable ways.

When we first meet the novel’s protagonist, Paul, he is “reading beside a creek on [his] daddy’s land” (3), showing the reader his fervent desire to read anything available to him. In Paul’s situation this often led to his being disliked by his peers. When Paul tells the reader that he “was always reading anything [he] could get [his] hands on” he follows up, noting that his reading got him “into more trouble with some of the colored boys” (35). Earlier, we learn how Paul starts to build community with Mitchell, a sharecropper’s son working on Paul’s father’s land, by sharing his ability to “read and write and figure” (16). However, when Paul offers to share these skills with the wider group of sharecropping children he is faced with the complexities of building community and sharing knowledge in a racially charged situation. The children turn down Paul’s offer with good reason; Paul, by using his father’s power as a white landowner and his brothers’ power as white children of a landowner, has previously threatened the safety of the same children he offers to teach (10). One can understand why the children would

not trust him as a teacher: “We got our own schools now, and we wanted t’ learn any of that stuff, we’d be goin’ there. We’d hardly be takin’ any teachin’ from the likes of you. You with yo’ white daddy” (36). Paul is excluded from his peer group because of his whiteness and the privileges that he is afforded, but his peers are not. If we understand agrarian community as something fostered by strong ties both to the land and within the community working the land, it is easy to see how difficult it is to forge such relationships when the power dynamics are so radically perverted by race, the history of slavery, and class-based privilege. Paul cannot hope to create meaningful and trusting bonds within a community that allows some members to own hundreds or thousands of acres, while preventing others from even owning the quarter acre around their home. Without some equality in a community, the ideals of New Agrarianism have little chance to function properly.

Because of his father, Paul is implicated in the power of whiteness. However, it is not only Paul’s father’s whiteness that causes problems for Paul, but his status as a landowner compounds the problem, both with his peers and within himself. Essentially, his love for his father is so strongly tied to his love for the land that the two become inextricable. Paul longs for an uncomplicated relationship with the land he loves, and the white side of his family that he also loves. Look, for example, at this passage early in the text where Paul’s father talks to him about the land:

‘You’re much like me,’ he told me once. ‘When I was a boy, I loved to read and I loved horses. I loved this land too. My granddaddy had gotten it before I was born, back before the turn of the century, when there were plenty of Indians

settled around here. There still were some here when I was a boy, and I got to know a few and they taught me a lot.’ (41)

This passage is interesting in how it positions Edward Logan as seeing himself like his son, and nearly placing Paul in the lineage of male inheritors, but falling just short of doing so. At the same time, Paul points out that the land was not only stolen from Native Americans, but stolen directly from his Native American grandfather: “This land [...] it belonged to [Kanati] first” (42). Without even a nod to the unjust assumption of white ascendancy, Edward says “That’s a fact [...] Maybe that’s where you get part of your love for the land” (42). Land ownership and inheritance happen in this community within a system that is thoroughly racist, classist, and sexist. Edward, being privileged in terms of all three, simply says, “That’s a fact.” The ease of this statement, and the ease with which Edward lays out such “fact[s]” to Paul points to the world of power to which Paul will never have access. On the heels of this conversation, Paul comes to the full realization of how the racist social system in which the agrarian south is rooted will never allow him the entitlement to the land that he sees in his father. Paul’s exclusion from inheritance and privilege with regards to the land speaks is also an exclusion from one side of his family, and one side of himself. As Paul is just shy of twelve his mother won’t allow him to sit with his father’s family at the table when guests are visiting. In anger, he storms out of the house, out of the kitchen where his mother has given him his meal, and looks at the land: “I [...] leaned against a post and looked out across the backyard to my daddy’s forest. I stared at that forest, the forest that had always seemed to be a part of me, and felt alienated from it, from it and everything that was my daddy’s” (51). Here Paul feels “alienated from” something that “had always seemed to be a part” of himself.

If Paul's relationship with the land is coupled with his relationship with his father's family, then his later longing to buy land can also be read as a longing for a time in his childhood before he understood what it meant to have a fractured identity. In his relentless pursuit to buy land, we see Paul urgently attempting to sew together an identity rent by racism.

Private land ownership is one of the basic tenets of New Agrarianism, but as we see in *The Land*, most pathways to land ownership are opened by status and privilege. This circumstance happens to be one of the most confounding challenges for African Americans in a time and place where the humanity and dignity of blacks was held in such low regard as to make their signatures on a legal document worthless unless accompanied by the signature of a white male with some social status.⁹ The very concept of land ownership is a legal one, and blacks had no protection or status under the law during Reconstruction. Watching Paul work against nearly insurmountable odds, from his childhood desire to own land to his ultimate status as a landowner, is like watching an agrarian everyman figure grow from child to adult. While the circumstances of his birth and family prevented him from easily obtaining land, the same circumstances provided him with some advantage when compared with other sharecroppers on his father's land. To wit, the money that ultimately allows Paul to buy the land comes from his mother, who perhaps because of her relationship with a white man (and despite the coercive circumstances that gave her no choice in the matter), had more means than her peers. Paul embodies all the characteristics of the ideal agrarian man in a system where living up to the expectations of one's gender role translates to security and stability for one's family and community. Agrarianism has long been criticized by feminists and eco-

feminists for its adherence to traditional family roles and gendered divisions of labor by which women have been oppressed. In his essay, “Feminism, The Body, and The Machine,” Wendell Berry responds to critics of New Agrarianism by pointing out that the modern industrial system does not play favorites with men or women. He proposes that it is the modern economic system that has created oppression for all people, not just women. Both sexes, he argues, are oppressed by the “specialization, degradation, trivialization, and tyrannization” of the modern economy both by how it treats humanity and how it degrades the earth (*What* 184). His main point is crystallized when he writes, “The problem is not just the exploitation of women by men. A greater problem is that women and men alike are consenting to an economy that is exploiting women and men and everything else” (185). Berry defines all that a modern non-agrarian man lacks: “He does not know what he would do if he lost his job, if the economy failed, if the utility companies failed, if the police went on strike, if the truckers went on strike, if his wife left him, if his children ran away, if he should be found incurably ill” (*Unsettling* 21). Berry points out that the modern man is tied into systems that render him unable to operate outside of an economy of money, modern infrastructure, and conventional gender norms that put him in power. But, as William Major points out, if an ideal agrarian male exists for Berry, he would not simply embody the “rough-and-ready individual who makes his own way in this world,” but he would also act as a nurturer (163).

Interestingly, Paul Logan acts as both the “nurturer” *and* the “rough-and-ready individual who makes his own way in this world.” Early on in *The Land*, Taylor shows a young Paul whose nurturing allows him to connect with horses, even wild ones:

The Appaloosa took [the apple wedge]. I gave him a second piece and he let me pat his forehead. All the while I was talking to him, telling him that I would like to ride him, and that nobody was going to slap him this time. I took the reins, then took the time to walk the Appaloosa around the meadow, talking softly to him and giving him apple wedges. (23)

It is this nurturing black male figure that bell hooks lauds as the kind of southern black agrarian who created a safe space for her as a child growing up in Kentucky:

It was sheer good fortune that I was allowed to walk hand in hand with strong black men who cared for me body and soul, men of the Kentucky backwoods, of the country. Men who would never think of hurting any living thing. These black men were gentle and full of hope. They were men who planted, who hunted, who harvested. They shared their bounty. (42)

This is the ideal agrarian “nurturer,” who, like Paul, is “full of hope.” But Paul is also of the “rough and ready” sort. Long after the scene where he gentles the Appaloosa, the reader learns exactly what Paul would do if all outside systems of support failed him. The rhetorical question Berry poses suggests that the modern man cannot function outside of the modern economy—a circumstance that cripples him and creates a person dependant on systems that degrade the earth and humanity. But, what if, in order to survive, a man could not rely on the infrastructure Berry faults? Taylor answers that question in Paul Logan, whose race excludes him from integrating into such systems. Indeed, Paul loses his livelihood when he chooses to ride another gambler’s horse against his father’s will; the economy, such as it is in the south at the time, has indeed failed; for a black man at the time the police have essentially gone on strike, or worse, are set on defending

injustices; the infrastructure that is in place for white business owners and farmers is often inaccessible for blacks; the woman Paul hopes to marry is in love with his best friend. Again and again, Paul must build a life for himself even when he lacks nearly every kind of support. While there is strong support within the African American community in their region¹⁰, it is clear that in order for the smooth functioning of a true agrarian community there needs to be something beyond that. Eric Freyfogle offers a definition of the meaning of community for agrarians: “Despite their strong sense of individual responsibility, agrarians view humans chiefly as social beings [...] People thrive best when knitted into responsible community structures” (xxix). From this series of injustices Paul must become one who works outside the modern economy, but he is able to become “knitted into responsible community structures” in a modest way with the interracial community he builds as he works toward owning his land. Ultimately, the two hundred acres that Paul buys is the result of enduring interracial ties. Paul’s white brother, Robert, hand-delivers the necessary money for the purchase (money from Paul’s mother who sold back her own ten acres to Paul’s father, as well as money from Cassie). In order to avoid “play[ing] the fool” again and trusting a contract with a white man, Paul enlists the help of a trustworthy white lawyer, Charles Jamison, who works on Paul’s behalf to ensure his legal right to the land will “hold” (356-357). In moments like this we see Paul working toward agrarian community despite color lines that have created a profoundly dysfunctional agrarian system.

Paul doesn’t fall into farming because he has no other choices. In fact, compared with any other African American in *The Land*, Paul holds a position of privilege unavailable to his peers because he is the biracial son of a white landowner who chose to support and

educate his biracial children. Because his father apprenticed him to a carpenter, is clear that Paul would have been able to live as an expert craftsman in wood. A woman for whom he works as a young man also encourages him to go into the professions, which were open to him largely due to the education he received at home as a child from his father and white siblings: “Why, you could go to one of the colored schools here in Mississippi or even north to study. You could become one of the great educators to your people, or even a lawyer or doctor to them [...] You’ve already got the foundation and you’re certainly bright enough. You could do it easy” (142). Perhaps the key word here is “easy.” For although it certainly wouldn’t be easy by most measures for an African American to become a professional in the late 1800s, to buy a large and desirable tract of land from a white landowner would be an equal, if not greater challenge. Nevertheless, many African Americans did become land owners, suggesting that while Paul may be exemplary, people with ambition to own land were sometimes able to find a way to do so. Smith explains that:

Most freedmen focused on acquiring land in the South. By 1910, southern blacks had acquired about 15 million acres of land, and nearly 17% of southern farm owners were black. This number, small as it is, represents an impressive achievement, given the barriers facing black farmers. Freedmen typically had little capital to begin with and limited access to legal services or credit. White landowners were often reluctant to sell to blacks. Faced with legal disabilities and a social climate infused with racism, buying and holding property was a constant challenge. (Smith, *African* 72)

Smith is writing about a time in our nation's history, before the Great Migration was underway, when land ownership and farming land was thought of as perhaps the most admirable and attainable dream for rural southern African Americans. Perhaps Paul is written as a kind of Black Agrarian archetype: a symbol of the vision for solidarity among rural African Americans at the time who were seeking their security through land ownership. While Taylor's chronologically later books take readers through the persecution of Jim Crow and hint at the Great Migration that was already underway, here we see an earlier vision for African Americans, one which was so widely accepted and promoted that both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois saw value in it.¹¹

In choosing to pursue land ownership over a trade or profession, Paul is also choosing a rural life over an urban life, a pattern that was reversed once the Great Migration was underway. Here, Taylor is showing us something important about Black Agrarian culture: that it was not always a default. Land ownership, despite the problematic relationship between agriculture and slavery, was keenly sought after, suggesting that a relationship with the soil does not have to be rejected *de facto* based on a fraught history. But the vast majority of the farming families in Taylor's novel are sharecroppers, whose relationship to farming was deeply scarred by class and race, whose economic position prevented them from being able to practice true agrarianism, and whose scant educational opportunity typically prevented them from being able to enter other trades or professions. For although Black Agrarianism (that is, farmers who own and work the land with attention to soil fertility) was not a default, sharecropping certainly was.¹² Paul decisively rejects any path that doesn't lead him to land ownership:

What I wanted was land. I wanted land like my daddy's. In a way, I suppose, I was driven by the thought of having land of my own. In my early years, before I truly realized my two worlds, I had figured that I'd always live on my daddy's land, that my daddy's land would be mine and I would always be a part of it.

When I discovered that wouldn't be, I created my own land in my mind. I knew that land was what I had to have. (142)

It is notable to see how Taylor uses language to construct the relationship between Paul and the land. Paul as a youngster thought he would always be "part of" the land, and as he grows and realizes that wouldn't be so, he "created [his] own land in [his] mind." In both of these instances the phrasing is intimate and all-encompassing; the land and the person are of a piece. It is as if Paul sees himself as imbedded in the land, or the land imbedded in him. Indeed, Paul continues to associate land ownership with his father and the ease with which his father was able to move in the community. His dream for land is tied to trying to reunite his "two worlds," and entering the professions would not have satisfied that longing. When Paul rejects the suggestion that he should become a doctor, lawyer, or educator, he also echoes Frederick Douglass's imperative: "Go to farming. Be tillers of the soil.... Our cities are overrun with menial laborers, while the country is eloquently pleading the hand of industry to till her soil, and reap the reward of honest labor" (212). While attending college and entering the professions is not exactly succumbing to the "menial laborers" of the cities, it nevertheless does create a situation Douglass warns against, where African Americans are "universally and completely dependent upon white men for the necessities of life" (212). The notion that a land owner could provide the basic sustenance for his family if all other systems fail is not simply a

worst-case-scenario vision. The political disempowerment and lack of the most basic legal and civil rights in the late 1800s gave African Americans good reason to question the reliability of any opportunity that was part of the oppressive political structure at the time.

When Paul finally happens upon the land that he wants for his own, he not only feels it viscerally, but spiritually as well: “A fallen tree lay beside the pond, and I sat upon it as the morning light slit through the trees and shown everything golden. For the first time since I’d left my daddy’s land, my heart soared, higher than any mountain I’d ever imagined, up to God’s own perfect clouds, and I felt a peace come over me”(159). This intimacy with the land is perhaps the most defining characteristic of the true agrarian, who sees the land as an extension of personal, spiritual, and communal health. In Paul’s case, I would argue that is also an extension of the agrarian imperative to care for land that will be in the family for generations. While Paul is not legally allowed to be the heir to his father’s property, obtaining property to pass on to his future children shows his agrarian longing to pass on something of his “daddy’s land” (even if it is just a spiritual connection) to his children. bell hooks, in *Belonging: a culture of place*, writes about the great agrarian and educator, George Washington Carver, pointing out that his relationship with the land was spiritual:

To Carver, maintaining a caring relationship to the earth, to nature, was a means to have union with the divine. Time and time again he told listeners: “Nothing is more beautiful than the woods before sunrise. At no other time have I so sharp an understanding of what God means to do with me.” This spiritual bond with the earth is one of the many counter hegemonic beliefs that sustained exploited and

oppressed black folks during the years of slavery and reconstruction. Indeed, experiencing the divine through union with nature was a way to transcend the imposed belief that skin color and race was the most important aspect of one's identity. (62)

In Paul's moment when his "heart soared ... up to God's own perfect clouds" and he "felt a peace come over" him, we glimpse for a moment Paul transcending the world where he feels divided by his multi-racial identity in an era of brutal racism. As hooks suggests, an intense relationship with the earth can create a "counter hegemon[y]." In the case of Paul, this could mean that instead of allowing the dominant white supremacist culture to define and limit him, he instead allows a primal bond with the earth to supersede the power structures created by humans. Paul's fervent desire for land and for a long-term, multi-generational relationship with that land reverses many of the attempts by the white supremacist culture to take land away from him.

If Mildred Taylor sets up Paul Logan as the ideal agrarian man, then it is abundantly clear that Caroline Perry enters the narrative as the ideal agrarian woman, who says of herself, "I been plowin' and hoein' since I could walk, so I ain't hardly afraid of no plow"(276). Because this is a first-person narrative, we as readers are not privy to Caroline's thoughts. If Caroline feels a spiritual intimacy with the land we are not told. Instead we meet Caroline through a series of anecdotes that shape our understanding of her as a generous, strong-willed, temperamental, artistic, devoted, beautiful young woman. Is it simply tiresome, predictable, and anti-feminist that when Caroline marries Mitchell and arrives on the land that she "take[s] over all the household chores," and that the "most welcome change ... was in [the] meals" (273)? I argue that is not so, and to

dismiss Caroline's work when it doesn't conform to liberated womanhood in the modern economy is to misunderstand the common humanity of men and women in the agrarian economy. It is both Caroline's work and also the support of her family that gives the new household healthier eating:

After Caroline's arrival there was no longer just grits with a cup of hot chicory for our breakfast, but also eggs, crusty biscuits and sausages, gravy and preserves, and fresh milk. It was that way from then on, for Caroline had brought with her a store of her mama's preserves and canning, as well as her daddy's meats from their smokehouse. She had also brought a rooster and two laying hens, two piglets and a milking cow. They were all presents from her family to her and Mitchell.

(273)

On the one hand, this kind of conventional gendered system is open to the criticism that structures of domesticity are oppressive to women. On the other hand, Caroline's contributions to the health of the whole family unit are as important as Mitchell's or Paul's, none of whom are leaving the land to bring home a paycheck at that time. For bell hooks, the place of women in rural, southern African American families is a powerful one:

More often than not black females worked alongside farming black men, sometimes working in the fields (there was no money for hiring workers) but in most times creating homeplace. In my grandmother's kitchen, soap was made, butter was churned, animals were skinned, crops were canned. Meat hung from the hooks in the dark pantry and potatoes were stored in baskets. Growing up, this

dark place held the fruits of hard work and positive labor. It was the symbol of self-determination and survival. (42-43)

hooks's salient point is that the work of her grandmother, and by extension so many other rural black women, gives women power to "survive" and power for the family to engage in "self-determination" (43).¹³

Paul's relationship with the land is characterized as a spiritual one, but Caroline, in contrast, is prominently tied to the pragmatic. One might argue that Taylor is showcasing the variety of ways that African Americans connected with the land during that time. Perhaps Paul's spiritual connection is meant to evoke a George Washington Carver-esque relationship with the landscape, where the world that teems with life, possibility, and beauty is an outward manifestation of God's presence and mystery. If that is the case, then, Caroline, by contrast, might evoke a different mode of connecting with the earth for African Americans, such as the one championed by Booker T. Washington, who promoted skilled labor and knowledge of how to eek out a solid living by working with the land. Alternatively, Taylor may be suggesting something about a mode of African American female identity. In *Gender and Jim Crow*, Glenda Gilmore writes that,

Educated black women sought to establish partnerships that maximized the potential and efficiency of both members, and they tended to do that by avoiding hierarchical ideas of male dominance and female subordination. Men and women were different, but they had complementary work to do; once trained for that work, women were anxious to establish domestic relationships that allowed them to get on with the job. (44)

While Caroline has not had the opportunity to be formally “educated,” she has certainly received an education from her parents and community that serves her well in her ability to run a household, which, incidentally, many higher education programs for women of the time did. The skills and knowledge Caroline uses when she and Mitchell are on “the forty” are the inheritance of both her mother and father. In addition to the culinary and gardening skills likely passed down through her mother, Caroline fells the trees when Mitchell has fever and dysentery, and raises hogs for sale—both traditionally male jobs that suggest she also carries out the legacy of her father. This supports Gilmore’s suggestion that a pragmatic approach to one’s work and domestic partnership was of great value to African American women at the time. Caroline’s contributions are tied more to the practical than to a strict gender role. Taylor’s choice to characterize Caroline in this way says something about a specific mode of femininity at play, one “springing from slavery, poverty, religion, and black women’s daily contact with men rather than distance from them” (Gilmore 44). While it is true that Paul is afforded a romantic attachment to the land, and Caroline is the one who plows the land and makes the butter, Caroline’s characterization may be a part of a historically relevant way of creating successful domestic relationships “in a society that rested on the subordination of black men as well as black women” (44).

There is a clear connection between freedom and the self-sufficiency afforded to families who had the ability to create products like soap and butter, and store foods through preserving and canning, but in addition, the aesthetic attention to a home is of great theoretical importance to the creation of a positive home life for African Americans after the Civil War. It is not immediately evident in Taylor’s novel that Caroline’s

mother, Rachel Perry, is carrying out an important tenet of black uplift by gardening. But her gardens certainly make a strong impression on Paul when he visits the Perry home for the first time:

[Sam Perry] went into the house and I remained on the pathway taking in the beauty of the garden. The flowers were splendid, planted knowingly to bring out the best of each. The tallest were in back, the most delicate, the smallest in front, and there was a pattern to them, with rows of purples and reds and oranges and yellows arranged in intricate designs. Each side of the flower yard was bordered neatly with stones. The garden made the little shack look almost grand. An artist had been at work there. (197)

Paul is clearly impressed by Rachel's garden. Its beauty and her care with it set the tone for what he finds inside around the dinner table: a large, happy family eating a large, delicious meal. The scene is resplendent with traditional homemaking skills. Gardening in particular was hailed by both W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as being a key element in fostering a sense of pride and beauty in black homes across the country. Du Bois was clear in believing that the "physical environment" was to be taken into account in understanding the social condition of a people (*Philadelphia* 5). Du Bois argued that "...it is manifest that the sense of harmony and beauty receives its first training at home. It is the child that first grasps, in the cradle and as it toddles about, the sense of the lovely and the unlovely. At best the Negro home is bare and lonely, and at worse, ugly and repelling" (*Writings* 1:120). While this is not a specific injunction to garden, Du Bois suggests that it is important to beautify the home and make it "lovely." In *Working With the Hands*, Washington devotes a chapter to "Outdoor Work for

Women” and outlines in some detail the semester-by-semester goals, including Horticulture, Floriculture and Landscape Gardening, and Market Gardening during each semester. Having traveled to observe schools in England and seen that the same young women who spent mornings in classrooms and labs spent afternoons “at work in the field with the hoe or rake, planting vegetable seeds, pruning fruit trees or learning to raise poultry and bees and how to care for the dairy,” he concluded that “if this kind of hand-training is necessary for a people who have back of them centuries of English wealth and culture, it is tenfold more needful for a people who are in the condition of my race at the South” (109). Evidently, the push toward domestic floriculture would have been encouraged through two different thinkers: Du Bois suggesting the pleasant environment created by the garden has an elevating effect on those living in the home, while Washington suggesting that the gardener benefits from the planning and execution of the flower bed, and views it as an opportunity to participate in the aesthetic values of middle-class culture.¹⁴ Thus, the garden can serve a spiritual purpose, by elevating the soul in the same way Paul’s soul is elevated on the land he buys, but also a community purpose, where the flower garden is a visible signal to neighbors and passers by that the occupants are participants in larger cultural notions of beauty. Rachel’s garden, then, is a powerful symbol of the Perry family’s participation in a movement for African American families to re-vision their role in society. And while the general cult of domesticity from which ideas of domesticity and middle-class aesthetic value flow has been rightly criticized for its stifling effect on women, these criticisms stem largely from the plights of middle and upper class women whose societal position put their domestic lives in starker contrast to

their male counterparts than what might have been seen in African American families in the rural south.

Gardening, and knowing how to grow things is not only a matter of improving the domestic aesthetic. A key skill in the agrarian community is being able to successfully cultivate plants, whether flowers, vegetables, or cotton. Caroline is aware of the growing cycles in a way that neither Paul nor Mitchell appear to be, making her a more knowledgeable cultivator than either one. While Paul and Mitchell have used their labor to clear land, earn money, train and sell horses, and do carpentry, they have not shown much in the way of planting and harvesting ability. This is particularly notable for Paul, who has made it clear that his lifelong ambition is to farm the land. From the start, Caroline has been the primary farmer of the land. Whereas Paul relied on store-bought rice and wild greens, Caroline is an active cultivator, breaking the ground for a large garden herself: "She asked for no help from us" (279). She shows herself to be focused on planting and knowledgeable enough to know what needs to happen when. When Mitchell and Paul don't want to stop cutting the trees in order to help de-stump land for a crop, Mitchell tries to dismiss Caroline when she says that if they wait too long they are going to be "too late to plant anything" by saying "Well, woman, what you gonna plant? It's here late summer already." Caroline, again, shows herself to be a true farmer, replying with assurance: "Can get us in some collards and spinach and cabbage. Maybe some sugar peas too. I got seed from home" (276). Again, it is not only that Caroline has the know-how to farm the land, but she has the community connection through her family's seed-saving.

While it is certainly true that Caroline takes on roles traditionally given to women, it does not follow that she is oppressed by that circumstance. On the parcel of land that they are working, it turns out that she is the least oppressed since her work cannot be taken away from her; Paul and Mitchell's work is ultimately stolen from them when Filmore Granger (the owner of the land they work, and the man with whom they have a "contract") reneges on his promise to turn over the land to the men once they cleared it for him. In fact, when Paul tells Caroline that Granger went back on the promise and "decided to keep" the land, Caroline says "Well, one thing I know too. He ain't getting' my garden" (344). Before they leave the land, "Caroline figured to pick her garden clean and preserve every single vegetable that wouldn't keep" (345), defying Filmore Granger who laid claim to the crops in the ground as well. In some ways, because she is doing the domestic work that is largely outside the economy and the world of cutting and selling logs and buying land (a world that is completely under white control at the time), her work is able to be saved. In a limited capacity, Caroline's work with her garden does bring home some money, as well: "Caroline's field of vegetables grew well, and she ... made several trips to the market in Strawberry to sell them. The vegetables made a small crop and we didn't get much for them, but the money helped pay Tom Bee. We put the remainder of money aside for next year's seed" (284-285). Caroline's work is unquestionably useful on "the forty." Her work contributes to the interwoven web of labor that creates a functioning and balanced homestead.

While Caroline's work is clearly valued in the context of this novel and in the context of an agrarian community in the late 1800s, what does her status as a heroine in a twenty-first century novel mean for the modern reader? It is not enough to know that Caroline is

strong-willed and smart. However, in *The Land*, Caroline also has agency. She will not be told where to go and what to do because she is a woman. We see this most clearly when her husband Mitchell is murdered, and she is left on “the forty” with Paul, a bachelor. Caroline is pregnant, widowed, and Paul plans to help move her back to her family, telling her, “There’s no home here,” and “No, you can’t stay” (309). Paul’s position is clear: “A man and a woman not married here on the same place, it just wouldn’t be right” (310). Caroline won’t be told what to do, simply because she is a woman and Paul is a man. Caroline not only recognizes that she and her child have legal claim to half of the land (this, of course, before the land is stolen back by Filmore Granger), but she also recognizes that she is a necessary worker—that the homestead, as it were, would disintegrate if she left her work undone. She’s not leaving the land, and explains this to Paul: “I’m gonna work right ‘longside you now, Paul-Edward, jus’ like Mitchell done, ‘til this land be truly ours. I done promised Mitchell. ‘Sides how was you plannin’ on doin’ all this work by yo’self?” (310). Caroline chooses what to do with her life, regardless of the societal expectation that an unmarried woman cannot live with a man who is not her relative. Paul persists in wanting Caroline to leave, and when it is clear that she won’t, he insists that they get married so he can fulfill his promise to Mitchell to take care of her. Caroline won’t be coerced into a marriage and tells him so: “Well, I loved Mitchell and I’m carryin’ his child but he can’t tell me what t’ do from the grave. Ain’t nobody gotta take care of me, Paul-Edward Logan, and Mitchell can’t make me marry you or nobody else” (317). Caroline’s father tries to persuade her to leave as well, but she absolutely refuses to allow anyone else to control her marriage choices. She is firmly resolved, saying “Papa, you and Mama, y’all talked me into waitin’ near a year ‘fore marryin’

Mitchell. But this time nobody talkin' me into nothin', not even you, Papa. I loves you, Papa, and I respects you and what you say, but my mind's made up 'bout this thing" (321). Caroline knows her value and she knows her rights. She is willing to defy those she loves and respects in order to claim both. It's not coincidental that Rachel agrees with her daughter on this point: "I ain't tried t' get her t' leave 'cause I agrees wit' her. This here's her place now. She needs t' keep it. She needs t' work it. She needs t' be on it. I wants her t' have somethin' of her own" (323). Rachel and Caroline join forces to vocally disavow oppressive, heteropatriarchal values that attempt to thwart women's independent choices by dictating that women must be part of a man's household (in this case with Paul as the husband or Sam as the father) in order to have a claim to a home. This is a particularly important point considering the oppressive weight of the patriarchy felt by Paul, who spends the entire novel trying to obtain what his "daddy" was given simply by being born as a white male in a land owning family.

When Caroline does finally marry Paul, she does so on her own terms, and the proposal she accepts is also something of a work contract: "So, pretty Caroline, how would you like to work this fine piece of earth with me? How would you like to be my wife so we can work this land together?" (361). Paul's proposal does not suggest she is a person who needs to be taken care of. Instead it acknowledges that she is a partner in creating a livelihood. Caroline's answer to the proposal is simple on the surface: she accepts. However, Taylor's word choice complicates any attempt to categorize Caroline's gender role. She says, "Ya know, I always felt safe with Mitchell, just like I felt when I was with my daddy. Safe, like long as I was with them, nothing bad would ever happen I couldn't see through and I'd be happy [...] I feel the same with you" (361). Thus, while it

is clear that Caroline wants to be on equal footing with her spouse, she also appears to take comfort in using the trope of female vulnerability in her acceptance. This vision of strong-willed Caroline looking for a man who will keep her feeling “safe” as her father did is very understandable, considering the especially vulnerable position of African American women during that time. Furthermore, the safety Caroline espouses does not protect her from all harm, but protects her psyche: “nothing bad would ever happen *that I couldn’t see through* and I’d be happy” (361 emphasis mine). Caroline is referring to a person who will reliably offer her psychological strength and support. This acceptance represents a fine line that Taylor manages throughout her historical fiction: the line between nostalgia and lived reality. Caroline seems to long for some kind of archetypal male figure who might keep her safe from danger, but that longing feeling for utter safety is tempered by recognizing its impossibility and hoping instead to derive spiritual strength from the person she loves.

The Land certainly lays out the gendered framework within which Paul and Caroline operate in order to create a life on the land. One wonders how authors who write about a community where gender proscriptively determines one’s life can do so without didactic judgment or retrograde nostalgia. The charge of nostalgia is often levied against both agrarians and children’s literature authors. William Major notes that “Today, farmers, farming, and rural life enjoy something of an ideological echo which says that they are intrinsically moral, simple, and good—fertilizer for a vibrant republic. We find ourselves squarely within the realms of myth and nostalgia” (19). The very same words “moral, simple, and good” have been used to refer to (or dismiss) Children’s Literature. In Chapter Two, I discussed Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Farmer Boy* (and others in the *Little*

House series) in terms of both Wilder's personal nostalgia for the past, and the cultural nostalgia for a lost agrarian past such as Major suggests is typical when people think about our farming past. With only a few word changes, Major's observation about nostalgia over farms, farming and rural life sound remarkably like what one might say about childhood and children's literature. Nostalgia can be productive; as I've discussed in Chapters Two and Three with Wilder's novels, it can provide insights into both the author's own time period and the earlier time period about which she has written. Nostalgia also contributes to our cultural colonization of childhood as a time of "innocence" and ingenuousness.

In writing about nostalgia for farm life, Major explains that "Nostalgia is the enemy of history, for it blinds us [...] from understanding and appreciating the material conditions of life—never the land of milk and honey of our imaginings" (20). Naturally, this line of reasoning leads directly to a discussion of the oppression of African Americans in the United States, which poses a significant challenge to anyone nostalgic for the agrarian past in our country. Quoting bell hooks, Major observes that:

African Americans fled life in the American South in a massive movement of people in the second decade of the twentieth century, and who can blame them? So, is bell hooks—not known for sentimentalism—waxing nostalgic when in "Touching the Earth" she suggests that "Living close to nature, black folks were able to cultivate a spirit of wonder and reverence for life. Growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life-affirming" (53)? Her "Why I am not going to buy a computer" essay must be put into the larger theme of healing, which is very much

of the moment and pertinent to agrarian writing. If African Americans were at one time “living close to nature” and profiting from this relationship—a questionable account to be sure—they also understood that it was worth giving up. That there might be other costs when people left the land (land they often did not own) can only be calculated in retrospect. (21)

The question Major raises in this passage, whether one can be nostalgic for an agrarian past if you, your family, or your people were oppressed during that past is a pertinent one. Certainly any writer can wax nostalgic about any era of history, since memory is not a recorder of fact but a highlighter of emotional moments. It is notable, though, that Taylor’s books about children and farming are fairly un-nostalgic, and it is this relative lack of nostalgia for the past that sets her novels apart from other farm novels for children. If nostalgia asks one to look back longingly at a lost past, Taylor’s books do the opposite: they look at the past as a time of terror and oppression. While they do, at times, suggest that the way out of the oppression is through an authentic relationship with the land, they fall short of being nostalgic for that relationship because the land itself is a contested space on both a literal and figurative level. Literally, the question of legal ownership arises repeatedly because the land is a space shaped by a racist and classist legal system, and figuratively because the land of the American South has been both stolen from Native people and labored on by enslaved people, and as such is haunted by a past that precludes an idealized relationship with the land. Taylor is unambiguous about the past being a place of loss and brutal inequality, and yet, there are moments where there *is* a longing for what has been lost. Here we see a kind of cognitive dissonance play out in the novel itself—the brutality of the past coexists with an attempt at an authentic

and fulfilling relationship with the land—the reader is invited to experience this ambivalence.

Part of this ambivalence is the ability to play with the idea of nostalgia, not as an attempt to obviate the present or future, but as a way of valuing and validating elements of family history and connectedness to place. Perhaps it is the term nostalgia that is problematic in this context. Is nostalgia a fixed concept? Or might the concept of nostalgia play with the elusive natures of memory, yearning, and historical fact? Indeed, nostalgia theorist Svetlana Boym rejects a simplistic approach to the term nostalgia; her nuanced approach explores (among other things) two different types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, that have different functions in the formation of culture. Boym writes:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as a truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (xviii)

The two kinds of nostalgia are here treated as separate concepts: one about restoring a time that has passed, and one about exploring the heteroglossia¹⁵ implicit in history and narrative. Taylor's works recognize that which is undesirable about the "reconstruction of the lost home" associated with restorative nostalgia (xviii). Thus, when William Major calls into question whether bell hooks could be waxing nostalgic in her writings about

agrarianism, and when earlier I declared that Taylor's works are "decidedly un-nostalgic," I believe we are writing about "restorative nostalgia." Certainly in common usage, the term encompasses "a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment" and "is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay" while remaining "eternally young" (Boym 49). This is what we reject when we write about the near impossibility of nostalgia for a time of oppression, as is the case with much of African-American children's literature that takes place in the past.

Yet, Boym's concept of "reflective nostalgia" allows one to revel in the pleasures of nostalgia, without being mired in regression. Reflective nostalgia admits to its own selectivity in memories, and does not attempt to pin memory and history to a board like a butterfly under glass. Importantly, reflective nostalgia is about "individual and cultural memory" (49). The dedication to *The Land* reads, "To my family, past, present, and future, and to the memory of my beloved father, the storyteller, for without his words, my words would not have been," alerting the reader to the personal nature of the novel to follow. In the author's note at the end of the novel, Taylor rounds out her dedication by offering some detail both about her family's past stories about the land they held (and continue to hold) in Mississippi, as well as the land Taylor herself has purchased in Colorado (371-375). Taylor writes:

Neither the preservation of the family land in Mississippi nor gaining the land in the Rocky Mountains would have been possible without the family values and teachings passed on from generation to generation. It was my great-grandparents who left my family this legacy, and my grandparents, my father, aunts and uncles,

and other family members who passed it on to my generation. Now my generation is passing it on to the next, and they in turn will do the same. (375)

In spanning generations before and after her own, Taylor expands and looks into the past and the future. Nostalgia is often considered a one-way longing, but this is not the case for Taylor. Boym explains: “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi). This concept is fantastically important when considering the role of nostalgia in African American Agrarian literature. The moments of nostalgia in Taylor’s book suggest an alternative narrative to the notion that African Americans’ relationship with the earth is “moot and mute” (Ruffin 53). Nostalgia acts proscriptively in this context to assert that the stories of the past can help shape cultural identity of the future, particularly when such stories have not been voiced in dominant culture.

It is too dismissive of the term “nostalgia” to say that Taylor’s work is not nostalgic—that seems to oversimplify. So, too, it is not entirely accurate to say that Taylor works only in “reflective nostalgia.” In some of her moments of nostalgia, Taylor earnestly attempts to recreate the archetypal Black Agrarian family before the Great Migration. This is not “prelapsarian,” nor could it be considering its historical situation, yet, as “restorative nostalgia,” it “takes itself dead seriously” (Boym 49). This calls for a renewed examination of how Children’s Literature scholars have used the term nostalgic as if works “are” or “are not,” perhaps without confronting the complexity of the word itself. Because of its multivalent meanings, such as we see in a book like *The Land*, Boym is right to assert that “Nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence”

(xvii). *The Land*, and some of Taylor's other novels do the work of nostalgia, which is "about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (Boym xvi).

In writing the stories of her family, Taylor recreates her own past while creating a cultural artifact that contributes meaningfully to both the ecoliterary landscape and the world of Children's Literature. What her works point to is perhaps a time when New Agrarians rightfully claim all their heirs—both the Twelve Southerners and the Black Agrarians—whose reasons for rising and falling as movements are certainly tied to race, class, privilege, and civil rights, but moreover they are both tied to the same soil. As New Agrarianism evolves as a theoretical framework, there will be continued opportunities to expand our understanding of its roots and its future growth. Taylor's novel *The Land* works in both directions.

5. *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea*: Female Identity and Agrarianism

In each of the preceding chapters the social structure of New Agrarianism has been heteropatriarchal. That is, the premise of a society led by the family patriarch has dominated depictions of agrarian life. The unwritten suggestion in my work to this point, of course, is that agrarian life is predicated on the legal and social primacy of a heteropatriarchal family and society. While I have argued for a reevaluation of women's value *within* this system, it is crucial to also consider the problematic nature of the system itself, and to ask how agrarianism reinforces the structures of heteropatriarchy when education becomes available to a broader range of the population. L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea* are works for children that resist the heteropatriarchal ideal (that men typically inherit property, but women typically must marry to obtain property) that drives much of agrarian literature. While these novels take place within an agrarian community, there is an aversion to traditional agrarianism, particularly to the idea of marrying a farmer. Not only is there a repeated theme of delayed marriages, as Marah Gubar discusses in "'Where is the Boy?': The Pleasures of Postponement in *Anne of Green Gables*," but there is also clear movement away from glorifying the work of farm life. Instead of descriptions of laboring on the farm, Montgomery emphasizes the transformative power of the pastoral landscape. Unlike Laura Ingalls Wilder and Mildred Taylor, Montgomery embraces the pastoral and intentionally romanticizes the landscape.¹ This is an important distinction, as it signals to the reader that Montgomery herself does not glorify farm labor, and by understanding an author's own attitudes toward farm life we can better understand how she constructs

childhood in her fiction. In this chapter I argue that two driving themes in Montgomery's work—romanticizing the landscape and delaying marriage—are closely connected to one another. This connection, I argue, can be best understood by considering Montgomery's deep personal objection to traditional agrarian family structures along with her concurrent desire to nevertheless embrace the romance of such a life. Montgomery's works show that New Agrarian thought can add a new layer of understanding to classic children's novels, even with authors who are not writing primarily about the workings of farm life, indeed, even with authors who may have clearly objected to some of the tenets of New Agrarianism. While in other chapters, I have focused on Georgic works, in this final chapter I turn to the Pastoral. Montgomery's work here is not nostalgic—she does not long for a lost time or place—instead, she romanticizes rural life without necessitating that it be part of an earlier time period. The distinction being that the nostalgic clearly idealizes the past, but Montgomery shows that imagination has the potential to idealize the present. Additionally, Montgomery's work offers readers an opportunity to see rural community that is not encased by the nuclear family structure that is such a strong presence in Wilder and Taylor.

Montgomery employs the pastoral at a key moment when the old agrarian community structure was failing to keep communities together, and with *Anne of Green Gables* offers empowering alternatives to traditional agrarian womanhood without denigrating the roles of agrarian women. Montgomery suggests that the traditional family structure need not be the only viable way to have a household in rural Prince Edward Island, and she creates functioning rural households without male “heads.” Marah Gubar's observations about the postponement of heterosexual union in the *Anne* series suggest that Wendell Berry's

philosophy of the relationship between marriage and agriculture can reveal new ways to understand Montgomery's apparent aversion to both. It is in this moment when we see New Agrarian theory offering new avenues into answering some of the perennially interesting questions about Montgomery's classic children's novels. In the case of *Anne of Green Gables*, a New Agrarian interpretation both adds another perspective to feminist critiques of Anne's choice to stay at Green Gables, and reinterprets the meaning behind what Gubar has called the "Pleasures of Postponement" with regards to marriage in *Anne of Avonlea*. Wendell Berry's observations about the problem of marriage outside agrarian community can frame Montgomery's distaste for agrarianism and marriage. Using New Agrarianism as a theoretical framework can be constructive even when an author or text might diverge from the major tenets of New Agrarian thought.

The Agrarian Woman and the Pastoral

To read *Anne of Green Gables* as a narrative that plays up the pastoral and bucolic nature of life on a farm is not simply outdoorsy romanticism, but rather, reflects a particular moment in Canadian history when the rural exodus threatened rural life. In using the pleasures of a rural landscape to foster a desire to stay on the farm, Montgomery is in good company with religious leaders like John MacDougall and governmental leaders like James W. Robertson, who worked with the Commission of Conservation in Canada (Brown xiv). The pastoral ideal that is popular as Montgomery publishes her first novel appears not to be simply a matter of appreciating natural beauty, but a matter of national importance and perhaps the only concept that could save rural Canada.

While Montgomery scholars are certainly aware that the agrarian context informs *Anne of Green Gables*, and *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables* (Barry, Doody, and Jones 1997) pays particular attention to the historical, cultural, and geographical context, there has been no full-length study specifically addressing changes in rural life and *Anne of Green Gables*. Janice Fiamengo explores the mutually constitutive relationship between setting in *Anne of Green Gables* and P.E.I. tourist literature of the time, arguing that joy in the natural world celebrates a “past time when authentic relationships with the land were possible” (238). Significantly, Fiamengo connects Anne’s “imaginative ownership of the land” (234) with a “celebrat[ion] of Canada as a place worthy of poetic language” (235). James DeJonge also considers P.E.I. tourism and “encourages a broad appreciation” of the “cultural landscapes,” focusing mainly on Cavendish and the physical preservation associated with Green Gables (253). He points out that “fields . . . that remain in agricultural use add to the site’s peaceful, secluded atmosphere” (262). DeJonge’s description of the “ruins” of farm buildings indeed suggests the rural exodus happening in 1908. Like Elizabeth Epperly, who argues that Montgomery’s “descriptive passages” are “not just vivid ornaments to the narrative,” but “dramatize Anne’s quest for identity and home” (351), I argue that Anne’s pastoral imagination has specific transformative meaning in the novel. Namely, by employing the pastoral and evoking nostalgia for rural living, Montgomery fosters a love of rural life at a crucial time in Canadian history.

Canada’s rural areas, like Montgomery’s own Cavendish, were in crisis at the turn of the century, as people increasingly left farms for education and employment in larger towns and cities. In 1913, John MacDougall published *Rural Life in Canada*, a collection

of lectures on the problems of rural life in a changing economy. Although *Anne of Green Gables* was published before MacDougall's lectures, the lectures are valuable because they offer a perspective on the social problems associated with the shift away from an agrarian economy, a shift Montgomery experienced first-hand in her lifetime. One source for MacDougall's lectures was the famous 1909 report of the Country Life Commission in the United States (Brown xii), which offered a picture of the changes in rural life over the course of a few decades.² The underlying goal of MacDougall's study was to solve rural social problems through ministry.³ In the process, however, he explains that the changing economy of turn-of-the-century rural Canada created problems for small farming communities.⁴ His study is relevant because it captures what may be hard for modern readers and scholars to re-imagine: the widespread public perception of what the changes in rural life meant for Canadians at the time. Perhaps because she is a rural Canadian herself, Montgomery appears to have a marked interest in the preservation of such communities in *Anne of Green Gables*. Many of the concerns MacDougall makes explicit in his lectures can help Montgomery scholars and readers understand the perceived and real problems within rural communities around 1908.

The first chapter of MacDougall's work is entitled "Rural Depletion" (of population, not soil), and he notes that in the decade of 1891–1901, Prince Edward Island had a rural population loss of 5.8%, against an urban gain of 4.7% (that is, people left the country for the town or city). In some counties he notes that the displacement is more severe, with rural townships in King's and Queen's counties losing 36 and 37% (30, 27). Montgomery would have witnessed this loss firsthand in her late teens and twenties. MacDougall notes that "girls are even more unsatisfied than are the boys, and are leaving

in larger numbers,” and, alluding to Dora Sigerson Shorter’s poem, asks “Have all our women the vagrant heart?” (39, 40). Immediately MacDougall answers this question with an emphatic “we know they have not,” and spends subsequent chapters exploring what might explain this exodus, including sparse opportunities for education and entertainment, long hours of physical labor, and few modern conveniences (128). However, he dwells on one intangible reason for people leaving the countryside, writing, “There is a pitiful lack of appreciation of country values. One of these is the beauty of nature . . . environment essentially healthful and creative another [country value]. . . . Few of those who are freeborn heirs of the country are awake to the charms of the fields” (140). In these lines, it is evident that MacDougall feels the preservation of rural life lies in its romanticization. MacDougall is hardly alone in believing that the romantic vision of farm life will save its population. The loudest voice on agricultural education in Canada at the time himself “embraced the romantic vision of rural life” (Brown xiv).

In *Anne Shirley*, Montgomery creates a heroine who embraces a romantic vision of rural life; she is the sort of person MacDougall claims will be the salvation of the countryside. MacDougall laments that “Few know the birds, the common flowers, or even the forest trees, and as for native shrubs they are quite nameless.” And, citing “The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft,” he writes, “The fact that flowers and birds are well-nigh forgotten, together with the songs and the elves, shows how advanced is the process of rural disintegration” (141). By contrast, from her first moments at Green Gables, Anne shows a heightened awareness and appreciation for her natural surroundings and Montgomery’s writing brings Prince Edward Island flora to life:

That bridge led Anne's dancing feet up over a wooded hill beyond, where perpetual twilight reigned under the straight, thick-growing firs and spruces; the only flowers there were myriads of delicate "June bells," those shyest and sweetest of woodland blooms, and a few pale, aerial starflowers, like the spirits of last year's blossoms. Gossamers glimmered like threads of silver among the trees and the fir boughs and tassels seemed to utter friendly speech. (56)

This is but one example of many; in nearly every chapter of the novel, Montgomery describes the scenery in remarkable detail, and Anne's "beauty loving eyes" (32) lead her to what Marilla terms "imaginings" (33) such as this one:

Oh isn't it wonderful? . . . Oh, I don't mean just the tree; of course it's lovely—yes, it's *radiantly* lovely—it blooms as if it meant it—but I meant everything, the garden and the orchard, and the brook and the woods, the whole big dear world. Don't you feel as if you just loved the world on a morning like this? And I can hear the brook laughing all the way up here. (32)

Anne's appreciation of nature's beauty falls on deaf ears. Marilla responds to Anne's effusive speech about the "wonderful" world by saying, "It's a big tree, and it blooms great, but the fruit don't amount to much never—small and wormy" (32). Matthew's greatest thrill in nature is, "to see them ugly white grubs that spade up in the cucumber beds" (22–23). And Rachel remarks that, "Trees aren't much company" (9). Marilla and Matthew both are intent on productivity—whether the tree or cucumber plant will yield fruit. Rachel notes that trees do not mitigate the necessity of social interaction in rural communities, and perhaps this is particularly true for Islanders. To these lifelong residents of Avonlea, the workaday functions of nature supersede their inspirational

potential. This exemplifies the lack of enthusiasm for nature that is cited in MacDougall's lectures as one of the roots of rural discontent. Notably, these comments come from those who are working the land. Anne's acute sensitivity toward nature and its "elves" makes her unique in the Avonlea community.

In his study, MacDougall relates the story of an agrarian woman he meets, who, perhaps like Marilla, Matthew, and Rachel, does not appreciate nature:

One day a few of us were off for a tramp over the hills. Coming across some huckleberry pickers we bought a few berries. As we paid the woman for them I said, "What a glorious view you have from these hills!" With mild profanity but with strong feeling she replied: "You wouldn't think so darn much of it if you had to make a living here picking blueberries." There were forces of feeling pent up within that woman's nature, but resentment only at hard conditions was felt. (142)

Interestingly, he asserts that "the unaesthetic rural mind starves amid scenes 'where the spirit of beauty dwelleth'" specifically because "in childhood neither did parent speak of love of beauty at home, nor did teacher impart it in school, nor were its fountains in literature discovered" (143). Essentially, he points out that each person has the innate capability to appreciate a romanticized view of nature, if only it is nurtured: "The latent power was there, and, as the harpstring vibrates when a note is struck on a string of similar pitch, might have awaked at the touch of nature-love in another heart" (142). In other words, "nature-love" can spread from person to person, and this is precisely what happens at Green Gables. In the early pages of the novel, Marilla does not appear to take pleasure in the beauty of the countryside, but by mid-novel she is moved to notice the "red fields smoking into pale-purple mists in the declining sun [and] still, crimson-

budded maples around a mirror-like wood-pool,” and the “deep, primal gladness” of emerging spring makes her step “lighter and swifter” (171). It is as though Marilla has momentarily seen the world anew through Anne’s “beauty-loving eyes” (32).

In addition to believing that rural inhabitants could foster love for the pastoral, MacDougall also believed that literature was a powerful tool for shaping one’s aesthetic view of the world. Certainly Montgomery was aware of this, as her descriptions of the natural world in her journals and novels regularly employ allusions to poetry and literature. Thus MacDougall and Montgomery share the notion that the pastoral could have real transformative implications for those living in rural Canada.⁵ Both MacDougall and Montgomery see cultivating the life of the mind and encouraging imaginative play as key to enduring the hardships and isolation of a farming life. Montgomery’s own experience of farm labor has both a touch of the aforementioned berry-picker, and a touch of the antithetical Anne Shirley. In her journal, Montgomery declares that she “hates” potato picking, and although she “love[s] that field,” doesn’t have “time to enjoy” the view while working. Despite this, she is able to observe that the day was “so bright and crisp, and with an exhilarating air and *such* a lovely sky—brilliantly blue, with lacy trails of misty white cloud straying over it.” The view that she doesn’t have “time to enjoy” she still describes in vibrant detail: “the deep blue sea, the pond as blue as sapphire, the groves of maple and birch just turning to scarlet gold, the yellow stubble-lands and the sere pastures” (*SJ* 7). MacDougall’s suggestion to rural people is that they attempt to adopt Montgomery’s ability to see what is “bright,” “crisp,” “exhilarating,” “lovely,” and “glorious” about rural life. Living in a farming community as both a child and an adult, Montgomery certainly experienced the trials of rural life, yet her heroine,

Anne, appears to have a very different rural experience: she often eclipses the workings of farm life with the pastoral language of “nature-love.”

As her potato-picking journal entry suggests, Montgomery had conflicting feelings about rural life. Irene Gammel observes that “She loved Cavendish dearly, but hungered for a richer social life, better financial conditions, an appropriate standing in the community, a passionate companionship, her own house, and success in the world” (*Looking* 36). And although she personally found rural life lacking, she also deeply regretted that the “best and most educated” in her peer group left Cavendish (*Looking* 163). Perhaps there is a built-in nostalgia here, for the community among peers of her youth—a community that will later break up. It may not be that the work of agrarian life was unbearably hard, but that the pull of something else was greater. Montgomery would have had a much happier existence if her intellectual peers had settled locally and fostered a vibrant community in rural Cavendish. In *Anne of Green Gables*, Montgomery’s scholarly heroine does not leave rural Avonlea. Nor does she stay on the farm on account of her success in housekeeping, or her reproductive and maternal potential. Anne is not valued at the end of the novel for being a perfect buttress to the gender “structure” as described by McQuillan and Pfeiffer. Instead, Montgomery portrays Anne as a rural heroine because of her ability to intellectualize the landscape. Gammel notes that the great Scottish, British, and American Romantic poets influenced Montgomery, and her literary landscapes have the “structure” and “organiz[ation]” of visual artists like painters of the Hudson River School and photographer Rudolf Eickemeyer (144). Montgomery creates a rural heroine whose vision seems to be shaped by great art and literature. Anne’s connection with nature cannot be dismissed as a simple

propensity to daydream. Instead, by re-visioning of the rural landscape as a place where poetry can be read in a barn, Anne shows engagement with the world of ideas, despite being isolated from a vibrant intellectual community. Montgomery posits the educated rural woman as a meaningful element in the re-valuation of Canadian rural identity. Thus, the novel suggests that a woman's intellect, rather than her reproductive potential or her labor, can comprise her chief contribution to nation-building.

Anne's intellect and interest in being a serious scholar are two of her most defining traits, and when it comes to literary pursuits she excels. Anne not only memorizes and recites the poetry of Sir Walter Scott with zeal, but doesn't hesitate to bring her recitations into the barn to share them with Matthew (154–55), and into the pasture when she's caring for the cows (184–85). Whether she brings her interest in literature directly into the workings of the farm, or into the rural schoolhouse (as when she starts a story club to invigorate the imaginative lives of her peers [169]), Anne clearly values intellectual pursuits enough to make them a part of her daily life. Nor is she static in her understanding of what it means to be an intellectual. As she learns more about her academic world, she re-evaluates her former desire to use "big words," noting that "There's so much to learn and do and think that there isn't time for big words" (205). She also abandons the story club in order to make more time to write compositions and learn to be her "own severest critic" (205). Anne strives to be the best critical thinker she can be, and when Diana doesn't have the opportunity to do the same, it's "nothing short of a calamity" to Anne (196). Anne calls attending Queens the "dream of [her] life" (195), and coming in first place for the Queen's entrance exams "a moment worth living for" (210). And while turning down the Avery Scholarship seems a move away from

intellectualism, I argue instead that it is a proactive step toward keeping rural Avonlea alive with academic pursuits. After all, Anne defies Rachel Lynde's anti-intellectualism by asserting that she's "going to study Latin and Greek just the same" (242). Anne chooses to stay in Avonlea to take her "Arts course," despite Mrs. Lynde lifting "her hands in holy horror" (242). Her choice in favor of intellectualism at the end of the novel is an act of defiance to some people in her rural community, but provides a template for other women to do the same, creating the possibility of a more stimulating environment for young women in rural Canada.

***Anne of Green Gables* and Independence for Agrarian Women**

Anne certainly fosters intellectual community in Avonlea, but her decisions in the novel may also offer practical alternatives to rural women who disliked the idea of having to marry to obtain a rural home. I argue that Anne and Marilla's farmstead at the end of *Anne of Green Gables* offers a meaningful option to the heteropatriarchal rural farmstead that dominated rural life during Montgomery's time. Anne and Marilla represent two modes of rural femininity that, when put together under one roof, offer an empowering image of the female-managed farm. This section posits Anne as a feminist heroine at the end of the novel for subverting the assumption that women could only have their "own" rural home through marriage. Anne quite literally replaces Matthew as a farming partner for Marilla. This makes Green Gables an example of a farm without a "farmer"—an increasingly realistic possibility due to the innovations in dairying on Prince Edward Island. With Marilla's skills as a traditional agrarian woman, and the forward-thinking

mindset of Anne, Green Gables becomes a site of feminist pleasure for representing female independence in a framework traditionally dominated by men.

In *Anne of Green Gables* one can find palpable anxiety about traditional rural marriage. Jane Andrews voices a serious criticism of becoming a farm wife claiming that “she will devote her whole life to teaching, and never, never marry, because you are paid a salary for teaching, but a husband won’t pay you anything, and growls if you ask for a share in the egg and butter money” (196). Jane’s concern that women are economically disempowered in a rural household is valid, particularly as rural economies became increasingly reliant on a consumer market and an exchange of money. Furthermore, the “egg and butter money” is likely to have been earned by farm women, thereby doubling the insult if the money is withheld by a husband or father. While composing *Anne of Green Gables*, marriage was very much on Montgomery’s mind, and she cites wanting her own household and children as strong impetuses for marriage (SJ 322). Yet, Montgomery’s attitudes toward becoming a wife and running a household are complex. Montgomery characterizes the housework of “old Aunt Caroline,” an unmarried woman who lived with her brother until her death, as drudgery (SJ 229), and calls the “life of a country minister’s wife” a “synonym for respectable slavery” (SJ 321). Montgomery clearly wanted her own home after living with relatives for most of her life, and while marriage would provide this, she shows obvious discomfort with the idea that being a “wife” made one subservient (“respectable slavery”), and being an unmarried woman living with relatives did the same (“a household drudge”). Montgomery’s concern seems not to be with the housework itself (she apparently took great pride and pleasure in her

kitchen skills [Crawford and Crawford 2]), but with the gendered power structure of households in her time.⁶

Keeping in mind Montgomery's attitude toward housework, one wonders whether Marilla is the kind of "household drudge" embodied by "old Aunt Caroline," or offers a more empowered household position. Unlike old Aunt Caroline, who lived not only with her brother, but his large family of six children, Marilla lives alone with Matthew, who, far from being domineering, "dreaded all women except Marilla and Mrs. Rachel" (14). Matthew clearly breaks with clichés about males, both in personality and by not participating in "courting" or marriage. Marilla does not express resentment about her position in this household or society—quite the opposite—she is proud of her housekeeping skills. Her role is both necessary and well-defined in a time when tasks like production and preservation of most foods, sewing and maintaining clothing, and attending to basic cleaning and disinfecting (before widespread use of chemical disinfectants) necessitated full-time, skilled, home-based work (Doody 438–52). There are hints throughout the novel as to the scope of Marilla's work, from the specifics of baking like putting a bread sponge to set (86), to sewing skirts from patterns (73), to straining milk into a creamer (45). Marilla, a "famous cook" (104), continually provides tasty treats that showcase her talent, as seen when Mrs. Allen's visit precipitates a culinary frenzy resulting in "two kinds of jelly, red and yellow, and whipped cream and lemon pie, and cherry pie, and three kinds of cookies, and fruit-cake, and [her] famous yellow plum preserves . . . and pound cake and layer cake, and biscuits . . . and new bread and old both" (141). Marilla's expertise keeps Green Gables a well-respected farmstead during a time when household skills had not yet been replaced with even very simple

conveniences like store-bought bread and ready-made clothing. Before so many household items were commercially available, traditional women's work had significant economic value.

Anne's economic contributions to Green Gables are not primarily associated with housekeeping. Compared with Marilla, Anne is a passable but not prodigious housekeeper by the time she turns sixteen. And, as McQuillan and Pfeiffer's article explains, Anne is by no means a natural to the role. Although by the end of the novel she claims she will "attend to the ironing and the baking beautifully," Anne says this in the context of her egregious housekeeping errors of the past: "you needn't fear that I'll starch the handkerchiefs or flavour the cake with liniment" (237). Anne is a valued partner in the farmstead, but not primarily for her role as a traditional housekeeper; she points out that she will do the ironing and baking only because Marilla will be out of the house. Thus, as the novel closes, Marilla is still the primary housekeeper at Green Gables. How, then, is Anne valued? Certainly, her teaching income will augment the household account, but there are also hints throughout the novel that suggest Anne, though not a "boy" who they hoped could run the farm, provides genuine physical support to the daily workings of this typical Prince Edward Island farm. In particular, Anne harvests apples (105), feeds the swine (148), tends to the poultry operations (174–45), and takes the cows to pasture and brings them back (184). Importantly, when Anne cannot do her chores because she is exhausted from nursing Minnie May through a bout with croup, they cannot simply be put off until the next day (120). Instead, they are picked up by Matthew, showing both that her farm responsibilities were vital to Green Gables, and that the farm

chores are gender-flexible, to some degree. After all, if the gender structure were inflexible, then Anne's chores would have been picked up by Marilla, not Matthew.

Although mentioned fleetingly, Anne's labor contributions to the farmstead are valid and valuable for the continued operation of Green Gables. Operating a farm on Prince Edward Island at the close of the nineteenth century meant knowledge of traditional farming and keeping abreast with modernization. The most significant change in Island farming during Montgomery's lifetime was the "revolutionary trend" of commercial dairying (Clark 184). While many farms on P.E.I. in 1900 were subsistence in nature, dairying had started to change that. The increased sale and barter of dairy products greatly augmented the farmer's income and his/her participation in a cash-based economy (Clark 184). In 1891, James W. Robertson (at that time the dairy commissioner for the Dominion of Canada) helped establish cheese and butter factories on P.E.I., and encouraged farmers to participate cooperatively in factory creameries (Shortt and Doughty 660). Between 1891 and 1910, forty-five cheese and butter factories were established and dairying had become an undeniable "staple" in the Island economy (Shortt and Doughty 660). In 1904, just before Montgomery writes *Anne of Green Gables*, Canadian cheese exports peaked as a result of the factory system that allowed for "substantial commerce in Canadian cheese" (Fowke 212). Women, the "craftsmen of farm dairies," saw their sector of the farm economy grow in value at the turn of the century (Fowke 213). Certainly at Green Gables Marilla does the lion's share of visible dairying (36, 45, 63, 105), and Rachel Lynde wins "first prize for home-made butter and cheese" at the exhibition (188). At the time of composing *Anne of Green Gables*, the Island economy was particularly friendly to the dairying contributions of rural women,

making Anne and Marilla's situation at the end of the novel especially compelling in light of its implications for female independence. As being a farmer became increasingly reliant on managing laborers rather than doing the manual work, the substantial difference between farming and teaching was lessened somewhat.

Innovations in dairying on Prince Edward Island suggest that the highly gendered world of farming had the potential to change its course. Ecocritic William Conlogue comments on this, writing that in Willa Cather's *O! Pioneers* (1913), Alexandra Bergson "choose[s] the techniques of industrial agriculture to free [herself] from male dominance" (22–23). And although a prairie farm in the United States and a farm in Canada's Maritimes may not share the "techniques of industrial agriculture," the potential for gender equality is similar. At the close of *Anne of Green Gables*, it is clear that with Anne's partnership, Marilla will be able to manage Green Gables. The feminist value in this ending is not only that it subverts the "male dominance" associated with traditional farming, but also that it values multiple expressions of rural femininity. The traditional skills Marilla expertly executes are valued, as are Anne's more wide-ranging contributions, from helping with farm tasks to bringing the increasingly valuable cash income through teaching. Anne is important not for her flawless performance of gender-normative tasks, and not just for her emotional support of Marilla as she ages, but for stepping in to replace Matthew as co-operator of Green Gables. The turn toward a cash economy on Prince Edward Island perhaps allowed room for a Pastoral vision of the rural life.

Marriage in a Time of Agricultural Transition

While the *Anne* series is peppered with households run by two (or more) women, Anne, after long delay, does marry Gilbert Blythe. Marah Gubar argues that such “delays make room for passionate relationships between women that prove far more romantic than traditional marriages” (47). And, just as I argue above that Anne and Marilla together become co-operators of Green Gables, Gubar points out that the delayed marriage in Montgomery’s characters “seems to indicate a strong desire to make room for the formation of more unconventional lives, relationships, and households” (52). Gubar argues persuasively that the romance in Montgomery’s series is consistently found outside of heterosexual union. I build on Gubar’s argument by asserting that the reason for this may be intertwined with the demise of the agrarian community. Montgomery’s attitude toward marriage as revealed in her journals, as well as in *Anne of Avonlea*, can be understood as a response to a disintegrating agrarian community. Wendell Berry observes that marriage and farming are deeply connected; this fuels my analysis, certainly, but so does Emily Matchar’s observation that New Agrarians tend to backpedal gains in women’s economic independence, often sacrificing women’s economic independence to ideals that may not realistically endure unexpected events like death, disability, or divorce.⁷ Montgomery’s concerns at the turn of the century reveal that the heteropatriarchy implicit in the typical agrarian family structure⁸ becomes increasingly oppressive as a community moves away from an agrarian economy.

Throughout his work, Wendell Berry continually suggests that “the analogy between marriage making and farm making, marriage keeping and farm keeping, is nearly exact” (*Standing* 68). He has also, “talked about marriage as a way of talking about farming

because marriage, as a human artifact, has been more carefully understood than farming” (*Standing* 68). In this section I wish to draw out some ways that the historical shift from an agrarian economy to a consumer-driven economy may explain Montgomery’s tendency to delay heterosexual union in her fiction, instead preferring to house “romance” in female community. Here I turn to an excerpt from Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977) where Berry describes how the failure of the economic competition model of agriculture (as opposed to the older, more interdependent mode of agrarian community) is analogous to the failure of modern marriage:

The model of economic competition proved as false to marriage as to farming. As with other capsules, the narrowness of the selective principle proved destructive of what it excluded, and what it excluded was essential to the life of what it enclosed: the nature of sexuality itself. Sexual romance cannot bear to acknowledge the generality of instinct, whereas sexual capitalism cannot acknowledge its particularity. But sexuality appears to be *both* general and particular. One cannot love a particular woman, for instance, unless one loves womankind—if not all women, at least other women. The capsule of sexual romance leaves out this generality, this generosity of instinct; it excludes Aphrodite and Dionysus. And it fails for that reason. Though sexual love can endure between the same two people for a long time, it cannot do so on the basis of this pretense of the exclusiveness of affection. The sexual capitalist—that is, the disillusioned sexual romantic—in reaction to disillusion makes the opposite oversimplification; one acknowledges

one's spouse as one of a general, necessarily troublesome kind or category.

(*Unsettling* 119)

Berry argues, in this passage, that when marriages are expected to be sole bearers of “sexual romance” one must reject the idea that as a part of sexuality, one is attracted to a general group of people, which certainly will include people other than their spouse. In a competitive world, this becomes anathema to the idea that spouses “only have eyes for” their partner. However, if, as Berry contends, the dual nature of sexuality is “*both* general and particular,” then it can find a more comfortable home in the female friendships and female-headed households of Avonlea where there can be a *particularly* special relationship (be it the romance between Anne and Diana or the more practical arrangement between Marilla and Rachel Lynde), without detracting from the more *general* appreciation for female companionship. Thus we arrive at one much-discussed⁹ element of queerness in Montgomery's work: that the majority of both romance and camaraderie is found between and among females. This is not happenstance, but instead it is the imaginative solution to a very real and oppressive economic and social situation where heterosexual union, the ticket to having your “own” home, was simply a ticket to yet another oppressive condition of being a subordinate wife. If agrarian female identity at the time was necessarily tied to a male head-of-household (be he a husband, father, brother, uncle, grandfather, or otherwise), then to separate oneself from dependence on men was nearly impossible. As the farming community started to change, the necessity of being linked to a land-owning man was weakened, thus potentially disrupting traditional family organization and marking a new era of possibility for women who found the idea of becoming farmer's wives unacceptable.

Montgomery subtly represents her ambivalence toward marriage in her fiction, which I will address later in the chapter, but writes about it quite plainly in her journals. What emerges from the journals is the impression of a person who has been unable to reconcile her romantic ideals with her real-life possibilities. The only man she ever loved passionately, Herman Leard, she felt she could not marry because after the excitement of a year (or so) wore off, she would be permanently attached to a man whose occupation as a farmer offered her little hope for the kind of social status and professional recognition she longed for,¹⁰ not to mention that with the work involved with being a farmer's wife, she would have little time for writing. In other words, Montgomery felt revulsion at the thought joining an agrarian community through marriage and believed that passionate love was not a good reason to marry a farmer because the cost of being a farmer's wife was too high. The journal entries chronicling her passion for Herman Leard are a near-perfect description of sexual attraction between people, and pages are filled with the overwhelming and magnetic attraction between the two.¹¹ Despite this, she describes him in a rather demeaning manner:

...I found Herman Leard jolly and full of fun. I soon made up my mind concerning him—and I never changed it! He had no trace of intellect, culture, or education—no interest in anything beyond his farm and the circle of young people who compose the society he frequented. In plain, sober, truth, he was only a very nice, attractive young animal! And yet!!!” (*Complete Journals* 396)

Montgomery is clear in stating that Leard's fault as a suitor lies both in his interest in farming and his apparent disinterest in any wider society that might include the kinds of intellectual and literary pursuits that were so important to her.

In some ways, Montgomery's relationship with Leard was representative of a strongly-held notion that the mind and body were separate, and the mind must always control the instincts of the body. In Montgomery's case she saw this as a dueling between her father's side of the family and her mother's:

I have a very uncomfortable blend in my make-up—the passionate Montgomery blood and the Puritan Macneill conscience. Neither is strong enough wholly to control the other. The Puritan conscience can't prevent the hot blood from having its way—in part at least—but it *can* poison all the pleasure and it does. Passion says 'Go on. Take what crumbs of happiness fall in your way.' Conscience says, 'Do so if you will. Feed your soul on those blood-red husks; but I'll scourge you well for it afterwards.' (*Complete Journals* 401)

Interestingly, then, it is her "Puritan conscience" that steers her away from becoming a part of the older agrarian order as a farmer's wife, despite her passionate love for Leard. This sets up a hierarchy within Montgomery's mind, where to deny herself passionate love is the right choice, because to do otherwise would forever tie her to farming.¹² In this worldview, farming is equated with a kind of intellectual, and perhaps even moral, inferiority.¹³

Despite dissolving what ended up being the only passionate love she ever knew, Montgomery held fast notions of romantic love, and even marriage. As she was helping with wedding preparations for her friend Bertha, Montgomery muses on her idea of a perfect wedding, awash in romantic ideals and sentiment:

In the morning—a June morning when a glorious sunrise should be blossoming over the silvery east and the roses in gardens and wilding lanes should be as sweet as

roses could be—I would rise early and dress—dress for the one man in all the world and for the eyes of no other and make me as fair as might be for his delight; and then in the expectant hush of dawn I would go down to meet him, unknown of any others and together we would go to the heart of some great wood where the arches were as some vast cathedral aisle and the wind of the morning itself sang our bridal hymn; and there we should pledge to each other a love that should last for all time and all eternity. Then we could turn, hand in hand, back to the busy world that would forevermore be glorified because of our life together!

Well, there's my *ideal*. But the *Real* is quite another thing. (*Complete Journals* 143)

Although Montgomery recognizes the implausibility of this vision, she nevertheless holds it up as an ideal, but why? She rejected the love of her life as an unsuitable partner, and she fantasizes about an ideal wedding that she knows to be impossible. It is vital to note that Montgomery embraces a series of sentimental romantic notions, then immediately recognizes them to be part of a category she calls “*ideal*” that is completely opposed to another category: “*Real*” (*Complete Journals* 143). This is precisely what Berry suggests will happen to marriage outside of the agrarian economy, where “the sexual capitalist—that is, the disillusioned sexual romantic—in reaction to disillusion makes the opposite over-simplification: one acknowledges one's spouse as one of a general, necessarily troublesome kind or category” (*Unsettling* 119).

It would seem that years before Montgomery even starts writing *Anne of Green Gables* or any of the following novels, she has decided that romantic love between men and women is strictly for the world of fantasy. In her lived reality, she saw that the

“*Real*” prospects for marriage were considerably less sublime. Thus we see Montgomery wrestling with “the isolation of sexuality,” which Berry asserts is “subject to two influences that dangerously oversimplify it: the lore of sexual romance and capitalist economics” (*Unsettling* 117). Berry goes on to explain that “By ‘sexual romance’ I mean the sentimentalization of sexual love that has been for generations the work of popular songs and stories.” Here Berry lists eight “dangerous falsehoods” that accompany the rise of “sexual romance.” Montgomery appears to be trapped in a world where her prospects are limited, both if she chooses to marry (where she will either be a farmer’s wife or in a loveless marriage with a minister [the latter of which, incidentally, she chooses]), or live a meager existence on her own. Here she describes the impossibility of ever having her own home without marriage:

There isn’t the least likelihood I shall ever have a house of my own. I suppose, when grandmother has gone, I shall migrate to C’town or some similar burg, get a cheap boarding place, and write pot-boilers for a living. A pleasant outlook, truly!

But I suppose it’s better than charity or the poorhouse and so, thanks be! (141)

In these moments we recognize that Montgomery was deeply tied to heteropatriarchal norms, and not because of a vague social pressure either. Her practical attitude toward marriage, in part, was the result of a world where women could rarely earn enough money to support themselves, let alone buy their own property. And here we plainly see the problem with the traditional agrarian community. Even when, as I’ve argued elsewhere in my study, women are truly economic partners in their particular agrarian family and community, their value was tied to a patriarchal system and to attempt independence outside of that was nearly impossible.

Montgomery knew in painful detail the extent to which patrimony institutionalized women's dependence on men, particularly in agricultural communities where livelihood was tied to land. She fantasized about a world where this wasn't the case—where she did not have to rely on men. She acutely felt the injustice of sexism, and resented the bartering between the sexes that was required in her circumstances. Here she writes about feeling beholden to her friend's brother because she did not have access to her own transportation, a serious problem in agrarian communities where church and gathering places were often outside of easy walking distance:

I can tolerate him along the lines of acquaintanceship but when he inflicts his unwelcome attentions on me—the nauseating attentions of a country *clod*—I feel as if I were being spiritually smothered. Yet I have to be civil to him on Bertha's account—and even on my own; since he is one of the few folks I can depend on to take me anywhere I have to go. I loathe the necessary makeshifts and the galling dependence they imply. But in this world of material facts such things have to be reckoned with. (143-144)

In this passage not only do we see Montgomery's strong bias against some rural people (“the nauseating attentions of a country *clod*”), but it is also apparent that Montgomery was practiced in the unpleasant world of sexual exchange. For while it is clear that civil conversation is the only thing she exchanges with the “country *clod*” for his transportation services, she clearly recognizes the debasement associated with her dependent status as a woman, particularly a woman without means.

While Montgomery was unable to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of marriage in her own life, through her fiction she is able to play out fantasies about alternative paths. Marah Gubar asserts that

...most of Montgomery's old maids ultimately embrace marriage, but the perfunctory nature of these unions, coupled with the author's habit of stretching out the careers of her single women over decades, seems to indicate a strong desire to make room for the formation of more unconventional lives, relationships, and households. (52)

If in her fiction Montgomery does cling to romantic suitors as resolutions,¹⁴ she prefers to make her stories about the independent and interdependent lives of women without men.

And, if Berry is right in asserting that the demise of the agrarian community could be associated with the demise of marriage, then Montgomery's discomfort with marriage both in her personal observations and in her fiction is, in fact, more than *personal*.

Instead, I argue that it showcases a dramatic shift in social organization that is the result of a changing agricultural landscape. *Anne of Avonlea* offers some interesting commentaries on both female friendships and marriages between men and women in agrarian communities. This novel pokes fun at gender, particularly when men or women must cross the lines of gender expectations. There are multiple ways in which gender expectations are flouted, in both public and private spheres. Montgomery both reveals and withholds in these moments; on the one hand in showing the gendered nature of the agrarian community she points out the performative nature of gender, but on the other hand, when characters break with gendered expectations one senses not that the reader is to laugh at the falseness of gender as a construction, but instead at the ineptness of those

who attempt to work at gendered tasks to which they are unaccustomed. In such moments *Anne of Avonlea* appears to grapple rather directly with gender as it is played out in a changing farming community. In the public sphere, an encroaching female influence creates anxiety in men. In the private sphere, men attempting to do women's work are at best ineffectual, and at worst, bumbling fools and the wives who expect husbands to do "women's work" are invariably scoffed at by Montgomery. Does this become simply a moment of conservatism, where people are "rightfully stigmatized" as shrewish wives or ineffectual husbands if they try to act outside their gender roles? While this is a viable reading of the scenario, a more productive result of this stigmatization is that Montgomery paints marriage in this community as an unhappy state, where people become not only narrow-minded, but virtually unable to function within such a stifling environment. The point is that Montgomery repeatedly shows the dysfunctional role that marriage itself plays in the Avonlea community, while simultaneously showcasing the functional, but non-heteropatriarchal households such as the new Green Gables with Marilla and Rachel Lynde at the helm. Montgomery sounds the alarm, as it were, almost as if she feels an obligation to warn her readers away from entering in the bonds of marriage, such as she sees it in Avonlea.

In *Anne of Avonlea*, one of Anne's first adventures entails creating an Improvement Society for her town. Anne's interest in forming an Improvement Society is, in some ways, very closely related to an idea I've discussed earlier in this chapter: bringing an intellectual life to rural Avonlea. Though one of the missions of the Improvement Society certainly is to promote a more aesthetically pleasing village, this goal is not without an intellectual basis. Just as Anne's romanticization of the landscape in *Anne of Green*

Gables had its basis in transcendental thought, so the Improvement Society also met to “collect and discuss ideas, write and read papers, and, as Anne said, educate the public sentiment generally” (57). Interestingly, the Improvement Society, despite being comprised of young women *and* young men, is repeatedly characterized as having a feminizing effect on the landscape. Intellectualism is strongly associated with the feminine in this context. For example, when Anne talks with Diana about the beauty of a September day, she says, “And oh, do smell the dying fir! It’s coming up from that little sunny hollow where Mr. Eben Wright has been cutting fence poles. Bliss it is on such a day to be alive; but to smell dying fir is very heaven. That’s two thirds Wordsworth and one third Anne Shirley” (*Anne of Avonlea* 55). Here Montgomery points out to her reader the close relationship between great literary figures and those who revel in the sensual pleasures of rural surroundings. In doing so, Montgomery is not being nostalgic about farm life, as much as linking farm life with Romanticism—a movement that emphasizes the importance of allowing oneself to be overcome with awe at the natural world. Whereas nostalgia looks back, Romanticism calls for being aware of the beauty in the present moment, and linking the emotion provoked by beauty with an intellectual experience as well. Thus the anxiety provoked by the Improvement Society seems to be a reaction against both femininity and intellectualism. The suggestion, of course, is that the falling away of the patriarchal agrarian world leaves rural Prince Edward Island open to the ideas of women and the wider world of intellectual thought.

The notion of places being gendered is strong in *Anne of Avonlea*, and the community of Avonlea perceives that the Improvement Society will forcibly feminize masculine

spaces. Take for example this passage, where underneath the humor is some palpable anxiety:

Mr. Lawrence Bell said he would whitewash his barns if nothing else would please them but he would *not* hang lace curtains in the cow stable windows. Mr. Major Spencer asked Clifton Sloane, an Improver who drove the milk to the Carmody cheese factory, if it was true that everybody would have to have his milk-stand hand-painted next summer and keep an embroidered centerpiece on it. (58)

The “lace curtains” and “embroidered centerpiece” are not, in fact, actual requests made by the Improvement Society, but rather they are representative of a feminine influence that is both mocked and feared. It is too simple to say that Mr. Lawrence Bell and Mr. Major Spencer are just annoyed at the possibility that the appearance of their operations would change. The historical changes in dairying practices at the turn of the century on Prince Edward Island were, in fact, threatening the old agrarian order. Advancements in dairying, as I’ve mentioned earlier, were beginning to make the heteropatriarchal household a mere tradition, rather than a necessity. Mechanization and industrialization, whether in household advancements that changed the amount of time women spent in sewing or food preservation, or in dairying practices that shifted household production to collective creameries, created greater opportunities for new household arrangements that did not require older, gender-specific tasks. This is not to say that the dominance of the older agrarian farm slid away quickly, but it is to say that there was an opening at this time that allowed for a wider range of rural occupation, which created a widening of opportunity for women and men alike. The “lace curtains” and “embroidered

centerpiece” that trouble the minds of the rural farmers are suggestive of the destabilization of the older agrarian order. Such “improvements” also suggest that as women’s productive economic roles in the older agrarian order faded, women were able to be more attentive to aesthetics and intellectual pursuits—neither of which bore an economic resemblance to the critically important work of women in earlier agrarian communities.

The comical nature of the disturbance, then, suggests the degree to which Montgomery herself meant to poke fun at how such small things—such as putting a garden bed by a roadside—could rattle a small rural community. It also suggested that one would be viewed with suspicion when attempting to imbue a rural town with new ideas. For Montgomery, the farming community was a place of narrow-mindedness: a place where she was laughed at for dreaming of having a life as a thinker and a writer.¹⁵ However, when Montgomery jokes that the men in town won’t put up “lace curtains in the cow stable” or use an “embroidered centerpiece” at the milk stand, it is crucial to understand who the butt of this joke is. She pokes fun at the what she sees as a deficiency in the wit of the farmers of Avonlea—that they are so dim, so stupid, such “country *clods*” (to use her phrase)¹⁶ that they don’t understand the intellectualism of the Improvers, who are smart enough to appreciate Wordsworth or Emerson. Instead of understanding the link between beauty and stimulation of the mind, they misinterpret the big-picture goals of the Improvers, and are unable to think beyond the small daily operations of their farms. Montgomery, remember, had very little respect for *farmers*. Recall that the Improvers do not advocate for hanging lace in the cow stall, but the farmers, unable to think outside the barn, can only interpret the Improvers interest in

aesthetics within their very limited intellectual scope. Montgomery relentlessly characterizes rural people as suspicious of cerebral ideas.

When Anne and Diana are going door-to-door collecting “subscriptions” for the Improvement Society to paint their building, they provide the readers with a glimpse into the private lives of the townspeople of Avonlea. When they stop in to Daniel Blair’s, it is with the knowledge that if his wife is home, they “won’t get a cent” because “everybody says that Dan Blair doesn’t dare have his hair cut without asking her permission; and it’s certain she’s very close, to state it moderately” (62). Immediately, the reader knows that Dan Blair is to be pitied for having such a wife, but when he greets Anne and Diana at the door, we understand that not only is his wife controlling of the finances, but she has also “emasculated” him by asking him to make a cake in her absence. The scene starts with some heavy-handed symbolism, as he is stuck in his wife’s apron: “...when that poor man came to the door, red as a beet, with perspiration streaming down his face, he had on one of his wife’s big gingham aprons. ‘I can’t get this durned thing off,’ he said, ‘for the strings are tied in a hard knot and I can’t bust ‘em, so you’ll have to excuse me, ladies’” (63). As the scene progresses we learn that he cannot seem to remember the directions on how to make a cake. He is flustered, and he gratefully accepts Anne’s offer to make it for him (64). As he runs around the house gathering the ingredients for the cake, “he had forgotten all about his apron and when he ran it streamed out behind him and Diana said she thought she would die to see it” (64). This scene is, of course, playing on the familiar trope of the hen-pecked husband, but beyond that it also suggests the degree to which straying from your gender role in this oppressive rural community is transgressive and humiliating. The confidence with which Anne saves the day by baking a cake signals to

Anne of Green Gables readers that Anne has fully mastered the household tasks that she failed at so completely in her early days. Perhaps this is what is unsettling about the scene—that Anne has become, here, the gender-normalizing figure whose culinary ability saves a man from his overbearing wife, who had the audacity to ask him to perform out of “his proper sphere” as Anne herself puts it (29). But Anne had to *work* to become a person who could bake a cake with ease—learning one’s gender role as a matter of dedication and skill—not something easy, inherent, or tied to biological destiny. One can’t strap on an apron and become an accomplished housekeeper. This is a nod to the skilled labor of women. Yet it is still a scene that highlights the distress of living within the confined capsule that was marriage at the time. Berry’s assertion that with the change in agriculture, people can become “sexual capitalists” is played out in the Dan Blair apron fiasco: “Within the capsule of marriage, as in that of economics, one intends to exploit one’s property and to protect it. [...] The protective capsule becomes a prison” (119). If we read this scene not as just a moment where Anne reinforces gender norms, but where Montgomery demonstrates the horror of marriage being a “prison,” it becomes a counter-hegemonic moment, particularly as it is a man who becomes “trapped.” Certainly, Anne bakes the cake, and Dan Blair is “saved” from the wrath of his overbearing wife. What I suggest is that we understand this as yet another situation where Montgomery exposes marriage as a disabling trap.

In such a scene, and elsewhere in the novel¹⁷, we see Montgomery writing stories not of agrarian partnership between the sexes such as we see in the fiction of Wilder and Taylor, but instead of marriage as “necessary” but “troublesome,” as Wendell Berry puts it (*Unsettling* 119). The marriages that the reader sees in action in *Anne of Avonlea*

appear to be ones of negotiated acceptance that one party must tolerate the other party in order to fit into a world where marriage is a union of men and women who exchange goods or services (be it the home and property they on which they live, or the work of running a household). This differs slightly, but significantly from an agrarian marriage where a couple works together in producing the necessary parts of a livelihood farm (homespun clothing, home-grown food, shelter). Montgomery clearly wants no part of a traditional agrarian marriage, but the post-agrarian marriage framework of which she is a part is also problematic. Perhaps this is why in journals and fiction, Montgomery is distinctly uncomfortable with marriage. Berry argues that “in modern marriage what was once a difference of work became a division of work. And in this division the household was destroyed as a practical bond between husband and wife” (115). The marriages in *Avonlea* are rendered comically, but underlying them is the unhappy recognition that an intellectual meeting of the minds, or an enduring romantic companionship is not the stuff of most married couples. Instead, such marriages are seen not in daily working life but only as the culmination of long drawn-out romantic plots, such as in the case of Miss Lavender and Paul Irving’s father. In other words, they are the “endings,” not the “stories.” Montgomery, the “sexual capitalist” who “acknowledges one’s spouse as one of a general, necessarily troublesome kind or category” (Berry 119), emphasizes that whereas weddings are a happy plot point, marriages themselves are a never-ending negotiation between annoyed parties. The structure of narrative itself is thus transformed by economic changes. Thus we see one of what Berry calls the “extremely dangerous falsehoods” about love and marriage outside agrarian community, which is worth quoting again: “That marriage is a solution—whereas the most misleading thing a love story can

do is to end ‘happily’ with a marriage, not because there is no such thing as a happy marriage, but because marriage cannot be happy except by being *made* happy” (*Unsettling* 117). Berry’s contention is that as households moved away from being productive centers, where couples collaborated on the mutually beneficial and vital project of running a livelihood farm, a more competitive, less cooperative model also moved into marriage, whereby working together on the common goal of operating the farmstead was replaced by a system where each party competes for the other party’s attentions and purchases a vast array of consumer goods to do so. The work of “making” a “happy marriage” is absent in *Avonlea*, but ironically the idea of a “love story” that is ended “happily” provides a prominently repeated plot point. Berry’s term “sexual capitalist” highlights that the commodification and exploitation associated with the capitalist economic structure disrupts the idea of marriage and a mutually beneficial and supportive enterprise. Throughout the course of my project, I’ve highlighted the beneficial situation of agrarian families who can work together, and who do so in an economy where agribusiness has not yet come to dominate. The economics of an agrarian community are not strictly based on competition, but instead on survival and cooperative exchange. In this chapter such cooperative exchange is absent, as the agrarian economy is already disintegrating.

Heteropatriarchal family structures dominate agrarian philosophy and children’s agrarian literature. Montgomery’s own spiritual oppression by patrimony and traditional marriage expectations sheds light on the challenging nature of agrarianism for anyone who desires a life outside of that system. Underpinning her novels is the problematic nature of negotiating social relationships like marriage as rural and agrarian life face

unprecedented changes. In her fiction, Montgomery falls into the dualism of the ideal romantic marriage (which was strictly the stuff of happy endings and the imagination), or the loveless, antagonistic marriage. This dualism, which Berry asserts is the fallout of the move away from agrarian community, gives rise to the primacy of female companionship and even female-headed alternative households where the enduring attachments are found in Montgomery's fiction. Montgomery's ability to render long-lasting and interesting relationships between and among women, I argue is the result of her position as a "sexual capitalist" who, because she has been pressed to do so, cannot see men outside their categories of either romantic heroes or perfunctory providers. Unsullied by these two extremes, girls and women are allowed to be round characters, worthy of romantic attachment without diminishing their capabilities in other capacities. In Montgomery's female-headed households and affectionate relationships between women, she provides an imaginative opening that she herself may have preferred to marriage, if given that option.

Montgomery shows us what happens when a rural community transitions out of agrarianism, but clings to the social institutions that once buttressed it. But what happens when the evolution of one (agriculture) outpaces the other (marriage)? Earlier in this chapter I discussed the historic reality of "Rural Depletion" (Mac Dougall 30) and the dissatisfaction among young rural people on Prince Edward Island at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. On Prince Edward Island the agricultural changes certainly outpaced cultural changes, and the documented discontent among young, unmarried people is perhaps a natural response to a world where being consumers was valued above being producers, although just a generation before the values were reversed. It is crucial to

realize that in Montgomery's journals and fiction, we see the anguish created by traditional marriage expectations, particularly in an era where the agricultural imperative of such unions had changed. Laura Robinson repeatedly refers to "compulsory heterosexuality" that was so much a part of Montgomery's life and time period ("Bosom Friends"). Like Gubar, who points out that female friendship provides the truly ecstatic moments in Montgomery's fiction, Robinson shows the vibrancy of female relationships in an era when heterosexual marriage was obligatory. Neither Gubar nor Robinson pay attention to how Montgomery's very specific rural context might inform why she prefers female friendship, and her apparent aversion to marriage. This chapter suggests that Montgomery, in her intellectualizing the landscape, her formation of alternative households, and her distaste for marriages is very much informed by her relationship to an agricultural community in transition.

Conclusion

The theoretical frame of New Agrarianism suggests that there is a vital interconnectedness between how we obtain our food, fuel, and shelter and how we relate to our families, communities, and the wider world. By extension, it suggests that even apparently distant things—our relationship to a farm in another hemisphere that grew the banana we just ate—might be in some way related to our most intimate interactions—how we interact with our relatives. This theory requires a willingness to consider that our relationship with the earth is replicated in our relationships with our families, neighbors, or colleagues. While so many environmental movements that focus on global crises do point to particular individual choices (think of climate change and fuel consumption), New Agrarianism is unique in pointing out that we suffer the effects of our distance from the earth now—not in the distant future. Daily we witness troubled families and community disintegration, and the theory is that these situations reflect a fractured relationship with agriculture, labor, and intergenerational ties to the land. This statement is troubling, particularly when one considers how race, class, and gender have allowed some groups privileged access to land, while crippling the ability of others to have the same. We are living in a post-agrarian world where we feed ourselves not by cultivating the soil or caring for animals, but by increasingly distancing ourselves from these things—driving on highways to work in buildings—quite possibly never stepping on ground that is not paved. Our friends and family go their separate ways on similarly cemented roads and sidewalks. Then with paychecks in hand (if we are lucky) we arrive home again and dine on beef from 10 states away, lettuce from Mexico, cornbread made

of ingredients from several different countries, and we dessert on kiwis from Italy and blueberries from Argentina.

In terms of literary study, understanding the relationship an author might have with agriculture can help readers understand why she writes about gender, marriage, family, or race the way she does. The farm novel for children, I've argued, is particularly interesting in New Agrarianism because of the intimate portrayals of family life and labor, as well as the role nostalgia plays in each text. It is relatively easy to see how this kind of analysis could be replicated in fruitful ways across many genres in Children's Literature or Childhood Studies. I think particularly of the Caldecott Honor Book, *All the World*, written by Liz Garton Scanlon and illustrated by Maria Frazee, where the reader toggles between intimate family relationships (siblings playing, grandparents cuddling grandchildren, mothers nursing babies) and larger community connections (in agricultural fields, gardens, farmers markets, cafes, etc.). What would be the relationship here between the soil, the people who work the soil, and the relationships they create? How do word and image work together to achieve a different sense of interconnectedness than we see in the novel form? Or, perhaps a New Agrarian reading of Karen Hesse's novel in verse, *Out of the Dust*, might suggest how a severely broken agricultural world creates suffering on a very intimate level. Do Hesse's prosodic choices appear to be linked with the agricultural and familial crises about which she writes? Or how is does a migrant worker experience the relationship between agriculture and culture as depicted in Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*? Even in adolescent speculative fiction, like M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, readers are confronted with the increasing distance between humanity and agriculture in the scene depicting the meat "farm." Because farm life is so ubiquitous

in both modern and historical children's literature, there is much work that remains to be done.

Outside the realm of Children's Literature, New Agrarianism holds enormous potential, perhaps even in unlikely places. *William Conlogue's Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (2001) has laid important groundwork in this field with readings of prominent American farm novels from Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. But inherent in New Agrarianism is the understanding that even those without a direct connection with the earth (by chance or by choice) are nevertheless implicated in agriculture and have some kind of relationship with the soil. What does it mean when this relationship is fractured, difficult to understand, or seemingly non-existent? This new direction might bring scholars to write about works that take place in the town or city—even works where a farm is not mentioned at all. If New Agrarianism is essentially about the soil, then what would such a reading look like, and what is the goal? This approach might look at a particular piece of literature like Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"—a work that is both urban and ostensibly unconnected with agriculture—by examining agricultural disconnect and its trace of agricultural despair. I think especially of lines 52-53 where Ginsberg writes, "who cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsht & tortillas dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom/ who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg." One also notes the anguish of industrialization, in Section II, where Moloch (a Canaanite god who required child sacrifice) is repeatedly invoked alongside the images of modernity and surrealism: "Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses!

granite cocks! monstrous bombs!” (line 88). Ginsberg invokes a god with the vicious demand that parents burn their children and pairs him with a vision of modern life where the speaker is trapped in a ghastly world of industry and terrifying isolation. The fragmentary and frantic nature of the poem itself is far from the bucolic pastures of Montgomery’s *Avonlea*—true—but we can use New Agrarianism to reveal the relationship between the chaos of “Howl” and its detachment from a not-too-distant agricultural past. It is also possible to use Wendell Berry’s essays on the relationship between culture and agriculture or family and farming, to offer new readings of John Cheever’s lonely, gin-soaked stories of family disintegration and suburban despair. Certainly there is an amorphous sense of personal loss associated with the loss of an agrarian past in his novel, *Oh What a Paradise it Seems*. Whereas Ginsberg’s work takes turns reveling in and raging against modern life in the city, Cheever’s work repeatedly confronts the loneliness and emotional paucity of his characters in their privileged suburban existences. Such texts are haunted by the mythology of American farm life and its supposed virtues.

The idea here is that New Agrarianism—like feminist criticism, race theory, disability studies and others—offers another way of thinking about the issues that are perennially interesting to authors and scholars in American literature. Underlying this project is an interest in history, social change, scientific and technological advances, gender equality, race relations, and human relationships. How many American authors, readers, scholars among us today need only to look back one or two generations to find their farming past? How does the abrupt removal from the farm play out in terms of creative work and scholarship? While the child reader holds a special place, and the child’s farm novel

shows this, these child readers grow into the adults who shape academic discourse and write public policy. While eco-critical work so often focuses on connections with nature in leisure activities, or they directly advocate an environmentalist agenda, agricultural texts have an appealing pragmatism. When we study agriculture in literature we are of course examining the relationship between humans and their environment, but we are also considering labor, economy, and the ability to turn sunlight and soil into food, fuel, and shelter. The establishment of a civilization turns on a people's capacity to farm. Without farming, there is no civilization as we know it, thus no literature as we know it. When an author writes about farming, she is writing about the primary relationship that has allowed humans to reach their highest artistic achievements. In an age when so many are removed from this primary relationship with the earth it is increasingly relevant to read farming texts with attention to how they depict agricultural changes and how such changes alter society and its literature.

Introduction: Myth-Making and the American Farm Novel for Children

¹ See pages 3-4 in David B. Danbom's piece "Past Visions of American Agriculture." Here he expounds on the ways that agriculture was used not only in the creation of a uniquely American identity, but also as a way to attach "virtue" as a civic duty within this "notoriously unstable form of government," the republic.

² The USDA compiles these statistics based on listings in their farmer's markets directories.

<<http://www.ams.usda.gov/>>

³ Berry is well aware of the multiple layers of privilege that have shaped his life, and writes freely about them. *The Hidden Wound* (1970) is a particularly relevant work that reflects on this.

⁴ In Chapter 6, Lynn Wake offers a reading of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, and in Chapter 16 Kamala Platt reads *Rani and Felicity: The Story of Two Chickens*, as "a story that criticizes corporate capitalist agriculture" (12).

⁵ Dobrin and Kidd summarize the brief history of ecocritical attention within Children's Literature similarly, but in more detail on pages 3-5 of their introduction to *Wild Things* (2004).

⁶ Some of the most beloved children's environmental literature teeters on this line, think of Dr. Suess's *The Lorax*, and the hefty critical attention it has received.

⁷ In McGavran's extended example of how contemporary culture construes an ideal Romanic childhood he uses Sam Mendes's 2009 film, *Away We Go*, where an expectant couple visits friends, family, and old haunts in order to figure out how to approach parenting the child they are expecting.

⁸ Of course, not all Children's Literature of the time ascribed to this. African-American Children's Literature, for example, often aimed at helping young people negotiate difficult situations.

⁹ This notion that the farm is the best place to raise children is alive and well. Consider the enormous popularity of the homesteading blog, soulemama.com, where readers are given selective snapshots of the joys and pains of raising a family of five children on a growing family farm. While the cloyingly perfect family harvests duck eggs in their Patagonia jackets and readers peep at them through computer screens, one can't help but wonder exactly what image of the American farm life is attractive to contemporary farm fanciers—one marked more significantly by privilege than privation, it would seem.

Farmer Boy and Phebe Fairchild, Her Book: Pre-Industrial American Farm Life

¹ Both Romines and I elucidate how Depression-era economics influence Wilder's work, and we both have a keen interest in how Wilder writes about gender. But we draw different conclusions: Romines's work is act of feminist re-readings, which are valid and revealing, but originate in a feminism rooted in a post-industrial, capitalist framework, while I argue that because Wilder's first two books are rooted in Agrarianism, they offer important opportunities to rethink urbanist and post-industrial feminist criticism as the primary avenue of interpreting gender. Romine's feminist project has value, and many of our thoughts intersect, but it shouldn't be the final word on gender in the *Little House* books.

² Erisman reads Wilder's series as essential cultural knowledge for those interested in the "American westering experience," and asserts that *Farmer Boy* is an essential *Little House* book because "it supplies [...] at the beginning of the series, distinctive cultural elements that are thematically essential to the completion of Laura Ingalls Wilder's accounts of the American westering experience" (123). In other words, by showing the established, wealthy farm that is integrated into its community, Wilder shows early on in her narrative the final cultural result of the frontier. Erisman evokes Frederick Jackson Turner's work several times, finally concluding that "In the best Turnerian fashion, Laura and Almanzo, frontier settler and American farmer, blend their qualities to shape, even as they are shaped by, the westering experience" (130).

³ See Gilbert Fite's *An Economic History of the United States* (1973), pages 519-522, for a brief overview of the New Deal and the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

⁴ Sue Headlee's *The Political Economy of the Family Farm: The Agrarian Roots of American Capitalism* offers a perspective on the shift from subsistence farming to commodity farming. Pages 2-9 of the Introduction give a brief overview of this change, focusing specifically on how labor needs were met differently on these two kinds of farms.

⁵ This is particularly true because his farm in Northern New York would not have been a victim of the Dust Bowl.

⁶ For a concise picture of this shift, see pages 61-72 of Shannon Hayes's *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*.

⁷ Wilder, though nostalgic for days past, nevertheless was a proponent of modern conveniences, about which she writes extensively in her years with *The Missouri Ruralist*. As this chapter will illustrate, Wilder's glorification of long-past farming days seems to be more strongly associated with the family dynamics that came with less advanced technology, than with the minimal technology itself. In other words, the social and familial system spawned by technology is what Wilder seems to lament. Chapter 2 discusses Wilder's relationship to nostalgia with more depth and nuance.

⁸ See Julia Mickenberg's *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*, where Lenski is mentioned in a list of "liberal authors" who "embraced the populist, antiracist, prolabor, and antiauthoritarian politics" (104).

⁹ See pages 34-46 in Ann Romines's *Constructing the Little House: Culture, Gender, and Laura Ingalls Wilder*.

¹⁰ See Danbom, 194-195.

¹¹ See chapter two of Sally McMurry's *Family and Farmhouses in 19th Century America*.

¹² For example, in 1926, the M. Johnson Poultry Ranch in Bowie, Texas had "75,000 chickens, 112,000 eggs in incubators, 1 million square feet of floor space and 186 buildings" (Fitzgerald 115). Deborah Fitzgerald points out that the USDA itself reported in 1928 that "specialization in the poultry industry was greatly accelerated by the introduction of such technologies as the mammoth incubator, the use of electric lighting to induce egg-laying out of season, [and] the use of coal-stove brooders" (115). As Fitzgerald points out, highly specialized farming operations often followed technological advances that required large investment in machinery that had only one function.

¹³ Danbom, 195-196.

¹⁴ Ronald Jager's *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea* (2004) offers a narrative of the kind of farm that was lost with industrialization. See pages 24-28.

¹⁵ The first chapter of Fite's *American Farmers: The New Minority* (1-19) gives a broad history of the decline of the self-sufficient farm, the shift of population from rural to urban, as well as the economic shifts that accompanied this change. While he does not offer specific statistics about when the self-sufficient farm was extinct, he does give many statistics about economic shifts, population shifts, and exports that all suggest the farm moving gradually from a center of self-sufficiency to a center of production for commercial use.

¹⁶ Jared Van Wagenen's *The Golden Age of Homespun* provides an excellent regional history of this era of farming. Pages 239-248 offer details on threshing and threshing machines.

¹⁷ Importantly, both Berry and Wilder look at new time-saving and labor-saving devices and rightfully question whether to save time and labor is actually desirable. Berry's 1989 question addresses the sudden boom in home/office computers for word processing, and Wilder's a threshing machine, but they have at their root the same dilemma. Whether their answers, no to a computer, and no to a threshing machine were reconsidered, I do not know, but I suspect that either way, the logic of their original decision would remain. Berry's reasoning is similar to Father's, in that he is questioning the assumption that there is inherent value in saving time: "a computer helps you write faster, easier, and more. Do I, then, want to write faster, easier, and more? No ... I would like to be a *better* writer, and for that I need help from other humans, not a machine" (74). Finally, what makes Berry's comments about writing and the computer relevant to this chapter is that he connects the "university system" (within which he has worked as a professor for some of his life) with the "industrial system": "The professors who recommended speed, ease, and quantity to me were, of course, quoting standards of their universities. The chief concern of the industrial system, which is to say the present university system, is to cheapen work by increasing volume" (74). Although both Berry and Wilder are living in industrial society, both reject stockpiling capital as the primary impetus for work. True, they each render this idea differently: Wilder by including the distant sounds of threshing ("from the barns came the joyful thud-thud! thud-thud! of the flails"[313-314]) as a part of Christmas day festivity, and Berry by a bald statement of purpose: "My wish is to simply live my life as fully as I can. In both our work and our leisure, I think, we should be so employed" (75). Both suggest that meaningful, conscious work is to be valued above time saving, for the sake of itself.

The point of this comparison is to exhibit that Wilder, in *Farmer Boy*, shows that individual choice plays a vital role in whether technology is to be accepted or rejected, and that choice largely dictates one's relationship to the market. Where Berry's example, true to the form of the personal essay, makes this correlation clearly, Wilder's example makes this correlation much less didactically. Berry's position as a professor and a professional writer make his relationship to the market clear: he sells his services as a teacher, scholar, and writer to the university system and the publishing industry. His gentleman's farm is not self-sufficient, and he is careful in his essays to point out his own dependence on systems he criticizes.

¹⁸ Pages 34-43 of Romines's *Constructing the Little House* detail Romine's take on the economics of *Farmer Boy*, particularly for a Depression-era readership.

¹⁹ Megan Sweeney's article, "'Like a Vanishing World': The Role of the County Fair in Three Depression-Era Children's Books" (2007), also emphasizes how financial advice is passed down through father-son talks in *Farmer Boy*. Sweeney points out that "the fair provides one more forum for instilling the value of the dollar" (146).

²⁰ Romines provides a reading of the same passage, pointing out that "in such lessons, farm labor becomes the basis for a monetary system and for the nation's success" (39).

²¹ John E. Miller's biography of Wilder, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*, offers a perspective on Wilder's life derived from her novels, papers, and other historical records. In "The Joys and Sorrows of Early Married Life, 1885-1894" (pages 71-90), he describes the many crop devastations from hail storms to "hot winds" that contributed to their decision to leave South Dakota.

²² The first two chapters of Miller's biography, as well as a knowledge of the plotline of the *Little House* series, delineate the financial problems that the Ingalls family faced. Although the family repeatedly tried farming, ultimately, they moved into town where Charles (Pa) took up Carpentry and other odd jobs (21-42).

²³ The Nearings are also clear that in selling products, their main goal is to maintain a livelihood: "We have no intention of making money, nor do we seek wages or profits. Rather we aim to earn a livelihood, as far as possible on a use economy basis. When enough bread labor has been performed to secure the year's living, we will stop earning until next crop season" (32). This appears to differ from what the Wilders practiced, in ideology, if not practice. In other words, there is no such declaration that profits were not sought in *Farmer Boy*.

²⁴ Megan Sweeney discusses the importance of Almanzo publicly "winning" at the fair as well (155).

²⁵ R. Douglas Hurt's *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century*, chronicles this change throughout the book. See pages 12-14.

²⁶ I'm comparing mid-nineteenth century farming with 1930s farming here, but still this is certainly a contested assertion. Major points out that "As women's economic power has expanded and improved over the last century [...] there is evidence that women in agriculture have far more public roles and more economic power than they once had" (150). Circular to my own footnote, Major's footnote to his point is of course that "This is a controversial position" (204).

²⁷ On pages 22-23 of *Constructing the Little House*, Romines writes that "*Little House in the Big Woods* reflects [...] conditions of the 1930s US market" (22). Romines claims that as a result, Wilder makes Ma Ingalls "unremittingly domestic" (23).

²⁸ See Wilder's essay "Shorter Hours for Farm Women" (Hines 22-26).

²⁹ Romines also sees the stove as symbolically important to the *Little House* series, arguing that it marks an important step in making Ma Ingalls and her daughters "consumers" in the new consumer-driven era (114).

³⁰ Boydston also suggests that the "corporate colonial household" declined as "commercial markets and manufacturing" rose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (2). What we see in *Farmer Boy*, though it is set a number of years past the "early nineteenth century," is a household that had more than the vestiges of a "corporate colonial household"—it still functioned largely as one, but with the self-recognition that it was a dying institution.

³¹ Economic power and social value did not translate to political or decision making power, and it would be hard to make a broad argument about whether Wilder truly felt women were "better off" in the days of *Farmer Boy* than they were in the 1930s having achieved suffrage. Wilder's feelings about women and the vote were complex, but clearly in favor of voting rights for women. Wilder writes: "A great many seem to regard the securing of the ballot as the supreme attainment and think that with women allowed to vote, everything good will follow as a matter of course. To my mind, the ballot is incidental, only a small thing in the work that is before the women of the nation" (*Ozarks* 197). In this quote from 1916, Wilder felt, as

many at the time, that women's chief duties were in raising children to be good citizens, and influencing their partners. However, after the women of Missouri (her then home state) attained the vote she said of it, "That it is a duty for every self-respecting woman to discharge faithfully" (*Ozarks* 204).

³² I say that Matchar "attempts to understand" because there is a sense throughout the book that she sees the New Domesticity as a potential problem for women in the long term, particularly in terms of financial independence. It is clear that Matchar is suspicious that the movement may leave women feeling trapped in unrealistic expectations. Chapter Ten (pages 231-250) outlines concisely what Matchar sees as the limitations of the New Domesticity movement.

³³ Matchar calls Wendell Berry one of the "heroes of the New Domesticity movement" (239).

³⁴ Romines reads the abundance at the Wilder's table as a symbol of their overall wealth and security: "This book is full of food and money. The abundance of the Wilder table is too much for even Almanzo, an epic eater" (38).

³⁵ See essays from *The Missouri Ruralist*, such as "Does it Pay to be Idle?" (February 1916), and from *MacCall's*, such as "Whom Will You Marry?" (June 1919). Both are reprinted in the compilation of Wilder's writing: *Little House in the Ozarks*.

³⁶ By the 1920s and 1930s most children under fourteen, even in lower-income families were not working: "by the 1930s lower-class children joined their middle-class counterparts in a new nonproductive world of childhood" (Zelizer 16). On pages 208-245 Zelizer documents the potential problems that have come from preventing children from working, pointing out that "economic dependency can be a psychological hazard to children" (220).

³⁷ The work that was left undone by the twentieth century "useless" child, nevertheless had to be done. The bulk of this burden landed on women, as men increasingly sought wage-labor outside the home. Zelizer has pointed out that some historians believe the "decline in child labor pushed mothers into the labor force between 1920 and 1940," creating a situation where "mothers took over children's work responsibilities, without, however, relinquishing their former household duties" (9-10). In a farming community, it is less likely that children would be employed off the farm. Thus, the work that mothers took over, as children became "useless" was household and farmstead labor.³⁷ If children do not exist simply to be waited upon, then parents' roles change as well. In "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature" (1987), Lissa Paul argues that "the forms of physical, economic and linguistic entrapment that feminist critics have been revealing in women's literature match the images of entrapment in children's literature" (150). The "economic" entrapment to which Paul refers is the very basis upon which my argument is formed. If, as feminist critics have long contended, the key to equality and respect lies in equal access to economic independence, it is revealing to consider that children's changing economic role in American culture also changes their capacity to demand respect and autonomy. Of course, to discuss womanhood and childhood together is to call up a history of critical tension. As Beverly Lyon Clark points out, "The relationship between feminism and childhood is complicated ... because adulthood is exactly what feminists want to claim. The cost of doing so is that we grind children under our feet" (5). When Clark suggests that "those of us who consider ourselves adults" should "work at imagining children as peers," (4) I feel this is especially challenging in contemporary American society, where children are economically disenfranchised.

³⁸ Zelizer's chapter two of *Pricing the Priceless Child*, describes in detail the culture war associated with the laws that worked toward limiting, then banning child labor. In concluding the chapter, Zelizer writes, "the conflict over the propriety of child labor between 1870 and 1930 in the U.S. involved a profound cultural disagreement over the economic and sentimental value of young children. While opponents of child labor legislation hailed the economic usefulness of children, advocates of child labor legislation campaigned for their uselessness. For reformers, true parental love could only exist if the child was defined exclusively as an object of sentiment and not an agent of production" (72). Child labor in colonial and Puritan life was seen as important in order to save children from the "sin of idleness" and to foster industriousness. Thus it was unregulated, save for the circumstance that all children have a *duty* to work (Hindman 46). During the industrial revolution until the Progressive Era, child labor was loosely regulated from state to state. It was not until 1941 that the Fair Labor Standards Act was upheld, essentially "establishing the first enduring federal child labor law" (Hindman 85).

³⁹ I use the term romanticization here purposefully. Both the senator and Wilder deemphasize physical hardship, pain, isolation, or missed educational opportunities. Wilder of course mentions hardships, but they are by no means a central concern.

⁴⁰ *Boy Life on the Prairie* by Hamlin Garland offers a much different picture of farm labor. Every bruise, blister, and burn is described in agonizing detail.

⁴¹ The very notion of character-building suggests that an ideal childhood exists, and that parents could strive to provide it for their children.

⁴² Remember that in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1909), the Cuthberts want to adopt a boy because they are in need of help. In lieu of the labor a male child would have provided, they hire Jerry Boute for the season.

⁴³ It is important to note, too, the limitations of party politics here. New Agrarianism, for example, defies simplistic, dualistic political thinking and draws both approbation and criticism from the left and the right at the same time. Scott Nearing, noted in Julia Mickenberg's *Learning from the Left* as a proponent of lefty literature for children (and also a noted leftist economist who was dismissed from the academy due to his radical positions), is considered one of the fathers of New Agrarian thought. He eschewed many modern farm technologies and might more readily be associated with Wilder's so-called conservative agrarian thought as seen in *Farmer Boy*, than Lenski's in *Phebe Fairchild*, *Her Book*. I enter into "political" analyses very carefully, finding it a dicey framework within which to discuss the attitudes of agricultural thinkers.

⁴⁴ I'm thinking particularly of Mickenberg's reading of Lucy Sprague Mitchell's *Here and Now Storybook* (1921) as an example of the kind of literature where introducing the child to industrialization was a primary part of the text (40-46). Mickenberg does make mention of Lenski as a leftist author, but Lenski is not one of her primary subjects.

Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie: Frontier Mythology and Nostalgia

¹ Indeed, whenever I mention that I write about farming novels the response from adults with PhDs in literature to grade school children and most people in-between is "Like *Little House on the Prairie*?" I have never heard "Like *Giants in the Earth*?" or "Like *Boy Life on the Prairie*?"

² Similarly, Anita Clair Fellman's point that "the series offers powerful though covert instruction, partly because it is not explicitly political and partly because it is literature for children and hence flies under the political radar" (5). Throughout her book, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (2008), Fellman examines how these books have been consumed by the reading public, arguing that Wilder and her daughter/editor Rose Wilder Lane "planted" "messages about individualism and the role of government" (9). Ultimately, Fellman persuasively argues that Wilder's books did indeed have political goals.

³ Louise Mowder, in "Domestication of Desire: Gender, Language, and Landscape in the Little House Books" sees this differently, writing that "this frontier is a masculine barbarity awaiting the strong, firm hand of the mother to transform it into a domestic paradise. Men are the servants of this domestication..." (18). For while she argues that the series traces Laura's process of silencing as she grows from girl to woman, and does point out the problematic nature of the silencing of women, she also promotes the series as an example of the feminine voice mapped onto what is usually a masculine narrative of westering, lamenting that it has been "relegated to the ghetto of children's literature" (18).

⁴ For example, almost all the cloth in *Farmer Boy* is woven from raw materials on the farm, such that machine-bought cloth is the rarity. There appears to be no homespun cloth in the Ingalls household.

⁵ In "Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else" Anita Clair Fellman points out the exaggerated nature of the "home made materials acquired from nature and processed by Charles Ingalls" (109). Fellman argues that Wilder's bolstering of her family's reliance on the handmade is part of the frontier mythology promoted in the series. It is clear that some of the reliance on the handmade is overstated for effect.

⁶ The handmade has growing political meaning in contemporary popular culture for New Agrarians and activists alike. "Craftivist" and DIY movements have been addressed by the academy as well. See Elena Solomon's "Homemade and Hell Raising Through Craft, Activism, and Do-It-Yourself Culture" (2013), Kristen A Williams's "'Old Time Mem'ry': Contemporary Urban Craftivism and the Politics of Doing-It-Yourself in Postindustrial America" (2011), and Fiona Hackney's "Quiet Activism and the new Amateur: The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts" (2013).

⁷ Part of this shift may also be a direct result in the change in landscape. The "home economics" of the prairie is essentially different from the economics in the woods.

⁸ Perhaps one could also argue that it is only with the advent of the “market” that the distinction between work and leisure is heightened.

⁹ Venturing out is not always a rejection of sophrosyne, but Pa’s abandonment of community suggests that in this case it may be.

¹⁰ It is clear that in this way, Pa is representative of the myth of the American frontier, as Fellman suggests (“Don’t” 109). Fellman’s article relies in no small part on exploring how Wilder herself uses Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” as a model for describing her family’s westering experience (101-103). Fellman asserts that Wilder’s selective representation of the frontier perpetuate the mythology that has become synonymous with frontier life. Fellman explains: “In its focus on the individualism inherent in the settlers’ values, for instance, the myth ignores the struggles to form community in regions with the ceaseless coming and going of populations. In its emphasis on self-sufficiency and on the bounty of the land, it leaves out the shaping role of government, the close economic ties of the West to the industrial order, and the dependence of many settlers upon wage labor” (104).

¹¹ In her article, “From Obedience to Autonomy: Moral Growth in the Little House Books,” Claudia Mills interprets this moment as an example of Ma and Pa interpreting “moral rules” with “straightforward literalness” (131). Mills writes that “Ma and Pa think it a moral disgrace to be beholden to their neighbor Mr Edwards for the loan of a few nails” (131). It is true that the Ingalls’s apparent discomfort with borrowing is given such weight in the book that it does seem to be presented as a moral flaw.

¹² This “nail for a nail” approach is markedly different from the efforts seen in community-minded groups. Gene Logsdon spends significant time in *Living at Nature’s Pace* discussing Amish agriculture and community. Specific to Pa’s nail-borrowing dilemma, is this the chapter “Barn Raising” in which Logsdon explains how an Amish community works together to build an enormous barn in one day. There is not a sense that each worker is “trading” work, so much as everyone in the community bears a responsibility to one another and the community welfare as a whole.

¹³ Fellman makes it clear that by omitting facts like Charles Ingalls worked for wages as a carpenter during their time in Kansas, Wilder actively shaped Pa to match the myth of the frontier man (“Don’t” 109).

¹⁴ Sharon Smulders’s 2002 article “History, Race, and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*” is terrifically important not only in how it documents critical attention (or lack thereof) to race in Wilder’s work, but also for its straightforward argument that “Wilder’s commitment to settlement culture implicates her within the structure of frontier racism” (192). Smulders asserts that Wilder “insists on not just the inevitability but the desirability of native dispossession and erasure as a means to facilitate frontier settlement” (200). Smulders characterizes Pa appropriately, writing that “Pa, like Mrs. Scott, views the Indian as inhuman. Thus, he is able to ignore aboriginal claims to priority when he justifies, however illogically, his own acquisition of the choicest land in Indian Territory” (196). Whereas I compare Pa favorably to the Scotts in terms of his attitude toward American Indians, Smulders suggests Pa’s “racism is far more pernicious (because it is far less transparent) than that of Ma or Mrs. Scott” (196). This is a fair point.

¹⁵ Smulders reads this passage similarly, arguing that “By interrupting Laura and so preempting her questions about the anger of the dispossessed, Pa resembles the Great White Father of United States Indian policy, for he invokes his authority to affirm the compulsory pacification of aboriginal people through the expropriation of their lands” (195-196).

¹⁶ Michelle Pagni Stewart’s article “‘Counting Coup’ on Children’s Literature about American Indians: Louise Erdrich’s Historical Fiction” points out the many ways in which *Little House on the Prairie* documents westward expansion without acknowledging the humanity of Native Americans during their forced migrations. Stewart points to the many ways in which Erdrich’s novel, *The Birchbark House*, works to “[reconceptualize] the view of westward expansion in Wilder’s novels” (220).

¹⁷ Frances W. Kaye, in “Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Kansas Indians” (2000), elaborates this point fully, writing: “*Little House on the Prairie* [is] a book that lulls us into believing that the dispossession of the Osage people from Kansas was sad, but necessary and even “natural,” like all losses of the innocence of childhood and other primitive ways of being” (124). Kaye’s article meticulously details the land ownership issues in Kansas during the time of *Little House on the Prairie*. Kaye strenuously objects to how the genocide of the Native Americans has been not only elided within Wilder’s series, but also within the body of critical work on Wilder.

¹⁸ Smulders addresses the problematic misrepresentation of the location of the Little House, pointing out that Wilder situated the house just three miles over the line into “Indian Territory” where they were actually

more than twenty miles into it (192-193). She suggests that Wilder's intent in such alterations of facts was both to promote the "legitimacy of western settlement" and to ignore the "legal rights of indigenous Americans" (192).

¹⁹ He may not use the term "ownership" in his philosophical thoughts on bioregionalism, but he participates (perhaps by necessity) in a modern system of "ownership." He "owns" land in California, for example.

²⁰ New Agrarians Wes Jackson and Brian Donahue also acknowledge the primacy of Native Americans to the land. See pages 6-13 in Jackson's *Becoming Native to this Place* and pages 209-15 of Donahue's *Reclaiming the Commons*.

²¹ It is important to note here that New Agrarian thought may recognize this soil/spirit relationship, but the agrarianism and frontierism of nineteenth-century Americans likely did not. Agrarian values of early America are responsible for much of the displacement of Native Americans.

²² Certainly, my own work on Wilder uses agrarianism as a lens through which I can better understand the changes that take place between *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie*. In doing so, I hope not to elide the Native presence on the land, but instead reveal the troubling nature of trying to establish proper relationships with the soil when the soil itself has been taken from the multi-generational landowner.

²³ Kaye's article addresses this in terms of Wilder criticism, but I mean to say that the United States and its people have never been able to adequately acknowledge and address the genocide of the aboriginal people of North America and the subsequent taking of their land. Wendell Berry alludes to this in the first chapter of *The Unsettling of America*.

²⁴ For Ann Romines, storytelling in *Little House in the Big Woods* is an act fraught with tension between the male protagonist of the story and the female protagonist of the novel itself (23-27).

²⁵ It is this feeling of family warmth, Fellman argues, that is alluring to many readers of Wilder's series. She writes "The lure of that 'idyllic family life' cannot be overestimated" (*Little* 193). That hardship created close-knit families in lieu of government assistance is part of Fellman's overall argument that Wilder and Lane had a political agenda in writing the series. See pages 190-196 of *Little House, Long Shadow*.

²⁶ Mills also interprets storytelling as a way of enforcing discipline. She points out that in "The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods" that "Pa's chief fault has really been disobedience" (129). This reinforces her argument that in *Little House in the Big Woods* "unquestioning obedience to adult authority" is the "central moral value" (128). I agree with Mills on this point, and add that it is important to recognize that because Pa is shown to have been disobedient in his own childhood, yet eventually becomes the adult authority, the child is not marked as morally bed because of disobedience. Like Mills, I agree that moral development is seen as a normal part of maturation.

²⁷ I should note here that the songs of *Little House in the Big Woods* also represent generic or distant locations; they are not rooted in place either. The difference is that fiddling and singing in *Little House on the Prairie* is the primary way the family relaxes and bonds, whereas in the *Big Woods* the family also told stories as a way of relaxing and bonding. The songs in *Little House on the Prairie* take on special significance because of this.

²⁸ Others have made similar arguments with regards to feminism and agrarianism. In "Wendell Berry's Feminist Agrarianism," Kimberly K. Smith challenges the notion that agrarianism is inherently anti-feminist as well. She cites a number of critics who have argued that the "bleak conditions" (625) of early American farm life were destructive to women in particular. However, her essay questions the idea that an urban, industrialized society has a better, less oppressive life to offer (626).

²⁹ I wonder, too, to what degree the Victorian notion of women being too delicate to work has influenced even modern critics, who may call agrarian life for women oppressive simply because it required so much work. To me, this suggests a bending to derisive ideas of feminine weakness, particularly if it is not paired with an analogous outrage about the intensely laborious life for farm men.

³⁰ It is exactly the essential and domestic nature of agrarian women's work which has led to its characterization as oppressive, and even violent, for women. Interestingly, when Kimberly K. Smith includes Laura Ingalls Wilder on a list of writers who "challenged the conventional romantic celebration of the family farm by depicting the loneliness, self-denial, and hard work that has characterized rural life for most farm women" (625 "Feminist"), one senses that she is not referring to the novels *Farmer Boy* and *Little House in the Big Woods*, but rather the more popular *Little House on the Prairie* and the books that

follow. In other words, she points to novels where farming takes place, but not within a truly agrarian community. For indeed, once *Little House on the Prairie* starts there is comparatively little time devoted to Ma's labor; it is clear that the narrative is about Pa's adventure.

³¹ In her research on Caroline Quiner Ingalls (the person, not the character), Fellman reveals that Caroline's difficult childhood, riddled with adult responsibility and insecurity, gave her a "deep hunger for stability" (13). Fellman includes that Quiner, in an essay written before her marriage, writes "Who could wish to leave home and wander forth in the world to meet its tempests and its storms? Without a mother's watchful care and a sister's tender love? Not one" (13). Rightly, Fellman asserts that this longing for proximity with family and the accompanying stability they offered was not something Quiner found in her marriage to Ingalls (13).

³² Fellman points out that in the fictionalization of Caroline Quiner Ingalls's experience, her "attachments to extended family, friends, and community are downplayed; her immediate family forms virtually her entire world" ("Don't" 106). To wit, this expression of delight at the chance to see family, is one of the only opportunities a reader has to see that Ma has any interest in the world outside her husband and children.

³³ This is a debatable point. Ann Romines reads this passage differently, arguing that Grandma's dancing "shows the tremendous danger to social order implicit in such a female performance, especially when a woman 'beats' a man. Significantly, this is Grandma's first and last speaking appearance in the Little House series. She seems a dangerous, potentially disruptive presence" (30). However, in her own footnote, Romines points out that this is likely the last time Wilder ever saw her grandmother, which might support my assertion that this matriarchal, communal dancing scene is a uniquely agrarian act. The reason Wilder never gives a speaking role to Grandma again might not be because she is a "danger," but because the continuity of agrarian community no longer existed in the narrative.

³⁴ Mills points out that technically Laura is whipped "less for the actual offense of striking Mary than for disobeying [Pa's] prior command" (129). While this is true and Pa does say "It is what I say that you must mind" before the whipping, the severity of the punishment, and Wilder's choice to include it in the narrative is almost certainly linked to the severity of the offense itself. It is inconceivable, even for a child of the nineteenth century, (except in the most strictly authoritarian households) to be whipped for each moment of disobedience.

The Land: Recovering Black Agrarianism

¹ See Kimberly K. Smith's *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (2007), particularly Chapters two and three for a detailed overview of Black Agrarianism.

² This is certainly not to say land-owning and farming was the only way to survive—many other skill sets proved equally useful.

³ Kimberly K. Smith points out that a number of fugitive slave narratives elucidate that for many of the enslaved, freedom meant the ability to pursue a life on the land (*African* 51-56). See *I Was Born a Slave* (two volumes, 1999) edited by Yuval Taylor for several notable passages supporting this. In particular, see William Well Brown (1:703), Solomon Northrup (2:174), and Josiah Henson (1:751).

⁴ See the 1873 speech by Frederick Douglass to the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association in *African-American Social and Political Thought, 1850-1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (1992).

⁵ Critics have pointed to Du Bois's romance as an early manifestation of his "socialist critique of U.S. economics and an alternative economic model originating in cooperative, southern, black folkways" (68 Van Wienen and Kraft). Gary Lemons reads *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* as a "tool to uplift black womanhood and the race" (186). Gina M. Rossetti asserts that "Du Bois's use of the romance genre showcases the text's tension between the discourse of social uplift and the discourse of economic exploitation" (43).

⁶ Specific books that spend some time in discussing Black Agrarianism include: *"To Love the Wind and the Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* (ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, 2006); *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (Kimberly N. Ruffin, 2010); *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Kimberly K. Smith, 2007).

⁷ See Eric T. Freyfogle's introduction to *The New Agrarianism* (xiii-xli) for a thorough discussion of the many aspects of New Agrarianism.

⁸ It is also possible to read this as “historicizing” or “re-historicizing” because Taylor is putting the black agrarian back into a narrative form from which s/he has been erased.

⁹ While the difficulties facing Paul Logan are extreme, I would argue that New Agrarianism’s focus on private land ownership still privileges those of a certain class, race, and sex.

¹⁰ While it is true that there are remarkably strong communities exhibited in her novels, they are divided by race in a way that damages the larger sense of regional community. For example, when Paul argues that Caroline must return to her family because she will need help in childbirth, Rachel (Caroline’s mother) points out: “Caroline done told me there’s a woman two or three miles ‘way can help her [...] Well, ‘cording’t’ Caroline this here Ma Jones could take care of anythin’ I could” (322). Again, the community is dispersed and people are not able to rely on their geographic neighbors unless they happen to be of the same race.

¹¹ Kimberly K. Smith offers a cogent summary of this idea: “Consider Booker T. Washington’s dilemma. Given the influence of Populism in the South, it made sense for him to use agrarian rhetoric to defend the interests of blacks, who were mostly southern farmers. But the problem of humility brought him up short: His advice to blacks to stay on the farm and cultivate agrarian values, while calculated to advance the economic status and therefore political power of the race, sounded to many like a cowardly refusal to challenge oppressive social conventions. In contrast, WEB Du Bois, who was sympathetic to the agrarian critique of industrial capitalism, drew more heavily on the aristocratic tradition. For Du Bois, the virtue of the agrarian south was that it supported a class concerned with humane values—a class (he contended) that should recognize its fellow natural aristocrats, no matter what the color of their skin. His somewhat elitist agrarianism sounds less humble, and has therefore seemed to later generations a better vehicle for status politics. Humility, in short, is at the center of conflict over social status. If we interpret humility as the virtue of “knowing one’s place,” we must ask what one’s place is and whether it can be defined without reference to existing social hierarchies...” (*Wendell* 24-25).

¹² Paul is repeatedly pushed to engage in sharecropping, which would have prevented him from ever attaining a truly agrarian lifestyle. See pages 343 and 346 for two examples.

¹³ I address feminist counter arguments to this agrarian ideal in the next chapter.

¹⁴ Richard Westamcott’s *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South* (1992) offers an excellent overview of the historical importance of these gardens and how gardens and yards changed over time.

¹⁵ I use M.M. Bakhtin’s phrase here as a succinct way to call up a complicated concept. It is defined as: “The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insure the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are hereoglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such, it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress. (Bakhtin 428)

Anne of Green Gables and Anne of Avonlea: Female Identity and Agrarianism

¹ As an example, consider how Wendell Berry criticizes the Sierra Club’s use of the word “scenic”: “Wilderness conservation, we can now see, is specialized conservation. Its specialization is memorialized, in Sierra Club’s slogan, in the word ‘scenic.’ A scene is a place ‘as seen by a viewer.’ It is a ‘view.’ The appreciator of a place perceived as scenic is merely its observer, by implication both different and distant or detached from it. The connoisseur of the scenic has thus placed strict limitations both upon the sort of place he is interested in and upon his relation to it” (*Unsettling* 26).

² It appears as though MacDougall was familiar with this report (familiar enough to cite it in his lectures, that is) and in *Rural Life in Canada*’s reprint in 1973, the introduction suggests that MacDougall’s conclusions were strongly influenced by this report.

³ MacDougall outlines ways the Presbyterian church can help improve rural life, starting with taking surveys to better understand rural populations and considering whether the church should start programs of

agricultural education. MacDougall also believes that the rural problem is essentially rooted in the moral character of the rural person. He asks: "Should she [the church] teach men here how to grow better cabbages? She need not. But she should teach men everywhere and always that it is their duty to grow better cabbages" (181).

⁴ MacDougall's study is certainly biased; it has a nativist subtext, privileging native born and English-speaking Canadians over other groups, and promotes Protestantism as superior to other religions. In fact, one "problem" he points to is the influx of immigrants, a sentiment echoed by both Rachel Lynde and Marilla Cuthbert at various times in *Anne of Green Gables*.

⁵ Many critics have pointed to *Anne of Green Gables* as a text that bolsters the pastoral myth. In Northrop Frye's *Literary History of Canada*, he writes this of the pastoral myth in Canadian Literature: "The nostalgia for a world of peace and protection, with a spontaneous response to nature around it, with a leisure and composure not to be found today, is particularly strong in Canada. It is overpowering in our popular literature, from *Anne of Green Gables* to Leacock's *Mariposa*" (343, qtd. in the Norton Critical Edition of *Anne of Green Gables*, Eds. Rubio and Waterson).

⁶ Also, from an agrarian point-of-view, the labor is not as "productive" as it had been in an earlier era, nor is it communal.

⁷ Matchar explores this most explicitly in her final chapter, "Take Home Points for the Homeward Bound," pages 231-250. I would contend that even in choosing the title, *Homeward Bound*, she wishes to draw attention to the problematic nature of people nostalgizing the handmade era and giving up stable careers in favor of tying oneself to the home crafting of another era.

⁸ Of course, as I mention in the previous section, the family unit was not always "traditional."

⁹ Laura Robinson's "Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery's Anne Books" (2004) offers a thorough look at both representations of romantic attachments in Montgomery's fiction, as well as the critical responses to these female bonds. Robinson asserts (and I agree) that "Montgomery's novels underscore the fact that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, heterosexuality was compulsory" and that "by exposing the operations of compulsory heterosexuality, Montgomery's Anne books subtly challenge the patriarchal traditions that intervene in women's relationships with each other" (13).

¹⁰ Montgomery articulates this most clearly in a journal entry dated Friday April 8th, 1898, in which she recounts her love affair with Herman Leard: "Even if I had been free Herman Leard was impossible, viewed as a husband. It would be the rankest folly to dream of marrying such a man. If I were mad enough to do so—well, I would be deliriously happy for a year or so—and wretched, discontented and unhappy all the rest of my life. I saw this plainly enough—passion, while it mastered my heart, left my brain unclouded. I never for a moment deceived myself into thinking or hoping that any good could come out of this love of mine" (*Complete Journals* 397).

¹¹ See *The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery: The P.E.I. Years, 1889-1900* pages 396-409. Here Montgomery writes of her love for Herman that was "so intense, so overmastering" and that made her "deliriously happy" (398).

¹² While it may seem like this could be read simply as a rejection of one suitor, Herman, Montgomery repeatedly suggests that the whole "class" of farmers would be unsuitable mates for her.

¹³ Truly, the work of being a wife and mother in a full-time farming family would leave little time or energy for intellectual pursuits. The charge against the Southern Agrarians, who linked agriculture with higher cultural pursuits, is that such thinking breeds a class system whereby the labor of one group of people allows for the leisure of another—all within the "agrarian" society. Montgomery wants nothing to do with a system where she herself might be a part of the laboring class that supports the intellectual pursuits of another class. More likely, Montgomery could see herself enjoying the fruits of an agrarian system that might allow her to live in a beautiful rural place, while still having some leisure time during which she could pursue writing. But never could she envision herself as part of the farming class upon which such a society was built.

¹⁴ Montgomery (and countless others) will use marriage as an ending, or a "solution" and this is one of the "dangerous falsehoods" about marriage that Wendell Berry warns against in this post-agrarian age: "That marriage is a solution—whereas the most misleading thing a love story can do is to end 'happily' with a marriage, not because there is no such thing as a happy marriage, but because marriage cannot be happy except by being *made* happy" (*Unsettling* 117). Montgomery does indeed use marriage as an "ending"—though usually for secondary characters. I'm thinking specifically of the marriage between Miss Lavender and Mr. Irving in *Anne of Avonlea*.

¹⁵ On Wednesday, December 3, 1903, Montgomery receives a check for a serial story she published in *Boy's World*. She reflects on “realizing” her “dreams,” but notes that in Cavendish it was a solo pursuit: “I enjoy my success for I’ve worked and fought hard for it. I have the satisfaction, too, of knowing I’ve fought my own battles. I have never had any assistance and very little encouragement from anyone. My ambitions were laughed at or sneered at. The sneerers are very quiet now. The *dollars* have silenced them. But I have not forgotten the sneers. My own perseverance has won the fight for me in the face of all discouragements and I’m glad of it now (*The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery, The PEI Years, 1901-1911* 89).

¹⁶ This is how she characterizes her friend Bertha’s brother (*The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery, The PEI Years, 1901-1911* 143).

¹⁷ I am thinking of the drawn-out story line of Mr. Harrison, who appears to be a new bachelor in town whose housekeeping habits shock all who visit him, and who we later learn has an estranged wife who is a meticulous housekeeper. Their marriage was a practical arrangement from the beginning, with Mr. Harrison needing a housekeeper after his sister died. However, when his new wife couldn’t stand his parrot, he decided to leave her rather than get rid of his bird. They reunite after the bird has died, and Mr. Harrison marks the occasion by saying he “found her scrubbing the floor but with the first decent meal I’d had since she left be all ready on the table” (320).

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