

FINDING HOME: (RE)DISCOVERING FEMALE IDENTITY IN BARBARA
KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the protagonists' pursuit of alternatives to traditionally patriarchal value through economic and ecofeminist critical lenses. The female protagonists in *Prodigal Summer* resist being identified through the social legacy of coverture that is still present in the small Appalachian town they live. Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie demonstrate that their socio-economic independence, acquired mainly due to their educational background, allows them not only to disconnect themselves from societal beliefs that the woman should be in the margins of the male presence, but also to interact with nature differently from others. The women's separation from the institution of marriage and their embrace of motherhood as a matriarchal structure that mirrors the example of the coyotes' families are studied as main examples of how they distance themselves from the other characters' attitudes in the novel. This rejection of old ideologies of womanhood in terms of patriarchal structures and their fight for new spaces in society is also present in their struggle to physically inhabit spaces long considered male domains. Defeating the notion that women belong to the domestic space of the house, the protagonists pursue a feminist identity in much wider settings, including forests and farms. The characters' choice to consider nature as their home demonstrates that they welcome the concept of ecology and recognize the interconnectedness present in nature. This study shows that because of the protagonists' feminist views, they can imagine different ways to both manage the land and their families. The land ethics they acquire thus refers to humans and non-humans equally.

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Preface

She is willing to... make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. (Gloria Anzaldúa)

Barbara Kingsolver's 2001 novel *Prodigal Summer* breaks paradigms concerning gender and space. The plot describes three women: Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie. Lusa is a scientist who moves to her husband's farm after getting married, Deanna is a park ranger who inhabits the forest, and Nannie is an organic farmer who has always refused to get married. While readers are used to seeing independent women portrayed in books, in this case it seems more striking because Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie actively fight against very patriarchal values that assume women should accept men's oppressive behavioral patterns. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that the three women face the remnants of coverture in their attempt to develop their independent selves. Drawing on William Blackstone's and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's commentaries on the English laws of marriage that served as an example to the American laws, I will provide close readings of the novel to explore the way these protagonists deal with a legacy that relegates them to specific gender roles and specific spaces. In order to evidence Deanna's, Lusa's, and Nannie's conflicts regarding their interactions with society in regards to marriage and motherhood I will examine Simone de Beauvoir, Stephanie Coontz, and Elisabeth Roudinesco. Their studies on family will guide my own observations about how *Prodigal Summer* describes the protagonists

so as to emphasize their difference from the rest of their community. Given that these differences include their behavior toward both people and land, I will utilize Aldo Leopold's concept of land ethic to define what is it that makes these women so independent.

Because readers are not granted full access to the protagonists' past, it is hard to affirm how these independent selves became a reality for these women. We do know, though, that for all protagonists this self-discovery appears when they allow themselves distance from traditional values. In Deanna's case, for instance, readers are led to understand that she has always presented traits that rendered her different from the traditional expectations of how a woman should behave. Through her accounts of her ex-husband's feelings towards her attitudes, the novel seems to highlight her rebellion against the stigmatization of the feminine. When the novel starts telling Deanna's story, she is recently divorced and has her dream job as a park ranger. For her, being married to a husband who did not support her views meant that she had to give up dreams about the outdoors. Her divorce symbolizes not only her disconnection from him but from all the patriarchal ideas he had. This separation and the ultimate representation of her feminist identity happen when Deanna decides to raise her child without a partner.

Lusa's independent self, like Deanna's, appears to have always been part of her life. In her description of how the relationship with her husband Cole started, for example, readers note that she is a researcher in a big university, and has her own independent life. After she gets married, she moves to Cole's family farm, and it is then that she encounters difficulties, for her husband's family has very specific expectations of how she should behave. Unlike Deanna, however, Lusa seems more willing to engage in domestic activities expected from her. She is still reluctant, though, to agree with the notion that in a farm the husband is the one who has the authority to make the important decisions. After her husband's death, her independent identity

continues to struggle, as Cole's brothers-in-law assume that the farm will be managed by them, not Lusa. Therefore, the female protagonist has to fight for her right to decide the destiny of the farm, and of the nephew and niece she chooses to adopt.

Nannie's feminism is explicit in her relation to Deanna's father. While she has, at least for most part, lived in a small town setting, she refuses to get married to him as a response to the community's desires. Nannie has a baby and even after that she does not succumb to societal pressures that wanted her to make her union official. Nannie also challenges the community's views by managing her farm by herself. There, her independent identity becomes clearer due to her refusal to use pesticides, an innovative attitude that defies the notion that, similarly to living, there is only one good way of farming.

This thesis is divided into three chapters that highlight the inheritance of oppressive discourses in the three women's lives. In Chapter 1, I will analyze traditional notions that consider that women should be defined in relation to men. The legacy of coverture will be established as the main ideology against which these protagonists rebel. Using a material/economic lens, I will show that the women's material independence from men, mainly acquired through education, facilitates the appearance of different points of view. In Chapter 2, the protagonists' resistance to the ideals of coverture persists in their search for bigger spaces that encompass more than just the domestic space of the house. I will provide evidence that the female protagonists' option for new ways of life allows them to conquer new territories, and embrace the land as their home. Because Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie are able to separate themselves from the ideals of coverture, they manage to create new relationships with people and things around them, which I will study in the next chapter. In Chapter 3, the protagonists' choice for an innovative family structure that follows a "coyote paradigm" of sisterhood is analyzed as a

result of these women`s independence. Finally, I will argue that this novel should be read as a feminist calling for new ways to interact with nature and all it encompasses.

Chapter 1 - Women and Coverture

Prodigal Summer presents three protagonists who constantly push against the constraints of womanhood. Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie live in a society where women do not have as much voice and freedom as men. Running a farm and living in the forest are tasks expected from men rather than women. Therefore, the protagonists' subversion of these tasks allows them to challenge the first assumption of this patriarchal system: that men should have more power than women. For these women, a woman's rights should not be different from those of a man. Despite their subversion, however, they still have to contend with this archaic heritage, reminiscent of the history of coverture.

Coverture is an Anglo-American concept that refers to women's legal status after marriage. According to the 19th century law, the woman loses any legal existence after she gets married. When commenting on the English laws, William Blackstone (1765) notes that "By marriage, the husband and the wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband;... and her condition during the marriage is called her coverture" (442). The woman cannot act as her own agent and is legally attached to her husband, his desires outweighing hers. She cannot own property in her name or control her earnings. She assumes a position of legal dependence, and she has little to no means of economic survival outside marriage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the main authors of "The Declaration of Sentiments" (1848), echoes Blackstone's observations that "[the man] has made [the woman], if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead,... going upon the false supposition of the supremacy of man." Women's identities do not entirely disappear as far as marital legal rights are concerned

at the present time, but it would be a stretch to say that this condition has been totally abolished. In this sense, the novel asks readers to compare gendered divisions of power and recognize that, even if coverture as a legal practice is not utilized anymore, its remnants are present in the community where these women live.

The location of the narrative is very relevant in understanding this legacy of coverture in patriarchal communities. The characters in *Prodigal Summer* inhabit Egg Fork, a little town in Appalachia. According to Barbara Ellen Smith, this region is particularly important for a conceptualization of women's agency, for it has "additional obstacles to the development of women's history" (4) as compared to other American regions. Smith argues that because of the natural uniqueness of the place, Appalachia's history mainly focuses on men: "Whether clearing land, fighting as soldiers, or mining coal, various forms of masculine exertion are the defining activities selected to give name to and evoke the spirit of these broad sweeps of time" (5), ignoring women's social engagement in activities such as farming and labor. Women are not mentioned whatsoever, and "Female agency (other than active support for her mountain community or her mountaineer)... [is] literally inconceivable" (Smith 2). Women are robbed of their history in Appalachia, and this still reflects in society's views of contemporary women there. Smith comments on a statement that John Inscoe, a historian famous for his studies on antebellum Appalachia, gives about a 1997 movie set in the place: "Inscoe automatically and unthinkingly (and that is, of course, the point) praises what are in fact his own 'remarkably accurate' depictions of the frontier as an all-male society (Women do appear in the film, including one as a lead character)" (5). With this example, Smith emphasizes that the history of gender in Appalachia erases women's stories, and this still leads to the erasure of women's agency in the region currently. Even though women are evidently part of reality, their voices are

unheard and forgotten. The traditional legacy of gender is thus more problematic in Appalachia than in other places in the United States.

Whereas the social legacy of coverture is still present in Appalachia, Zebulon County becomes a site of conflict, as the protagonists pursue very different ideas and lifestyles from the rest of the traditional patriarchal community. The community notices the evidence of the protagonists' success in the struggles of maintaining their independence while participating in the patriarchal community when these three women deny the societal positions others expect them to take. In this chapter I will demonstrate how the protagonists challenge the vestiges of coverture that preach that women and men belong to separate worlds, and as such, women must be "covered" by the men. In the novel, the female protagonists refuse to believe that their identities should be defined in relation to their male partners. In order to demonstrate how the female protagonists resist this practice, *Prodigal Summer* describes their lives mainly when they are set apart from marriage and its traditional gender roles. These women's search for education and economic freedom allows them to acquire power through means other than just connecting to men, thus expanding their power domain. Patriarchy defines domestic space as the arena in which women can exercise their agency. When the domestic space becomes too small, Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie innovate and search for a bigger space to exercise their power, such as the farm, the orchard, and the forest, which become their respective homes.

In *Prodigal Summer*, the institution of marriage and its female oppression emphasizes the protagonists' attempt to fight the remnants of coverture. Deanna is divorced, Lusa becomes a widow in the beginning of the narrative, and Nannie had always refused to get married. The protagonists realize that systems of power in marriage most often favor the man. Stephanie Coontz (2005) affirms that "Today, even though most of the legal and economic basis for a

husband's authority over his wife... is gone, we all have inherited unconscious habits and emotional expectations that perpetuate female disadvantages in marriage" (311). While the main characters are very aware of these "disadvantages," the other women in the novel seem to either ignore or conform to them. Marriage is thus used as a contrast between 1) the protagonists, who, even when they chose to take part in it, manage to distinguish themselves from their male companions, and 2) the other characters, who display coverture ideals. By rejecting stereotypical notions of how women should behave within a patriarchal structure, Nannie, Deanna, and Lusa appear to others as outsiders within the small community, for their independence from male figures grants them a different status than the other women in the novel. Even if Nannie is the only protagonist who actively chooses not to get married, the fact that during most of the narrative neither Lusa, Deanna, or Nannie are characterized as married women seems to evidence the novel's attempt to demonstrate how these characters experience their independence from coverture.

Lusa's narrative starts with readers learning that she has had yet another argument with her husband Cole. As the novel presents more details, Lusa appears to understand why constant fighting constitutes their marriage: Cole expects Lusa to act just like his sisters. This creates a conflict between how he wants her to behave and how she actually behaves. Because Lusa resists to some of the patriarchal expectations of society, she is different from Cole's sisters, who do not appear to recognize them as changeable. Due to that, Lusa and Cole find themselves in conflict all the time, and they both recognize that their viewpoints are very different.

Lusa's first way to unconsciously defy the veiled legacy of coverture happens through education, years before she even conceived the idea of getting married. When Cole meets Lusa, she is a postdoctoral assistant at the University of Kentucky with a degree in entomology.

Readers are told that by following this degree “Lusa had wanted to be different” (Kingsolver 42). And so she is, but this uniqueness is not regarded as a good trait in the rural community into which she inserts herself. Lusa’s choices are not understood by others, and the narrator explains that “what she couldn’t bear, then or now, was the implied belief that she was a curiosity, a nonsense of a woman” (Kingsolver 42). Indeed, the community does not see her higher level of education as necessary or relevant, granting her choices the status of “nonsense.” Due mainly to the locals’ own inability to notice how the legacy of coverture affects all the women in the community, Lusa’s choice of creating new opportunities for herself is regarded as eccentricity in Egg Fork. Her pursuit of a high degree of education, something quite common in big cities such as New York, where she comes from, allows her to create a socio-economic independence that the women she meets years later in Egg Fork do not have. The rural women do not have the chance to create new opportunities for their lives, and for them the thought of spending years in graduate school is inconceivable. These women are expected to occupy the domestic space of the house as their main environment. Lusa’s shift in positionality, from an insider in New York City to an outsider in Egg Fork, reflects how the legacy of coverture is more present in certain regions. Lusa’s disregard for the rural community’s viewpoints, however, empowers her to navigate through different settings, which seems to be her biggest advantage in relation to the other women in Egg Fork. Lusa’s mobility is what ultimately allows her to reject patriarchal stereotypes that women should be confined to the domestic space.

Lusa’s refusal to adopt her husband’s name and her attempt to grasp at her former identity before marriage also opposes the ideas described in the laws of coverture. Concerning the coverture rights, Blackstone states that “our law in general considers man and wife as one person” (444). Nevertheless, Lusa does not want to efface her own independent identity. She

refuses to replace her last name with Cole's, and thus opposes the rural community's patriarchal expectations. For them, she is disavowing the farm as a family business, one that will be inherited by the children who will then ensure the business will always carry the family name. Lusa Landowski's choice not to adopt her husband's family name, however, does not necessarily come from the fact that she does not want to be part of the family business: instead, she is trying to guarantee that her foreign heritage will be kept alive. She is proud of her Polish and Arab traditions, and music and food - among other things - are parts of her previous independent life she does not want to leave behind by replacing her last name with her husband's.

However, Lusa's fight against the erasure of her previous identity and the adoption of patriarchal notions about marriage is challenged by the society, which refuses to address her by her last name. Since others' perception of her identity is not something she has control of, "Everyone called her Mrs. Widener, as if there were no Lusa at all" (Kingsolver 40). Lusa was going against patriarchal ideas that were already rooted into everybody's mind. Because of that, nobody seems to bother memorizing her first or last name. Even Cole's family refuses to say "Lusa" when referring to her and their reluctance to use her name mirrors their opinion about her entering the family. The community's apparent difficulty in defining Lusa as a subject, independent from a man, mirrors Judith Butler's argument that

oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects... who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law.... Oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability. (229)

Butler's definition of oppression as a covert prohibition relates back to Blackstone's use of the word coverture to refer to the male act of the husband metaphorically covering the wife. In 1765, Blackstone explained that the wife becomes one with the husband, and when she is considered separately from him, she is seen "as inferior to him" (444). The wife has her own identity erased, and after marriage her identity becomes that of her husband. She has no individual desires or actions. In Lusa's case, even though she lives in the 21st century, the community still hesitates to use her name. There is an overall intention of ignoring her personal identity after marriage. Moreover, the fact that, in the eyes of the law, Lusa's marriage turned her into Cole's dependent, for he was the breadwinner in the family, while she stayed at home taking care of the house, also contributes to the notion that her previous identity was being effaced somehow by the community.

The "domain of unthinkability and unnameability" which Butler identifies as one way oppression may work constantly frames the other characters' attitudes towards Lusa. Their inability to think outside of their established traditions is clear not only in terms of patriarchal ideas but also in relation to most aspects of their everyday life. When Lusa searches for an alternative to the tobacco they have always grown in the farm, for example, Cole's brothers-in-law make fun of her. When she announces to Little Rickie that she is going to raise goats, he tells her: "I think everybody in the country would think you were crazy for trying it" (Kingsolver 166). His remark nicely describes the society of Egg Fork, which is wary of changes. Lusa's creativity and problem-solving ability frame her difference in relation to the limited thinking the community presents.

The difference between the views of the protagonist and the community and the subsequent conflict between these two worlds are most obvious when Lusa sees the ghost of her

mother-in-law in her house. The ghost epitomizes the vestiges of coverture that her in-laws carried with them, and Lusa's resistance to them causes her late mother-in-law to constantly judge her: "...sitting in this kitchen... she felt the disapproving presence of his dead mother..." (Kingsolver 33). Lusa never fulfills the ideal of submission expected from a farm wife, and her mother-in-law, as the most important matriarchal figure of the family, serves the purpose of reminding Lusa of her failure. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar address the difficulty of maintaining a female identity when one is always surrounded by the "ghosts" of patriarchy: "[w]hat this implies... is not only that she herself is fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes, as her mother [in-law] did, but that male-defined masks and costumes inevitably inhabit her, altering her vision" (19). Gilbert and Gubar argue that the woman's individuality has to disappear to open space for these new masks and costumes. The use of language is important here, as the words "masks" and "costumes" imply that women are covered by male expectations and should become an embodiment of the coverture values utilized as norm. In this sense, becoming a member of the community entails Lusa's submission and acceptance of these ideals. As Lusa refuses to wear the mask, others do not know how to react to her real self.

Lusa's individuality is also attacked by her sisters-in-law's husbands, the main patriarchal presences around her. They do not believe she can take care of the farm by herself after Cole dies. When Lusa suggests not planting tobacco anymore, she "felt [her sisters-in-law's husbands] pressing on her shoulders like the hands of a disapproving matron trying to get the message across to a selfish child: 'Sit down, your turn is over'" (Kingsolver 107). With Cole's death, Lusa's in-laws seem to think that she needs the men in the family to make decisions for her, as if she were "either invisible or dangerous" (Kingsolver 112). After all, if the rural community

considers one's identity related to the husband's existence, then when he is not alive anymore, a woman's role becomes confusing.

These coverture values become even clearer when the narrator explains how the farm was divided among Cole and his sisters after their father died. Readers are told that "Dad Widener had deeded each daughter an acre on which to build a house when she married, meanwhile saving back the remainder of the sixty-acre farm for his only son, Cole" (Kingsolver 33). Cole's father's choice to leave a considerably bigger part of the farm to Cole reflects two main ideas. The first one, that Cole is somehow more able to manage the family property, is very much based on a value system that "g[oes] upon the false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giv[es] all power into his hands" (Stanton). The second argument on why Cole's father would leave the majority of his property to just one family member is connected to the assumption that all the daughters would get married and thus not carry the family name anymore, which, as mentioned before, is very important in an agricultural setting. In both hypotheses, women are seen as objects with little to no alternatives in life besides marriage. Because they are given no substantial property or choice, they cannot be economically independent.

Although Lusa becomes economically independent again when she inherits the farm, which allows her choices that her sisters-in-law are not granted, she is willing to conform to some patriarchal ideals. While Lusa does attempt to deviate from the expectations Egg Fork's community has about an average woman, at times she accommodates, even embraces, certain patriarchal values. After Cole proposes, for instance, we hear that "As a woman, she'd jumped at an expected chance: to be a farmer's partner" (Kingsolver 42). The word choice in this sentence emphasizes that there was no hesitation from her, but the word "partner" also implies that Lusa expects equality in her marriage. Her embracing of a marriage that would turn her into a farmer's

partner and make her economically dependent on Cole demonstrates that Lusa does accept some aspects of the patriarchal system she seems so eager to reject. In the farmhouse, for example, she is described as a typical housewife who cooks and cans fruits, and she does not seem dissatisfied with her work. Lusa adopts the domestic space and tries, at least while Cole is still alive, to conform to the notion that she does not have a say about the business, and her realm is that of the house.

Similarly, Deanna's storyline also presents vestiges of coverture which the character must challenge. In her first appearance in the novel, she is already divorced, but her struggle to redefine herself without her husband is still present in her speech. When Deanna meets Eddie Bondo, for example, and he asks her name, she answers by using her first name only. After he asks for her last name, she says: "Deanna and I'm not sure of the rest...I've got one, but it's my husband's" (Kingsolver 25). In a clear example of how male domination is still a reality in the institution of marriage, Deanna adopted her husband's last name. Unlike Lusa, her individuality is affected by this fact, for when the marriage did not work, her husband proceeded with his life while she was left with his name, covered by his identity. She says: "That name is nothing to me now, but it's still yet stuck all over my life..." (Kingsolver 25). She also realizes that her ex-husband "[p]ut his territorial mark on everything [she]... owned, and then walked away" (Kingsolver 25). For him, signing the divorce papers was all it took to be out of the relationship, whereas for her, it was not that easy. The remnants of coverture are still present in this marriage ideology. Surely one must acknowledge that marriage does not work how it did in the 17th century, when the statement that "He has endeavored, in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life" (Stanton) was the only truth women knew. However, there is still the

lingering notion that the woman will be more dependent on the man than the other way around, even if she is more independent than the average woman.

For Deanna's ex-husband, her inability to conform to patriarchal expectations was not acceptable. His explanation for the reason he asked for a divorce was that "her skills and preference for the outdoors were choices a man had to leave" (Kingsolver 19). For him, her apathy concerning the domestic space rendered her a bad wife. Even though readers are not granted access to his thoughts, his vision appears to defend that a wife should feel satisfied with domestic affairs and should not explore other spaces. Deanna's search, nevertheless, was for a bigger space where she could finally be herself. After the divorce, then, her independence leads her to move to the Zebulon Mountain, "Her proof, in case anyone was watching, that she'd never needed the marriage to begin with" (Kingsolver 19). Here Deanna clearly links her need for an open space to her rejection of marriage and its imprisoning concepts. As soon as Deanna manages to distance herself from the institution and its patriarchal ideas, she feels free to follow her heart and live the lifestyle she has always wanted to embrace: "She'd told her husband (*ex* – already by then), when he asked her why, that she was moving up onto the mountain so she wouldn't have to cut her hair... She just hadn't liked the rule" (Kingsolver 54). Deanna rejects the role expected from women, and refuses to cover her independent self with a man.

After Deanna defines the forest as the space where her independent identity is most apparent, her relationship with Eddie Bondo marks a new conflict with the patriarchal society, since he represents the stereotypical male conqueror in the forest. Eddie is there to hunt coyotes, the very animals Deanna is trying to protect. However, as their story develops, readers are offered a different description of Eddie. While he may be the hunter who risks the coyotes' lives, he is also somebody who does not always exercise the patriarchal power expected from him.

Contrary to what Deanna expects, Eddie demonstrates that he is different from most men she has met, and Deanna and Eddie's interaction is marked from the beginning by their differences, both from each other and from others. He feels puzzled by the woman who lives by herself in the woods and is so different from all the other women he knows. He says, "You're not much of a talker... Most girls I know, they'll yap half the day about something they haven't done yet and might not get around to" (Kingsolver 4). Eddie is surprised by Deanna's courage to challenge coverture ideals that she should be linked to a man, in the domestic space. Deanna, on the other hand, is surprised by the fact that he ignores some of the patriarchal ideas she has always hated, such as the notion that the man needs to be stronger and taller than the woman. Eddie is "not only younger but half a head shorter than she" (Kingsolver 27), and he does not seem diminished by it. Eddie does represent some of the patriarchal values that the community shares, but he is also slowly moving away from them. He is different in several of his characteristics.

Because Deanna feels that Eddie, like her, explores his personality in ways different than most of society, she has a hard time remaining firm in her purposes of not falling in love with him. Readers hear her thinking that "Occasionally, it took all her wits to resist loving this man" (Kingsolver 259). However, she constantly reminds him that he is not essential for her life. For Deanna, putting herself in a situation that could turn out to be even remotely similar to her first marriage is something she must avoid. She does not want to fall into the trap of coverture again, for she has already felt its effects. She says to him, "Eddie. It's not like I want to get married and live happily ever after" (Kingsolver 257). Because she does not want to be attached to a male figure again, she reminds herself that her independent self is more important than anything else. When Eddie leaves, he acknowledges that his search for independence is what connects him to Deanna, for she is also looking for it. He writes Deanna a note that reads: "It's hard for a man to

admit he has met his match” (Kingsolver 432), in what can be understood as his final recognition that she has been succeeding in her search for independence, and exactly because of that, he must leave.

Like Deanna, Nannie suffered from the gendered societal expectations, but she managed to distance herself from them. Nannie creates an independent self and avoids coverture and its influence by rejecting marriage altogether: “Miss Rawley it was and ever would be..., even though she had once borne a child and it was well known in Zebulon County that she’d never married the father. And that had been some thirty years ago” (Kingsolver 83). Deanna, when describing Nannie to Eddie, says that she admires Nannie “for knowing her mind and wanting to be on her own. The county gossip was always that *Dad* wouldn’t marry *her*” (Kingsolver 262). Although the county does not imagine that a man would want marriage while his sweetheart would not, both Nannie and Deanna’s father challenge these patriarchal expectations. According to Deanna, “he would have married her in a second” (Kingsolver 262). By going against people’s ideas of what is expected, Nannie is regarded as the outsider in the small rural community.

The first clue that Nannie will be different from the other women in Egg Fork appears in the description of how she inherited her father’s farm, for it is this property that provides her with financial stability and the possibility to remain unmarried later. But before that, her father had already ensured she went to college so she would know how to manage the farm. When Garnett describes the past, readers hear that “anyone could have foreseen that [Mr. Rawley’s] daughter stood to inherit, since he had no sons. That was trouble that Garnett’s father should have smelled: a daughter away at school in the 1950s” (Kingsolver 136). Garnett links education to trouble, which once again reminds us that economic dependence on men has been one of the reasons women had no choice but to marry. Access to education, however, not only provides

women with some economic independence, but also with tools to consider fighting the vestiges of coverture present in the community. Nannie's educational background allows her to fight stereotypical ideas about gender roles and ultimately escape the domestic space and its oppression as the only place for her.

Nannie's refusal to conform to aspects of coverture does not mean she cannot participate in the community: in fact, Nannie reappropriates the patriarchal expectations. When the narrator describes the community gossip around Nannie's life choices, for instance, readers learn that "even the vociferous Oda would put a hand beside her mouth to cut short a remark about Nannie, letting the suggestion of it hang but packaging it with deep regret" (Kingsolver 83). The reason for that silence is that "Nannie bribed Oda with apple pies" (Kingsolver 83). Nannie seems to smartly use her cooking talents to open up people's minds about her. She does the same with Garnett when they have an argument. This time, she leaves a pie on his doorstep and a letter that she knows will irritate him because of the concepts she is trying to convey. When Garnett goes outside, after not answering the doorbell, readers follow his thinking: "A berry pie, just sitting there, taking in the day. It had the pretty little slits in the top from which a berry pie bleeds its purple fluids – oh, what heavenly mysteries were created by female hands" (Kingsolver 213). The connection between making pies and the expected roles women are supposed to perform is very clear in his notion that the pies were surely made by female hands. Garnett's viewpoint that women are destined to domestic activities such as baking mirrors his traditional coverture beliefs. According to the doctrine of coverture, women are shielded from public life, that is, they are to remain "under [the husband's]... wing, protection, and cover" (Blackstone 442). Women should be covered in the domestic space, while their husbands navigate freely through public spaces, representing their wives in the public sphere. In this sense, the family was well-organized

in specific gender roles: women were responsible for domestic chorus while men were the breadwinners. Nannie tweaks the coverture ideals by doing what others expect her to do, such as baking pies, which surprises others and creates some kind of friendship tie that allows them to accept what they see as “eccentric.”

In opposition to the independent female protagonists, the minor female characters are described as very conformative to the coverture ideals the community defends. All of them, except Jewel, are not very important to the plot, in what seems to demonstrate the ideals the novel wants to emphasize. Jewel, who was left by her husband, notes that even four years after the divorce, people in town still “go into a different checkout line so they won’t have to stand there and not say something to [her] about Shel” (Kingsolver 111). Because in marriage women are considered one with their husband, when Jewel finds herself single again, the town does not know how to treat her. The expectation that a woman must be married in order to fulfill her role in society is such a reality for that rural community that even Lusa, who is independent and from out of town, recognizes that “she’d accepted the family’s judgment of Jewel as a child and not a woman, simply because she was manless” (Kingsolver 112). The lack of a husband, for Cole’s family, characterizes Jewel as a child. Legally, the connection between a woman and a child has been made before. When discussing the husband’s rights to punish the wife in the 1700s, Blackstone affirms that he should do so “in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his apprentices or children” (444). According to the coverture laws, the married woman became a child, someone who should be punished for her misbehavior. She was considered incapable of judging her own actions and acting with autonomy. The notion that the woman is like a child when she gets married justifies why the community treats Jewel as a dependent being who cannot make decisions for herself after the divorce.

Cole's other sisters, all married, represent the domesticity and subservience in marriage that the protagonists try to avoid. In the celebration of the Fourth of July, for instance, the women are segregated to the group that takes care of the food and the children as their husbands smoke, flirt with Lusa, and have fun. When Lusa observes the situation at the end of the party, she realizes that "All her sisters-in-law were busy feeding children or cleaning up, but the men were glued to their lawn chairs" (Kingsolver 243), which depicts the patriarchal society still very present in Egg Fork. Coontz says that "For thousands of years marriage was organized in ways that reinforced female subservience... [I]t is still true that... marriage decreases free time for women, but not for men. In many cases... being married places women 'constantly on call,' lessening the quantity and often the quality of free time" (311-12). In Cole's sisters' case, the wives keep working while the husbands enjoy the day off. The unequal distribution of work and the fact that this is regarded as common reminds readers of the model of a patriarchal system that explores the remnants of coverture to indicate women's inferior situation in marriages. Cole's sisters, with their stereotypical female roles, become then examples of how strongly society still believes in coverture, highlighting the paths the main characters do not seem to want to follow.

Kingsolver's novel shows the differences between the protagonists and the other female characters mainly in terms of their choice opportunities. In the setting where they all live, the legacy of coverture is still very much alive, but the three protagonists seem to be in a constant fight against this system that tries to manipulate them. In what is a consequence of the formal education that the other women do not possess, these three women manage to move through different settings. The education also provides them with a greater sense of ethics in relation to the land and the environment in general. It is their ability to see things differently from the rest of

the community that allows them to accomplish goals that others could not (vide Lusa's successful decision to raise goats and Nannie's thriving organic business, for example).

The women are indeed able to move comfortably through the domestic space of the house and even perform stereotypically female roles, such as cooking and canning fruit. Interestingly enough, because of their unconventionality in relation to gender roles, the moments in which they happily conform to these roles go unnoticed by the other characters. The protagonists' search must be studied as an attempt to find bigger spaces that encompass more than just the domestic space to which women are traditionally relegated while their husbands are free to wander around and make decisions. These bigger spaces allow the women to navigate between the worlds of public and private sphere indiscriminately, without following preconceived ideas of where they belong. In this sense, the women's denial of coverture is their denial of the separation between private and domestic space.

Chapter 2 - Nature and Feminist Search

In *Prodigal Summer*, the place where the protagonists live and develop their independent selves not only contributes to their discoveries about themselves but also helps distinguish them from the people who carry traditional ideas. According to the patriarchal society in which they live men are allowed mobility and freedom through their connection to outdoor spaces, whereas women are condemned to domesticity, as noticed in Cole's sisters. The protagonists, however, do not constrain themselves to the physical space of the house. On the contrary, they have freed themselves from preconceived ideas about the spaces where they supposedly belong and this broadens their participation in the world. By breaking with past conceptions, they open up new alternatives to both their society and themselves. Their need for alternative ways of leading their lives independently from men requires them to challenge patriarchal rules and search for a bigger space in which their personalities can be fully developed. The novel thereby destabilizes the traditional model that connects women and the domestic space of the house, for the house is seen as a constraint to the female protagonists who are then able to embrace nature as a borderless, plural, diverse space. Nannie, Lusa, and Deanna lead independent lives in their farms or the forest, respectively, which represents their distance from the domestic ideology of separate spheres for men and women.

Feminist critics have studied how the lexicon of nature implies an association between nature and the different sexes that has harmful consequences to women. Stacy Alaimo, for instance, argues that "Pastorals depicted nature as mother and bride who would soothe the anxieties of men, ... comforting them with nurturing, "subordinate," and "essentially passive" female natures" (2). The comparison between nature and women, depicted by expressions such as "Mother Nature," emphasizes the conception that men's jobs should involve taming women in

the same way they tame nature. It “endorse[s] the exploitation... by promoting an ideology of power” (Alaimo 2). The denigration of women through the comparison between them and nature highlights the exploitation of which both have been victims. Annette Kolodny affirms that by choosing to illustrate the man as the stereotypical inhabitant of the “wilderness,” “the images of abuse that have come to dominate the pastoral vocabulary suggest that we have been no more successful in our response to the feminine qualities of nature than we have to the human feminine” (177). Women’s and nature’s oppression are then connected through the “continuing fascination with the lone male in the wilderness” (Kolodny 177). In settings such as farms and forests, where nature is abundant and patriarchal conceptions are very present, the stereotypes of the male conqueror and the female subservient present in the ideals of coverture are still true. Kolodny incites a change in the way both nature and women are described in relation to men. *Prodigal Summer* answers this urge by portraying three women who aim at separating themselves from these conceptions that women, like nature, must be dominated by the forces that insist on ruling them. Kingsolver hints from the beginning that the novel will treat nature and its connection to gender in different ways. In Alaimo’s words, nature has been seen as the bride who comforts men. It is thus interesting to notice that Kingsolver chooses to use a prothalamium, an ode in celebration of an upcoming wedding, as the epigraph to the novel. In the ode, however, the groom is the spring season, which emphasizes the new connections the writer draws between the protagonists and nature, and the idea that people are given a new chance to grow and start over. The protagonists’ separation from the conventions imposed on them by the patriarchal society allows the female protagonists to reevaluate not only their own identities but also everything that surrounds them.

Following Neil Evernden’s claim that “There is no such thing as an individual, only an

individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place” (103), the study of how the female protagonists interact with the world around them and accept nature as home is important for demonstrating their constant search for ways to express themselves. Narduzzi affirms that the novel is “intimately linked with ideas of how wilderness and home are connected, and how wonder, awe, and embodied states of awareness work together when one is deeply connected to *place*. Kingsolver asks her readers to question how these concepts factor into human beings’ relationships with others, and human beings’ relationships with Nature” (73). Booth agrees that the settings are important in the novel: “*Prodigal Summer*... offers a possible trajectory that affirms the potential of woman’s connection with nature without reinscribing persistent and powerful dualisms” (329). In this sense, the common connection between nature as feminine and culture as masculine has to be forgotten because the protagonists do not believe in such a distinction in the construction of their identities.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the female protagonists fully embrace the concept of ecology and make the world their home. The word “ecology” in its etymological meaning already recognized the land as one’s home, and the study of ecology should encompass more than a mere study of nature as wilderness, but rather a study of all beings as connected to our home. In the search for this new home, the main characters are able to imagine different ways to manage the land, in an association that highlights the connection between the roots of the words ecology and economics. Moreover, they realize that nature cannot be considered a static home, but it is always dynamic and related to interconnectedness among all beings. As a consequence of these new perceptions, these three women create a deeper land ethics in comparison to the other characters.

The protagonists’ love for the land and their recognition of it as home is explained by the

fact that this is the space where they can finally be themselves. In Greta Gaard's definition, "Home' needs to be understood as 'a set of relationships, a series of contextual experiences,' and a place of connection where one lives physically, where one is emotionally connected, and where one is part of a community of beings" ("New Directions" 656). Nature, with its own examples of self-reliance and community building, is for them the essential foundation for their search for independence in a patriarchal society still affected by the legacy of coverture. This comfort only home provides is experienced by the protagonists in their different settings. If Nannie succeeds at separating herself from patriarchal conventions in her orchard, Deanna does so in the forest, and Lusa, in the farm. In the traditional rural setting in which they live, their freedom finds its utmost expression in these spaces. Indeed, they are creating their own ecological ways of dealing with others and nature. Alaimo asserts that "'nature,' dense with contested meanings, becomes a discursive nexus for feminist attempts to establish agency, self-determination, and reproductive control" (109). The protagonists do exactly that, assuming a different interaction with the natural that allows them to engage in feminist practices. Deanna, for instance, moves to the forest by herself after her divorce. This is her way to answer her urge of being outdoors while not suffering the pressures of society. Her residence in the forest gives her time to explore and recognize the importance of every being there, as well as their need for community. This recognition seems to lead her to later move back to Nannie's farm in search of a system of help. Lusa also experiences nature in a way that utilizes feminist practices, as she is the main person responsible for the farm and has to learn alternatives for using the land ethically. Nannie experiences a similar situation to Lusa, for she also has an orchard which she manages by herself, and contrarily to most farmers in the region, she chooses to grow her apples without any use of pesticides. These three women's encounters with nature not only highlight their fight

against patriarchal expectations but also signal their differences when compared to the other characters.

Although the land is indeed regarded as a means of survival for almost the entire community, the protagonists appear to be the only ones who see it as a true modifier of their attitudes. Suzanne W. Jones claims that Kingsolver “suggests that the natural world could give humans ‘insight’ into their own behavior, and she reminds that humans are but one species among many in the world they dwell in” (93). The interconnectedness so easily perceived by the protagonists goes unnoticed by almost everybody else, and it is already evidence that the protagonists have an innovative view on nature. This innovation present in their ideas of how humans and non-humans are intrinsically connected allows them to also use nature differently. The female protagonists recognize the connection between their acts toward nature and their own lives, but it is harder to notice this in terms of the minor characters. Because the other characters’ relation to the land is rather anthropocentric and pragmatic, a smaller sense of land ethics is created. Cole’s sisters’ opinions about the land are not very clear, as they are not allowed a voice in how the farm should be managed due to the patriarchy still very present in their environment. While they have grown in that farm and had “traveled no farther than the bottom of the hollow” (Kingsolver 33), there is no indication that they have developed a sense of land ethics. For them, the farm seems to be regarded as their economic means of survival. Cole’s sisters’ husbands do not possess this land ethics either.

Lusa and Jewel’s conversation about what to grow in the farm after Cole dies, for example, reveals a picture of Big Rickie and Herb as prisoners of the one thing they knew could bring profit to them in their land: tobacco. The two women recognize that the men have no other easy alternative, for the market would not allow them to earn money with anything else:

“They’re trapped” (Kingsolver 122). Lusa, however, finds a solution that none of them had thought before, showing her innovative values. While the farmers could not think of any solution to tobacco, Lusa created a plan that involved much more crafting than the men were used to. Lusa recognizes her ignorance when it comes to farm business, but there seems to be an attempt in the novel to demonstrate that responses to nature are not as simple as one might think. Lusa tells Jewel: ““I don’t want to grow tobacco... Oh, I’m being stupid... Farm economics, what do I know?” But half the world’s starving, Jewel, we’re sitting on some of the richest dirt on this planet, and I’m going to grow drugs instead of food?” (Kingsolver 122). By showing that Lusa chooses land responsibility over economical interest, *Prodigal Summer* argues that the men see a false choice and are trapped in their own ways of thinking. Moreover, in the end, Lusa is rewarded by her hard work and thus manages to unite land responsibility with profit.

Lusa defends her land and everything that is in it, showing that her relationship with it is more ecologically informed than the other characters’ relationship with it. When Jewel points out that Lusa could sell lumber, the latter replies: “I will not cut down those trees. I don’t care if there’s a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of lumber on the back of this farm, I’m not selling it. It’s what I love best about this place” (Kingsolver 123). Lusa’s interest in nature is based not on an economical standpoint, but on a feeling of responsibility towards it. Nannie is also an example of how the protagonists are more deeply aware of the fact that human interventions should be very carefully planned. Garnett, however, is unable to recognize how the effects of herbicides, not the insects, are responsible for his crop failures, for instance. Garnett says, “It took only one good dose of Two-Four-D herbicide every month to shrivel these leafy weeds to a nice, withered stand of rusty-brown stalks, easily raked down afterward to show the world a tidy frontage” (Kingsolver 85). Even though Garnett obviously loves his land, his connection to it is not as wise

as the women's, as evidenced by his inability to notice that Nannie's orchard always produces the best apples, without any use of chemicals. Nannie herself describes the differences between her and Garnett in relation to how they treat the land. She says, "Every creature alive believes this: The center of everything is me" (Kingsolver 215). Her opinion, however, is that "Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads" (Kingsolver 216). The difference between the two is that Garnett is clearly anthropocentric, as opposed to Nannie, who recognizes elements in nature as belonging to the same scale of importance as herself.

Deanna and Eddie also experience the same kind of differences concerning their views on nature but perhaps not as strongly as the other characters, for they also have several points in common. Eddie seems to understand her life choice. When they meet for the second time, he is a little surprised that she lives there by herself, but does not react negatively. On the contrary, he affirms that she works in paradise, and tells Deanna: "You must have some kind of a brain, lady. To get yourself hired in this place of business" (Kingsolver 12), implying that he would also like to do what she does. Moreover, Eddie's appreciation for nature and his deep connection to it is very clear when Deanna thinks about her relationship with the young man: "No man had ever spoken to her so freely of her body, or compared it to such strange and natural things. Not only a silkworm. Also ivory, for instance, which he claimed was unnaturally smooth" (Kingsolver 55). Eddie shows a profound appreciation for nature, but he still believes that humans are more important than the other beings. For Deanna, nevertheless, the important part of the world does not include just humans. Deanna's relationship with the forest is explained by her thought that "when human conversation stopped, the world was anything but quiet. She lived with wood thrushes for company" (Kingsolver 53). Deanna recognizes the importance of other species, while Eddie has no knowledge of keystone predators and the importance of having coyotes

reproducing in the Zebulon Country. About coyotes, Deanna thinks, “The farmers she’d grown up among would sooner kill a coyote than learn to pronounce its name. It was a dread built into humans via centuries of fairy tales: give man the run of a place, and he will clear it of wolves and bears” (Kingsolver 28). Deanna’s description of her view of farmers highlights Eddie’s resemblance to them, and consequent distance from her. The protagonist knows that both farmers and Eddie trust in old knowledge based mostly on the lack of ecological education on predators and prey.

The protagonists’ ecological education not only creates opportunities for them to free themselves from typical patriarchal ideas, but also allows for a closer connection to the land. The main female characters all seem to share a secret nobody else in the community does: they know that the interconnectedness they see in nature is the key for a better understanding of the land. The Volterra principle, as explained by Nannie to Garnett in relation to the pests in their farms, is one of the examples of how the women allow themselves to look at land in a different manner: “If the predators and prey are balanced out to start with, and they both get knocked back the same amount, then the pests that survive will *increase* after the spraying, fast, because most of their enemies have just disappeared. And the predators will *decrease* because they’ve lost most of their food supply” (Kingsolver 275). Nannie’s example applies specifically to her resistance to the use of insecticides in her apples. Deanna’s use of the principle is an attempt to educate Eddie on the influence of hunting on animals’ populations. Her explanation, however, is not that killing leads to extinction, but rather to an augmentation in the numbers of the animals. If in this context, humans are considered the predators and coyotes are the prey, then killing the coyotes would potentially decrease their numbers at first. After a while, however, the human population would not find food. With this decrease in the number of hunters, coyotes are expected to grow

in number. Deanna says, “One of the things [my thesis] shows is how people’s hunting [coyotes] actually increases their numbers” (Kingsolver 258). Lusa also shows knowledge of the Principle when she hires Little Rickie to help her take care of the farm, for “she would not let him spray any weed killer” (Kingsolver 439). She knows the weeds would just grow stronger, and she prohibits the use of insecticides. Evernden states that “For once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the ‘environment,’ then of course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate –it is animate because we are a part of it” (101). The protagonists create a sense of self as particularly connected to how they interact with nature. Nannie, Lusa, and Deanna do not forget that every action to their land has a reaction. Therefore, their own deeds toward their land must be carefully planned. The land responsibility we see in the protagonists’ attitude mirror their respect and their understanding of the dynamics of the system.

Land ethics is one of the most notable characteristics that distinguish the protagonists from the other characters. As such, this ethical system permits the protagonists to reject the notion that the land exists without a clear connection to the human world. In Aldo Leopold’s discussion of the different uses of land, he states that “A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are... essential to its healthy functioning” (229). The protagonists realize the existence of these “elements that lack commercial value”. The past usage of the land, for example, is something the women cherish. Once again, Leopold helps us understand the importance the women see in understanding the past: “The combined evidence of history and ecology seem to support one general deduction: the less violent the man-made changes, the greater the probability of successful readjustment” (235).

The characters' knowledge of the fact that humans should avoid interfering in nature and try to respect it as they would respect each other allows them to offer a view on the past that is not just nostalgic but rather an attempt to improve the lives of the entire community. The characters learn to respect nature in all its aspects, for the mistakes in the past become avoidable and the connection among the beings, clearer. Whenever Nannie and Lusa avoid the use of insecticides, and Deanna studies the presence of coyotes, the protagonists' respect for the past is emphasized. They not only reject traditional stereotypical values, but also valorize a kind of past knowledge of how to live with the land, relying on older (wiser) management practices. Evernden emphasizes the importance of studying the past as a way to understand nature better. He says that "[a resident] sees a landscape not only as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there" (Evernden 99). For him, to truly possess an environmental view, one must not "look on the world as simply a set of resources to be utilized" (Evernden 99), but rather as a consequence of the actions of humans and non-humans. In this sense, the protagonists show a much clearer idea of what they need to do now to avoid repeating the same mistakes of the past. It is not a coincidence, then, that both Deanna and Lusa see ghosts that remind them of either animals or people that are not there anymore. Deanna sees coyotes as the returning ghosts of the extinct red wolf, and Lusa sees members of her family and of Cole's. Deanna's and Lusa's visions are equated, highlighting again the equal importance given to humans and non-humans in the novel.

While the legacy the characters leave is quite apparent through their responsibility to the land and the younger generation, they also learn from the legacies left to them. In a move that proves the interrelatedness of everything in the novel, family becomes an essential part of the land. If on the one hand, the characters seem to be building independent identities, on the other,

they are only capable of this because they realize the importance of having loved ones close.

When Nannie meets Lusa for the first time, at Cole's funeral, she says, "I lost a child... I thought I wouldn't live through it. But you do. You learn to love the place somebody leaves behind for you" (Kingsolver 73). In an inversion of expectations, Nannie is seen as the person learning from the legacy left by her daughter. This legacy also seems responsible for her realization that people should treat the land as they want to leave it for the next generations.

From the moment Lusa dreams about procreating with a personified mountain to the adoption of Cole's nephew and niece, she shows that her love for the land means love for the family that not only took care of that farm, but grew with it. The specificity of the way the novel links family, land, and love is demonstrated when Nannie's advice to Lusa materializes through Lusa's recognition that land and family cannot be separated in a context where land becomes home.

After Lusa has the dream where she sleeps with the mountain, we hear her saying that "What he'd reached out to tell her that morning, as she sat near the window, was that words were not the whole truth. What she'd loved was here, and still might be, if she could find her way to it" (Kingsolver 80). While Cole collects a branch of flowers, the scent of it reaches Lusa and their communication through the language of nature is the only moment in the novel when, after their marriage, they manage to understand each other. Lusa learns with this episode that even if Cole and her never comprehended each other's ideas, they would still be connected through their love for that land. Lusa's final decision of taking Cole's last name when adopting the two children seems to be the utmost evidence that she wants to emphasize the commitment involved in embracing the land and the family as her own. The family, and everything that composes it, such as the children, the problems, and the land are then Lusa's. The adoption of Cole's name brings her closer to the farm she learned to love. When Rickie asks her why she is doing that, she

answers by saying, “For Cole, the kids, all of you. The family... It just seems like the thing to do. So this farm will stay where it is on our little map of the world. It’s an animal thing, I guess. Marking a territory” (Kingsolver 418). Lusa’s affirmation that humans are nature, clear in her parallel between her decision to leave the farm for her children and animals marking their territory, shows that the protagonist rejects male/culture vs. female/nature dichotomy. In fact, she entirely rejects the idea of a dichotomy.

Deanna, even in her apparent choice for solitude in the woods, also connects family to land. When the protagonist gets pregnant, she leaves the forest where she used to live by herself and moves to Nannie’s farm, at the foot of the mountain. However, Deanna’s decision to leave the forest she loves should not be seen as evidence of a lesser love of her space. Like Lusa, who has the personified mountain, Deanna also has connections so strong with the land that nature assumes a role much more important than that of a background to her discoveries. Deanna’s refusal to tell Eddie she is pregnant and the explanation she will give to people in town that a coyote impregnated her mirrors her conception that the relation between humans and non-humans is more than natural.

Deanna’s decision to raise the child without Eddie mirrors the protagonists’ choice for feminist ideals. The three women articulate their feminist positions through the discourses of nature. Their choice of nature as home reaffirms their connection to the cause of feminism, for their sense of self equals a new sense of place. Alaimo claims that “Given that the ‘natural’ was summoned to discipline feminist subjects and deny women reproductive control, it is hardly surprising that nature and the natural would be particularly volatile sites within women’s texts” (108-109). The women’s breaking of the patriarchal stereotypes related to the legacy of coverture not only creates independent selves that differentiate them from others but also allows them to

interact with nature in a different way. The protagonists' freedom to navigate through different spaces and the subsequent realization that interconnectedness between humans and non-humans is a reality in the natural world leads them to a greater sense of land ethics that the other characters do not possess.

The responsibility these characters feel in respect to nature is intertwined with their perception that nature is everywhere, thus the interconnectedness between human and non-human beings they create. As Leopold affirms, "A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (219-220). The main characters' attitudes are different in relation to how they treat both the environment and an essential part of this environment: their family. In this sense, family and legacy are regarded as essential part of their lives. Land ethics creates a special type of responsibility concerning the future, which connects the protagonists with the younger generations: Deanna with her yet-to-be-born child, Lusa with Crys and Lowell, and Nannie with Rachel and then Deanna.

Chapter 3 - Motherhood and Legacy

In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed how the protagonists' search for an independent self allows them to disconnect from the expectations created by the legacy of coverture still present in the rural communities where they live. Whereas the women's independence changes the roles they perform in the community, they do not prevent them from being part of it. In fact, the women seem more willing to participate in the community as soon as they find their own space. The contributions these women offer to the community include Nannie's and Lusa's jobs as farmers who do not raise crops in the same way everybody else does, and Deanna as a park ranger who protects the forest. The characters' behavioral innovation in relation to their community starts with their separation from the concept that all women should be covered by a male counterpart, but it only achieves its peak when they all embrace motherhood as *part* of their independent lives.

The female protagonists' pursuit of an independent selfhood while voluntarily attaching themselves to others through motherhood is possible due to the protagonists' recognition of their own economic independence. Motherhood, like marriage, has long served the function of separating women from the public space. While women occupied themselves with tasks such as bearing, breastfeeding, and taking care of their children's immediate needs, women's presence was restricted to the private space, outside of the workforce. In the 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir already acknowledged that women were not satisfied with the expectations that they must become mothers: "[the woman] demands participation in the movement by which humanity ceaselessly tries to find justification by surpassing itself; she can only consent to give life if life has meaning; she cannot try to be a mother without playing a role in economic, political, or

social life” (568). Many women felt the need to control their own bodies in relation to motherhood. Elisabeth Roudinesco explains that in the 1960s and 1970s, the Western youth was eager for “another authority, a new symbolic order, a new order of the world and of the desire” (149).¹ Women were conscious that changes in the power structures and authority were needed. Roudinesco affirms that “It was after the World War II that...women conquered, after difficult fights, rights and powers that allowed them not only to reduce male domination [in relation to the “techniques of birth regulations”], but invert its course” (150).² When birth control and family planning became a reality for women, new conceptions of womanhood and motherhood started to appear. Coontz discusses these new possibilities: “Once upon a time almost all men and women accepted that their lives had to be a package deal: You get married and then you have kids. Now men and women can customize their life course” (301). The customization Coontz mentions echoes Roudinesco’s argument that new rights and more freedom to women implied a big societal change, for women could choose if they wanted to have children or not, and further, if they wanted to follow the traditional nuclear family structure or create new family bonds. As Coontz argues, family does not have to imply a specific set of patterns anymore; men are no longer the presumed head. In the 21st century “[family] will not be seen only as a structure of the parenthood which restores the defeated paternal authority...but as a place of decentralized power and multiple appearances” (Roudinesco 155).³ In this new construction, structures of power are different, and even though there are still a few strictures to women raising children by themselves, it is easier now than it was in the previous centuries. Motherhood does not require fatherhood as it used to: economically, women are entitled to choose how they want to raise a family, if they choose to.

In these new feminist settings, the patriarchal notions that considered men essential in the

creation of a family are questioned. In *Prodigal Summer*, as the female protagonists continue to develop their independent selves, they explore alternatives to the rigid family structure that predominates in Western patriarchal societies. This chapter will demonstrate that the women pursue a matriarchal structure that mirrors the example of the coyotes' families, for they seek a new meaning for not only motherhood, but also sisterhood.

The women's interest in protecting the coyotes, while the men, such as Eddie and Lusa's sisters-in-law's husbands, hunt them, transform the coyotes into a symbol of how the protagonists apply their feminist attitudes. Deanna explains the constant conflict between the protagonists and the men when she describes an encounter between a farmer and the animals: "Last spring a dairy farmer had found a coyote den over there in the woods above his pasture. A mother, a father, and six nursing pups, according to local gossip all dead now, thanks to the farmer's marksmanship" (Kingsolver 18). For the three female protagonists, however, the coyotes are seen very differently. When Deanna narrates the previous story, for example, she quickly says that she does not believe the farmer's version, for "she knew a coyote family to be a nearly immortal creation. 'Mother and father' was a farmer's appraisal of something beyond his ken; a coyote family was mostly females, sisters led by an alpha female, all bent on one member's reproduction" (Kingsolver 18). Like the protagonists', coyotes' families are matriarchal: the female is the one responsible for taking care of the pups, while the male's role is simply the one of a sperm donor. Deanna's, Lusa's, and Nannie's interest in protecting the coyotes symbolically represents the protagonists' unconscious choice of creating their own independent family version of the coyotes. Female coyotes, like the protagonists, participate in a type of family that rejects the male presence as essential in the raising of the pups. Deanna tells Eddie that coyotes are so hated among people in the community because "A coyote is just

something you can blame. He's nobody's pet; he doesn't belong to anybody but himself' (Kingsolver 176). Deanna's use of the male pronoun here appears to represent the general assumption that humans or non-humans, when depicted as conquerors, free to wander around, are often seen as male. In one more example of how men are allowed more freedom to move among spaces than women, Deanna shows internalized notions that if a coyote "doesn't belong to anybody but himself," he must be male. The protagonists, however, subvert this patriarchal expectation that only men can be independent.

The protagonists' self-sufficient choice to embrace motherhood could be seen as an unexpected example of how they end up following the patriarchal ideas that all women should become mothers. However, patriarchy is the social system that considers the father as the head of the family, which is not true for the protagonists in the novel. The acceptance of their role as mothers has nothing to do with societal expectations: It is rather a choice that emphasizes their way of approaching nature as integral part of themselves, not of pressures coming from the patriarchal society. Gaard distinguishes the two strains of feminist thought in relation to nature. The first one claims that women are essentially closer to nature, whereas the second one argues that women's association with nature is a social construction. Kingsolver stays away from the misrepresentation of ecofeminism as purely essentialist, for the "essentialist equation of women with nature" to which Gaard refers ("Ecofeminism" 31) is not true in the novel. There is nothing in the plot that points toward a complete integration of all women with nature. The minor female characters, for example, are not distinguished from the male characters in their relation to nature. Moreover, they are described as lesser characters, who deserve less attention and empathy from the readers. The female protagonists, or the characters for whom the readers are supposed to cheer, on the other hand, are "naturally" connected to nature.

The three women do not regard nature as an “other” that must be conquered; on the contrary, they see nature and its beings as active part of their life. Their approach to life is different from the other characters’ in the fact that they do not face nature as exotic, or merely important for their survival. When Garnett writes a letter to Nannie, for example, he describes her attitudes toward nature: “Are we humans to think of ourselves merely as one species among many, as you always insist in our discussions of how a person might live in ‘harmony’ with ‘nature’...? Do you believe a human holds no more special authority in this world than, say, a Japanese beetle or a salamander?” (Kingsolver 186). Garnett’s rhetorical questions, set in a tone of disbelief, demonstrate that Nannie, like the other female protagonists, recognizes herself as one with nature. She also acknowledges that all species are equally important, for they all have different functions. The main characters’ view of nature as part of their lives represents Timothy Morton’s definition of ecological thinking:

Thinking genuine interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between ‘over here’ and ‘over there,’ and more fundamentally, the illusory boundary between inside and outside... This means that society can no longer be defined as purely human. Thinking interdependence involves thinking... [that] all beings, not just symbolic ones, are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge. (75)

Morton’s argument fits perfectly into Nannie’s reply to Garnett’s observation that good fences were important in order to keep a neighbor: “people just adore fences, but Nature doesn’t give a hoot” (Kingsolver 86). Nannie’s statement reflects Morton’s claim that eliminating the boundaries between here and there demonstrates “thinking genuine interdependence.” For Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie, there are no species that are more important than others. In this sense,

the characters not only differentiate themselves again from other characters, but also advance in the direction of the non-human species, especially the coyotes.

Following the coyotes' example, the protagonists try to raise children either by themselves or without a major male presence by their sides. Motherhood as a choice of the protagonists is first hinted when Deanna appears sitting on the floor of her porch, paying attention to the sounds of nature. The narrator explains that "She needed to listen to this: prodigal summer, the season of extravagant procreation. It could wear out everything in its path with its passionate excesses" (Kingsolver 51). The use of the word "procreation" in Deanna's thoughts is important, for it emphasizes the main female characters' connection to the natural world, as they repeat, even if in unexpected ways, the natural calling for reproduction. While trying to follow their own path and separate themselves from old definitions of motherhood and values of coverture, the protagonists are the ideal portrait of the reproduction so typical of the prodigal summer they are experiencing. With the claim that nothing alive can resist nature calling, the narrator anticipates the protagonists' future.

Lusa's response to this call appears when she adopts her late husband's land and discovers that a new feeling of sisterhood toward Cole's family accompanies the caring of this land. In this sense, loving the Widener farm signifies for Lusa loving the whole environment encompassed in the land and embracing the sisterhood system that mirrors the coyotes' examples. Cole's family becomes then her family, one that she must protect in the same way she protects the land. Lusa's decision to adopt the farm as her own triggers a new feeling of commitment towards the family. While Lusa quickly realizes that her newly inherited farm brings with it the constant presence of Cole's family and unavoidable closeness to all of them, she becomes aware of their struggles. Noticing problems like Jewel's difficulty in raising her

children alone, relying merely on her job as a cashier in a grocery store, and still being marginalized by the traditional community, Lusa starts revealing feelings of empathy towards Jewel.

The coyotes' use of sisterhood as a way to support each other is unconsciously utilized by Lusa as she realizes the importance of the Widener family for her. Lusa's connection to the family becomes clearer when she first has a vision with Cole and Jewel. She is the only one who can see them, and they are described as being about four and seven years old. Lusa tells Little Rickie: "Mostly they play on the steps. This morning I heard them whispering. I got up and looked down over the banister and they were sitting there" (Kingsolver 240). Lusa describes these visions as always portraying Jewel with her arms around Cole, "like she meant to protect her kid brother from the whole big world" (Kingsolver 240). Whereas nothing could have prevented Cole from prematurely dying in an accident, this vision could be read as a sign that Lusa should try to protect the remaining person, Jewel, who is now on her own. Lusa appears to feel the importance of her role when she says that she would leave everything if it were not for the presence of the visions there, for "the children were on the landing with their backs to her, impossible to get around. They stopped her" (Kingsolver 242). Dilia Narduzzi affirms that

The ghosts are the indicators that point out for Lusa the ties she has to a place where outwardly it seems she has no connection. She inherits the farm, and... she inherits the legacy of what has occurred there in the past. This past encompasses a family history that values the normative, nuclear, family system... versus what occurs for Cole and Jewel as adults: Cole dies and leaves behind a widow, while Jewel is left by her husband Shel with two children to raise on her own. (67)

Narduzzi's argument suggests that Lusa's heritage includes the legacy of patriarchy that

considers the nuclear family system as the only possibility. Ironically, though, Cole and Jewel are responsible for Lusa's adoption of a new kind of family, for when they both die, Lusa has to find new possibilities to raise Crys and Lowell.

As Lusa becomes progressively closer to the family, the visions that represent Cole and Jewel suddenly change. The narrator says, "A small boy and a bigger girl with her arm around his shoulders to protect him from the world. He was not the little boy she'd believed she would know anywhere, at any age, and the older one was not his sister Jewel" (Kingsolver 309). Now the visions impersonate Crys and Lowell. As Lusa finds out Jewel has cancer, the images she sees change, and she starts becoming a real part of the family when offering to stay with the children while Jewel has to go for her treatments in town. When Lusa talks to Hannie-Mavis, for example, she says, "I'm your sister now, you're stuck with me" (Kingsolver 308), in an affirmation of her commitment to being part of the family. This is the first moment in Lusa's narrative in which there is a clear connection drawn between her and the coyotes' paradigm. Following the animals' family model, Lusa recognizes that she now has sisters and, as such, they should create a system of mutual support.

The sisterhood Lusa creates is only possible due to her choice to embrace the farm she inherited. Lusa develops a very close relationship to the land when Cole dies and she announces that she will not let her late husband's brothers-in-law make all the decisions. Cole had always managed his farm following traditional notions of patriarchy that did not allow Lusa to express herself in the farm matters, even though he knew of her expertise concerning pest management. His death allows her to reach the independence she has always wanted. Days after Cole's death, when Jewel gives Lusa some sleeping pills, the latter dreams that a stranger approaches her: "He was covered in fur, not a man at all but a mountain... He wrapped her in his softness... His solid

strength and immensity... comforted her as he shuddered and came into her” (Kingsolver 79). The personified mountain in Lusa’s dream highlights her connection to the land, as if the land becomes one with her. The land is regarded from then on as part of the protagonist, not just the place where she lives, which might be useful in explaining why I argue that the novel is using a concept of love for nature as a social construction, not an inherited notion that all women equally share. The difference between the protagonist and her sisters-in-law appears to be that they do not have alternatives to their living there, while Lusa does, and still chooses to stay. Lusa, after the dream with the mountain, confirms this idea by affirming, while looking out at her bedroom window, that “What she’d loved was here, and still might be, if she could find her way to it” (Kingsolver 80). Lusa becomes aware, for the first time, that even with Cole’s absence, the farm is still important to her. Moreover, Lusa’s love for the land brings her closer to the family, as they recognize that she is also interested in keeping the Widener legacy alive.

The strongest way in which Lusa ensures the Widener legacy will be kept alive is by adopting Jewel’s children. When she thinks about Cole, she says, “*I wish we’d had time to make a baby together*” (Kingsolver 235), showing her interest in leaving a legacy, and her desire is answered by Jewel’s need to have somebody raise her children. The children Lusa raises are also important for this analysis of motherhood as a partnership with other women. Following the coyotes’ paradigm, the children will be raised by their mother’s “sister,” without the help of a major male presence. Lowell and Crystal will also still be surrounded by their other aunts, who, for the most part, seem to want to participate in their upbringing.

Lusa’s decision to raise the children in a non-nuclear family and Lowell’s and Crys’ resistance to accept stereotypical gender roles highlight the connection between the three characters. After all, they all recognize, unlike most other characters, that they do not have to

follow old genderized ideas. The otherness experienced by Lusa and examined in Chapter 1 is mirrored by the two children, who do not mingle so well with the others. Jewel says that “The boy’s a girl, and the girl’s a boy” (Kingsolver 232), trying to explain why they are different.⁴ Crys is so disconnected from traditional gender roles that Lusa thought for a year that the girl was a boy. After knowing the truth, however, Lusa’s resemblance to the girl becomes clear. To Jewel’s earlier comment, Lusa replies, “Being a little person in a big world with nobody taking you very seriously is tough. I can relate” (Kingsolver 232). Crys, just like all the female protagonists in the novel, rejects traditional views of how a girl should behave. Jewel explains that “It’s been going on since she was a baby. Her first word was *no*, and her second was *dress*. No dress. No dolls, no pretty hair bows” (Kingsolver 120). Crys is very similar to the mature women in the narrative that revolt against the remnants of coverture or pre-conceived ideas of how they should act or behave. Lusa relates to that, and thinks that “this wasn’t really her wish, to promise that Crys would grow up straight and feminine, because maybe she wouldn’t. Her wish was to tell Jewel that the alternative would be fine, too” (Kingsolver 121). In a society whose rules are very strict, Lusa appears as evidence that being different can turn out fine. Lusa’s financial independence – based on land ownership and education – allows her to form a non-nuclear family and raise Jewel’s children without the economic support of a husband or the children’s father. When Jewel and Lusa discuss the paperwork involved in the adoption of the children, Jewel asks if it would be acceptable to make Shel sign away a claim to the children. Lusa answers, “It’s the safest thing. Legally, I think it would be best. Because I’d like to be able to put their names on the deed to this farm. So it would go to them, you know, after me” (Kingsolver 382-383). By choosing to legally renounce the rights to which the children are entitled and then officially separating them from their negligent father, Lusa achieves three

things: 1) she rejects the common idea that men should be the breadwinners in the family, 2) she avoids a more participative presence of the father in the choices involving the children's upbringing, and 3) she ensures the children will inherit the farm once she is gone, which would not happen if they were simply considered Cole's nephew and niece. The fact that Lusa can guarantee the children's ownership of the farm not only emphasizes her close relationship to her new adopted family but also shows that her economic independence makes her feminist choices possible. While it may be argued that Lusa is behaving like a female patriarch, I defend that she is in fact overthrowing patriarchy by demonstrating that a woman can also run properties and determine inheritance lines. Lusa's actions are not attempts to use the legacy of coverture against those that most gained from it, but rather to reclaim her agency by restructuring society in new ways. In that sense, convincing Shel to give up parental rights is not need for power, but her way of ensuring that the absent father will not make decisions about the children he never even visits. Lusa's independent attitudes are explained by Coontz's statement that "never before in history have so many women been capable of supporting themselves and their children without a husband" (268), and this seems particularly true of Lusa, who assumes a farm and two children without a man's help.

Lusa's final adoption of her late husband's last name also emphasizes that she is aware that legal and economic features can hinder a woman's independence. Using Cole's name while married would have caused her independent self to diminish. After his death, however, taking his name represents a different thing. As she says, "I'm married to a piece of land named Widener" (Kingsolver 383). Using the last name when Cole is not there anymore is useful to establish stronger ties with both the family and the farm. Lusa states that using his name "is an animal thing... Marking a territory" (Kingsolver 418). The patriarchal ownership structure that favored

Cole over his sisters is challenged by Lusa's marking the territory. This new mark, i.e. using the Widener name, highlights the fact that Lusa not only inherits the farm, but she subverts coverture ideals that have for years privileged men. Lusa uses the territory that has been the setting for women's oppression in a different way, for she marks herself in it by adopting her late husband's name while creating her own ways of farming.

Like the coyotes, Lusa marks her territory and rears children without a participative male presence, embracing her new sister's children like her own. The main difference between Lusa and the female coyotes is that, while the animals rely on their biological sisters, Lusa chooses her sisters, making her connection to the Widener family even more meaningful. Deanna's claim concerning the coyotes that "If their parents got killed, the pups would hardly suffer for their absence – that was the nature of a coyote family" (Kingsolver 57) applies to Lusa's adoption of the two children who will be motherless soon. In this model of motherhood, nurture becomes more important than nature, which explains Deanna's statement that pups do not have a hard time living without their parents. In a coyote-like system, the clan is more important than the biological parents, and only the alpha female gives birth.

The transformation of motherhood and the awareness of the fact that women should not have to procreate is, in Deanna's case, ironically triggered by her ex-husband. Whereas he seems to believe in the construction of biological determinism as a function for all sexes, he appears to recognize the concept as an obligation he has already fulfilled. Deanna explains why she did not become a mother: "He'd been married before. He had two teenagers already... The way he did the math, he and his ex-wife had replaced themselves. There was no more room on the earth for him to put another kid" (Kingsolver 264). Deanna's ex-husband's opinion that people need to do no more than replace themselves in the world represents a valid environmental concern about

overpopulation. While Eddie is troubled by the professor's strict math, Deanna does not expose her opinion about it clearly. It is hard to tell if she was upset about not having children or if she agreed with his point. Given Deanna's investment in a state of ecosystem balance, however, one may assume that even if she wanted to have children, she still understood her ex-husband's argument. Eddie, on the other hand, has a harder time understanding her ex-husband's claim, for Eddie has different ways to interact with nature.

Deanna's belief that she is part of nature, as opposed to Eddie's notion that nature is there to satisfy his needs, indicates the impossibility of her union with Eddie. When she gets pregnant, she chooses to let Eddie leave without telling him about his baby, for she knows this is not in his plans. She states that "She would tell people in Egg Fork, because they sure would ask, that the father of her child was a coyote" (Kingsolver 432). Deanna literally redefines family through the coyote symbolism. Comparing Eddie to the male coyote, she recognizes that the male presence is necessary only for procreation, not for the child's upbringing.

Deanna's character embraces motherhood as a choice, not a biological function. Deanna's choice is particularly important due to her own recognition of nature as a very powerful force. Nature's wishes are described as stronger than humans' desires. Due to this description of nature, one might believe that Deanna chooses to have the baby just to follow the notion of biological determinism, a concept that does not allow humans much choice. The fact is that Deanna does not choose to be pregnant, this was indeed nature's role. She recognizes that: "It didn't matter what she chose. The world was what it was, a place with its own rules of hunger and satisfaction. Creatures lived and mated and died, they came and went, as surely as summer did. They would go their own ways, of their own accord" (Kingsolver 365). However, Deanna did have a choice concerning the continuation of her pregnancy. Sherry Booth states that

“Deanna is not just another woman trapped by pregnancy; she allows herself to be shaped by it. It is her choice, her human and biological participation in this amazing, prodigal summer” (347). Booth’s use of the word “choice” echoes my earlier argument that Deanna does not simply follow the notion of a biological determinism. Deanna can choose not to have the baby. Instead, however, there are no moments in which readers are faced with any kind of hesitation from her part. The protagonist redefines her relationship with nature by allowing it to act on her, as opposed to what she did before, when she was the one acting.

The independent choices Deanna makes are to a great extent due to Nannie’s influence. Deanna lost her mother when she was a little child, and Nannie was the closest thing to a mother she had. Nannie’s feminist attitudes not only changed the way the community regarded her, but also influenced Deanna’s choices in life. Deanna explains to Eddie, for instance, that “Nobody ever taught [her] to be a proper lady” (Kingsolver 171), demonstrating that the feminine ideals expected from a girl were not transmitted by Nannie. What Nannie did teach Deanna was the possibility of successful nontraditional family structures. Deanna’s decision to leave the forest and move to Nannie’s orchard mirrors the coyotes’ behavior once again, for Deanna realizes she does not need a male presence, but a help system based on her adopted mother. Biological ties are yet one more time proven not to be essential for the concept of family. Nannie’s role as a substitute mother for Deanna is important for the plot, as Nannie’s existence allows Deanna to feel comfortable about raising the child without the father.

Nannie is the first of the protagonists to engage in the coyote system of raising children. Although her motherhood experience is very different from the other two protagonists, she still follows the model, even if in less strict ways. It is true that she does not rely on sisterhood, but she still distances herself from a mandatory male presence in the upbringing of her child. By

refusing to follow traditional patriarchal views, she declines Deanna's father's proposal to get married. Nannie's pioneer actions, especially when one considers that she belongs to an earlier (and even more traditional) generation surprise the community. Garnett says, for example, that "In those days, a girl went away for a decent interval to visit a so-called relative and came back sadder but wiser" (Kingsolver 83). For Garnett, it was expected that an unmarried woman would prefer to give up her child rather than raising him or her by herself. In a description of women in that period, Coontz affirms that "[1950s] women who got pregnant out of wedlock and couldn't get the father to marry them were encouraged... to give their children up for adoption and start over, pretending it had never happened" (239). Nannie, however, refuses to either hand her baby over to an adoptive family or to get married, and ends up having a baby without being legally married to her child's father, thus adopting Rawley as the baby's last name –not the girl's father's-, emphasizing her feminist choices.

Prodigal Summer provides a dual function to the baby's shaping of Nannie's identity: Rachel not only serves as evidence of Nannie's feminism, but also functions as a catalyst for her environmentalism. In Garnett's words, there was probably a "connection between that long-ago birth of a deformed child and [Nannie's] terror of chemicals. The troubles had been evident at birth, the Mongol features and so forth, and Nannie had named it Rachel Carson Rawley, after that lady scientist who cried wolf about DDT" (Kingsolver 136). Nannie's choice to name the girl after a scientist emphasizes her recognition of Carson's work on DDT and its impact on nature. Rachel's birth allows Nannie to consider how the use of pesticides can affect nature (both humans and non-humans). Garnett confirms the baby's influence in Nannie's ecological decisions: "Everything in Nannie's life since seemed to turn on the birth of that child... The woman had probably been normal once. That child had launched her off the deep end"

(Kingsolver 136). For him, as well as most of the rural people, Nannie's ecofeminist attitudes are not "normal" and have reached their peak of "abnormality" because of the girl's condition. Ultimately, however, the baby represents the novel's redesign of ideas about family and maternity. In an application of the coyotes' paradigm to Nannie's life with Rachel, Nannie demonstrates her closeness to the animals' notion that motherhood is not just about the mother and the baby, but society around them. Similarly to how the alpha female coyotes involve their sisters in the upbringing of the pups, Nannie includes society as a whole in her unique experience as a mother. According to Garnett, she links her baby's health issues to the use of insecticides in farming, which would then be responsible for Nannie's better awareness of the power of insecticides. This knowledge following Rachel's birth affects the manner Nannie grows crops, and thus affects the community around her. Rachel's short existence shifts then from a stigma in the rural community to an element of consciousness-raising.

The three protagonists' search for an independent identity should not be understood as a desire to disconnect from all things, however. On the contrary, all of them realize the interconnectedness of nature and eventually search for some kind of support system. When readers follow the female coyote's steps at the end of the narrative, we can hear the narrator explaining the coyote's thoughts, which echo the exact same words Deanna used in her first appearance in the narrative: "If someone in this forest had been watching her – a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a corpse of leafy beech trees – he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path" (Kingsolver 443). The novel's choice to use the same sentences to describe Deanna walking around the forest in the beginning of the narrative and the female coyote at the end emphasizes the idea of the connection among all things in nature. The two excerpts link the two species, and highlight the equality among the species in the novel. The description of the two

females reminds readers that humans and non-humans are equally important to nature, and as such are intrinsically connected. Whether in relation to how the protagonists treat their land or to how they interact with other people, the consciousness that everything is interconnected is always there, creating kinship between them and both the human and the non-human world. Morton's argument that in nature "human beings cannot afford (in all senses) to pursue old-school thinking about our coexistence with all the other beings on this Earth" (92) summarizes the protagonists' own ideas, and indicates their progressive thinking in relation to both womanhood and nature.

Motherhood for these characters is not the fruit of the patriarchal society. They do not have children because it is expected from them, and they do not raise them as the ideals of coverture would preach, with an authoritative father and husband. Rather, maternity emphasizes their fight against patriarchy through the protagonists' demonstration that there is no need to follow a specific set of gender rules in relation to raising children. The three protagonists realize that, more important than following a nuclear-family structure, is to have a support system. Sisterhood is thus regarded as vital for the protagonists, for it highlights the characters' notion that everything is connected in nature. Lusa chooses to adopt her husband's nephew and niece, and Deanna decides to have her child without Eddie's help, having Nannie as her main companion. The narrator describes pregnant Deanna right before she leaves the forest to find Nannie: "Unaware that she would never again be herself alone – that solitude was the faultiest of human presumptions" (Kingsolver 434). Whereas Deanna thought she was alone before the pregnancy, she realizes, as she is moving, that she was wrong. Her pregnancy leads her to reconsider her connection with nature and human society, while recognizing that everything is related. The women's feminist identity and their ecological thought allow them to realize that

nature and humans are one, and everything is linked to everything else: no action is unnoticed. With motherhood, the protagonists will leave a legacy of fight against stereotypical patriarchal conceptions, since they reinvent new ways of raising children based on a community system rather than a nuclear family.

Conclusion

This study focuses mainly on the female protagonists and how they manage to define their independent selves by distancing themselves from stereotypical ideas about gender and space. By looking at these characters through an ecofeminist lens, one can notice Lusa's, Deanna's, and Nannie's attempts to break misconceptions about gendered expectations and domains. The imprisonment these protagonists experience when faced with the legacy of coverture creates their need for new viewpoints. The protagonists' acknowledgement that a male presence should not be mandatory and their insistence on freedom for raising children without men are thus examples of how these three women break the traditional concepts of the patriarchal society around them. The three women's choice for non-nuclear families is the ultimate evidence that they do not see breaking paradigms as a bad thing. Their innovation, started in how they regard marriage, becomes even stronger when they embrace the land as their true home, challenging the community's ideas that women should not be entitled to choose their own spaces of power. The chapters in this thesis were organized in this specific order so as to highlight this series of gradual stages the female protagonists experience, starting from fighting patriarchal expectations concerning gender and space and moving to creating a new family structure that evidences their independence from preconceived notions.

The other female characters in the novel, however, do not present the same resistance to patriarchy as the protagonists. Because of that, Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie are often described in relation to these other women. Whereas the comparison between the female protagonists and the other characters is essential for understanding the gap between the two groups, it is also important to emphasize that the characters, like real people, are much more layered than my

scope could capture. Cole`s sisters are raised in the little town and mostly just accept the roles others expect them to have: they do housework, take care of the children, do not interfere with the farming business, and are described under a negative light. They are portrayed as locals who had neither traveled far nor been formally educated. Like the mouthless moths Lusa studied, her sisters-in-law have no voice. Their lack of agency in the novel makes it difficult to analyze why their land ethics is not as strong as the main female characters. The hypothesis I assume is that they uphold and perpetuate patriarchal attitudes present in their society and do not question the old ways of farming (and living) due to their lack of any other considerable experiences.

Another group of characters that deserve more attention in future research is represented by the younger generation. *Prodigal Summer*, despite its clear commentary on patriarchal societies, appears to bring a message of hope for the future. The protagonists` choice for motherhood is emphasized as a way for the protagonists to continue their lessons about gender and space constrictions, but the interactions between the three women and the younger characters also functions as an example of how the next generation will hold different values at heart. Little Rickie, for instance, learns the valuable lesson that innovation can be the solution for farming. Also, he falls in love with Lusa, who is the epitome of the independent woman, showing that he is much more open about a relationship to women different from his mother or aunts than his family ever was.

The novel invites readers to re-think traditional values and explore what is behind their adoption as rules. The female protagonists` fight against coverture and its limitations becomes then an example of how even small disadvantages women experience in marriage, for example, are consequence of old values that are not properly noted nowadays. *Prodigal Summer* also reminds readers that these old values may be stronger in certain settings, but are still reminiscent

in most settings today. The book seems to be a cry for change in the way people treat each other and nature. By inviting readers to consider humans part of nature, there is an attempt to bring everything together and emphasize that this interconnectedness makes everybody accountable for the future.

Notes

1. In the version in Portuguese: “uma outra autoridade, uma nova ordem simbólica, uma nova lei do mundo e do desejo” (Roudinesco 149).

2. “Foi logo depois da Segunda Guerra Mundial que... [em relação às “técnicas de regulamentações de nascimentos”] as mulheres conquistaram, ao preço de lutas difíceis, direitos e poderes que lhes permitiram não apenas reduzir a dominação masculina, mas inverter seu curso” (Roudinesco 150).

3. [Família] não será mais vista apenas como uma estrutura do parentesco que restaura a autoridade derrotada do pai,... mas como um lugar de poder descentralizado e de múltiplas aparências” (Roudinesco 155).

4. Both Lowell and Crystal behave differently from what the society around them expects, but Crys is more relevant to this study because the focus of the novel is on her rather than on her brother.

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