

*The following essay is an excerpt from my larger senior honors thesis. My work in my thesis, entitled “Resistance is Fertile: Reimagining Community, Agriculture, and Environmental Discourse through Contemporary American Literature,” is concerned with the effectiveness of environmentalist rhetoric. Chiefly, the essay investigates the pervasive representation of a ruined landscape in political, scientific, and cultural visions of the future. I contend that such a vision – which aims to incite fear in the reader to motivate action in the present, to stave off the realization of such a future – is incomplete in its objectivity. Such a vision fails to recognize the importance of human subjectivity in environmental discussions, and thus merely paralyzes the audience as they are left to make sense of a bleak bombardment of information. I turn towards literature – specifically two novels by Ruth Ozeki: *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* – as a venue wherein the possibilities of new relationships – among humans, and between humans and landscapes – might be presented as positive and pleasurable. This first section of the thesis, however, aims to demonstrate how the desolate vision of a ruined future landscape nonetheless can exist within contemporary environmentalist literature.*

Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* is a tale of the people and tensions behind big agribusiness of Zebulon County, an Anytown in the American Midwest. A contemporary retelling of *King Lear*, the novel places narrative authority in the hands of the dutiful daughter Ginny (Goneril) as she navigates the dynamics of a traditionalist family and its family farm at the verge of its collapse, while simultaneously coming to terms with the scarring sexual molestation that plagues her childhood. At the heart of this novel is a critique of the modern industrial agricultural model that places production and profit at the absolute forefront, sacrificing the long-term sustainability of soil and water quality. Yet beneath the environmentalist concerns of land ethics are the personal accounts of family members harmed by the ills of patriarchal dominance. In truth, *A Thousand Acres* is a novel about the dominance of Ginny and her two sisters, as they work to understand the role they play within the farm and the pleasure – or lack thereof – that they might glean from their existence. In this section, I will examine the parallel domination of women – both physical and emotional – as it relates to an intergenerational domination of land. Larry Cook (Lear) demands productivity from his land, but also demands subservience from his

daughters by instilling within them an ideology that reduces their worth to mere offshoots of his own mental and sexual desire.

Within this section, I intend to draw attention to these parallel, and ultimately entwined, dominations, first by outlining the mastery and manipulation of landscape at the hands of the Cook legacy, and later by retracing this dominance, substituting the manipulated physical landscape with the female flesh and minds of Ginny and her sisters. Beginning with the first Cook farmers, who pioneered a draining of the swampy wetlands, and ending with Green Revolution technological advancements including chemical fertilizers and pesticides, I outline the shared nature of an oppressive human supremacy. No matter what the historical time period Smiley writes of, there is a refusal to incorporate the health and well being of the landscape into agricultural practices. The only goals set by the farmers of Cook Farm are entirely human-derived; there is no consideration of the non-human. This selfish shortsightedness extends past the attempted mastery of landscape and connects to the patriarchal dominance of women. Just as technological innovation strips away the natural primacy of landscape, so too are the women in Smiley's novels deprived of their own volitions. The patriarchal organization of a farm dictates what they do around the house and land; their own desires are forfeited so that their bodies might become vehicles of male desire.

Drawing from ecofeminist theorists including Carolyn Merchant and Karen Warren, I note the ways in which Smiley has established a linked problem in the forced production of land and *reproduction* of women, both physically and emotionally. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that is aware of the parallel domination of both women and the environment. Carolyn Merchant sums up ecofeminist actions as those that “address the contradiction between production and reproduction” (Merchant 193). Ecofeminists recognize how toxic chemicals and

other hazardous wastes impede upon both the biological potential of reproduction and the events of everyday life. Karen Warren conceptualizes ecofeminism more broadly as “a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature” (Merchant 195). Cultural ecofeminism, simply put, demonstrates how the male-female binary is mirrored in a culture-nature binary, wherein the ‘progress’ of technology is seen as superior to the untamed natural world, just as the masculine suppresses the feminine. An exploitative mastery of land is deeply rooted in a patriarchal claim to ownership, both of forms both human and non-human. Other ecofeminist viewpoints see these ascriptions of male to technology and female to nature as flawed and essentialist, and seek alternative understandings that might more accurately describe and overcome social divisions. Social feminism attempts to overturn all forms of feminine oppression – including marriage and the nuclear family – to in turn end the subjugation of nature by humans. A socialist ecofeminist perspective breaks down the capitalist ideology inherently values production, associated with masculinity, over the feminine roles of social reproduction – the maintenance of the home – and biological reproduction – the creation of the workforce. Merchant reconciles these discrepancies in ideology by suggesting a partnership ethic that puts humans and environment in conversation, thereby creating a respectful and personalized relationship. Such an ethic protests chemical assaults on reproductive health on the basis of both human health and ecological ramifications, and avoids essentializing women’s roles by making reproductive *choice* more important than ability. As I will demonstrate below, it is Larry’s

The critique of agribusiness levied in this novel begins with a discussion of the original, relatively traditionalist, taming of landscape generations before Ginny’s birth. Indeed, the analysis of industrial agribusiness is rooted in these previous encounters, and demonstrates an

enduring legacy and naturalism of the human-landscape relationship. The sprawling mass of land that constitutes the eponymous thousand acres of Smiley's novel, therefore, becomes a historical embodiment of generations of destructive practices: as much a character as the brooding farmer who stakes claim to it. The farm itself is the first entity introduced, its "unquestionably flat" acreage enabling a passerby on County Road 686 to remark at just how isolated the expansive Cook Farm is from seemingly everything. Yet, despite its outward appearance of a pastoral idyllic, the land is constructed artifice, the result of years of deliberate action. The history of Cook Farm has its roots some eighty-odd years before the present 1970s narration. As Ginny illuminates the tale of her great-grandparents Sam and Arabella Davis – their arrival in Zebulon County, Sam's partnership with the young dry-goods store clerk John Cook, the birth of Ginny's grandmother Edith Davis, John's integration into the Davis family via his marriage to Edith – the legacy of the family becomes solidified in its generational repetition. The swampy, waterlogged lands of the initial farm held the seeds of excess: thirty somewhat dry acres and the roughly hundred useless ones that held potential to give birth to the thousand of laboriously tilled and managed acres of the present.

Concurrent to Ginny's explanation of the genealogy of the Cook family is another, more poignant ancestry of the creation of the farmland itself. John's excitement at the "newest agricultural and industrial innovations" persuades Sam to drain the useless acreage via a series of tiles that level the land. The history of Sam and John's tiles is bred into the very nature of Cook Farm such that a generation later, even as technology shifted and tile became plastic tubing, the legacy of this initial domineering encounter lives on. Ginny remarks how, as a child, she was stunned in a sort of twisted awe by the mythology of her great-grandfather's actions: "There was no way to tell by looking that the land beneath my childish feet wasn't the primeval mold I read

about at school, but it was new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence” (15). Cook family practices become their own sort of origin story, replacing the ‘primeval mold’ with a new vision of earth and, even, religion itself. The swampy land, unable to produce, is useless, while the man-shaped land, which provides year after year of crops, is something at which to marvel. In this manipulation is a rampant anthropocentric hubris that undercuts the seemingly pastoral landscape. Larry’s ‘pleasure and reverence’ towards the tiles similarly overturns typical notions of respect towards God or gratitude for the land itself. “However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not. We went to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks” (15). Larry Cook is not a humble man, envisioning himself as a steward between humans and some divine omnipotent being. Rather, the text paints him as a man deeply rooted in his own actions and immediate volition. The land has been tamed at the hands of man and a profoundly masculine technology, the fleeting, whimsical disorganization cast aside in favor of a purely domineering relationship. Man shapes man, and man shapes landscape; there is nothing given nor lucked upon, but rather all success is born from a combination of hard work and personal accountability.

Cook Farm, in essence, is an ideology of personal gain and a demonstration of personal power. Larry Cook is established squarely opposite from the barely-mentioned Ericsons, whose failings serve as a constant lesson of the importance of discipline and structure. Cal Ericson, in Larry’s eyes, represented a lack of focus, and a failure to understand or even appreciate the value of a farm as a business. “[The Ericsons’] farm represented neither history nor discipline, and while they were engaged in training dogs and making ice cream, we were engaged in toiling steadily up a slight incline toward a larger goal” (46). In references the history of the Ericsons’ farm, or lack thereof, Ginny nods to the essential role that the legacy of taming the land has

played in her life, even eighty years later. The Cooks do not entertain flights of fancy or get distracted and unfocused, but rather toil up a slight incline. The end goal, of course, is to flatten out the incline, just as Sam Davis and John Cook did years before. Landscape, again, becomes adversarial: a mere inconvenience that must be overcome in an effort to achieve maximum profit and maximum status.

The actions of the Cook family farmers are taken to achieve maximum, short-term economic profits, and rest on technology-centered means of production. Such means of production are largely a result of so-called Green Revolution technologies that came about after the Second World War and were quickly adopted to increase yields. Synthetically produced chemical inputs such as fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides are applied to fields in order to restore vital nutrients to the soil, and kill unwanted weeds and insect pests, respectively. The effects of such chemicals are vast and detrimental to both humans and the environment, alike. Many of the most common agricultural pesticides are toxic to the nervous system, are carcinogenic, can cause genetic damage, can harm reproductive organs, and can disrupt healthy functioning of hormones. Chemicals contaminate the water due to agricultural run-off, causing their harmful effects to spread out well beyond the point of initial production. Pests and weeds can become resistant to chemicals, and in the process require new and more inputs. The soils themselves become degraded as diverse microbial health diminishes and the physical structure of the earth compacts, again requiring more inputs to salvage production for the following year. The vicious cycle wherein past practices require increased destructive practices plays out generation after generation; the stories of *A Thousand Acres* are not atypical, yet Smiley employs individual accounts in order to personalize the experience of such overwhelming shortsightedness.

While maximum profits at Cook Farm are a result of these Green Revolution practices, to label them as a chief motivation is limited, at best. Ginny describes how Larry Cook's motivations appear to be rooted in something much less tangible – an insatiable need to keep up appearances of farm and household, but more so conquer and tame. Though history informs the land that he inherited, Larry reviles at the idea of swampy marshes filled cattails and leeches. Ginny, ever the conflicted narrator, however, is not so quick to adopt such a rampantly pragmatic ideology.

Although I like to think of my Davis great-grandparents seeking the American promise, which is only possibilities, and I enjoyed the family joke of my grandfather Cook finding possibilities where other saw a cheat, I was uncomfortably aware that my father always sought impossibility, and taught us, using the Ericsons as his example, to do the same—to discipline the farm and ourselves to a life and order transcending many things, but especially mere whim (46).

In Ginny's unease comes a problematizing of essential American values of hard work and success. The historically positive image of triumphing over the land is replaced with an unsettled feeling in the potential fallout of the discipline of emotions themselves. Ginny would like to believe in the mythos of American idealism adopted by those initial actions of her ancestors, and yet her most immediate relationship to her father is different. Larry Cook is not simply draining the land; he is actively overturning a divine creation and claiming supremacy above everything, including emotions themselves. Ginny is aware, however, that the land itself maintains the ability to push back against forcible human intervention. "The grass is gone, now, and the marshes, 'the big wet prairie,' but the sea is still beneath our feet, and we walk on it" (16). Beneath the tiled, perfected landscape is the raw sensibility of a land that transcends Larry's almost magical individualism, a potential that at once unnerves and motivates Larry's adoption of modern agriculture. For while Larry claims himself a divine creator above non-human landscape and

human emotions, alike, in truth his feet, just like Ginny's, walk on land that is powerful and timeless.

The acquisition of the acreage itself becomes an unspoken insight into the fierce individualism and ruthless self-creation into, and beyond, Cook Farm. Ginny reflects on the discrepancies between her childhood lessons and the details that complicate such simplified mantras. "Every story, when we were children, revealed a lesson— "work hard"...or "respect your elders"...or "don't tell your neighbors your business," or "luck is something you make for yourself" (132). Yet it is not simply frugality that enabled Larry Cook to achieve ownership of the titanic-sized acreage. Shady dealings with such long-gone farmers such Mel Scott and Cal Ericson are acknowledged yet quickly brushed aside. As Ginny succinctly states: "A land deal was a land deal, and few were neighborly" (135). Though Larry is not atypical – Ginny cites a certain universality to the dealings of farmers and the ever-changing boundaries of farmland – he nonetheless rests more on a heightened ethos of land acquisition than his father and Sam Davis.

Though history informs the draining and leveling of the landscape, Larry's forced productivity carries this legacy into the era of modern industrial agriculture. Fertilizers and pesticides, the hallmarks of Green Revolution technology, become the mainstay. Larry Cook, again alluding to the failures of the Ericsons, states, "There isn't any room for the old methods any more. Farmers who embrace the new methods will prosper, but those that don't are already stumbling around." (45). What was once a physical taming of farmland becomes something much more exaggerated, and ultimately more ingrained. Pesticides and fertilizers themselves become adopted into the history of Cook Farm, as the relationship between farmer and landscape increasingly is one of machine and industry. Ginny describes the scenes of "the buzzing machine[s] monotonously unzipping the crusting soil" with a sort of resigned awe, aware of how,

just like the shady land dealings of her father and so many other farmers, the machines themselves are a part of the culture of productivity, no longer new technologies, but the methods that are wholly necessary to the functioning of this type of agribusiness (137).

Ginny's punctual diction assumes this sort of realistic, matter-of-fact acceptance of the role of chemical assault on soil and landscape. "A farm abounds with poisons," she claims in a matter-of-fact tone, "though not many of them are fast-acting" (310). The chemical dealers, who are as much a part of agricultural production as the farmers, push insecticides by taking a drink to prove them "safe as mother's milk" (310). Chlordane, arsenic, insecticides, and seemingly innocuous supplies as kerosene, diesel fuel, paint thinner, Raid, aerosol degreasers, motor oil, atrazine, Treflan, Lasso, and Dual lurk everywhere on the farm: the tools to ensure any remote sort of success. Raised within this modern system, Ginny is aware of safety measures like wearing a mask and gloves when handling, or not eating before ridding herself of every trace of smell, yet she cannot imagine escaping from the practices themselves. As noted above, the very first instance of chemical application breeds necessity in the future. The farmer – like Larry Cook – becomes obsessed with the need to boost production by any means, layering pesticide upon fertilizer upon pesticide again. The soil, too, is constantly diminished, requiring inputs to, at the very least, produce the same yields as the previous year. Ginny recognizes the overwhelming number of poisons, but she too is simply shuttered within the system.

While much of the origin story of the thousand acres of Cook Farm is a tale of Larry's capitalization on the failings of his neighbors, Harold Clark remains as a nearly identical image of the same ruthless hard work as Larry himself. The opening scene of the novels finds the main characters at Harold Clark's pig roast – Ginny remarks that she "was surprised Harold intended to take a day off from bean planting – and the return of his prodigal son, Jess (7). Jess, having

escaped the grasp of the Iowan agribusiness farm to experience the nascent 1970s world of organic agriculture and radical community gardens in Canada and the Pacific Northwest, undermines the sort of ignorant complacency that allows Ginny to list off the pervasive farming chemicals in such a nondescript manner. He is radical and removed, his ideas threatening in their potential to overturn the almost archetypal relationship between farmer and landscape. Yet, this ideological shift is, in and of itself, a difficulty for Jess, let alone those farmers so deeply entrenched in the culture of Zebulon County. Jess recognizes the positive reimagination of the entire agricultural system, even though organic agriculture is almost unheard of in the 1970s. Jess can envision himself, unlike Ginny, outside the trap of conventional agriculture, yet to obtain it – that is, the radical shift away from the norm – requires a commitment to beliefs that are wholly exceptional:

That's it. That's what drives me crazy. Yeah, of course I want it. But the idea of sending for all my stuff, and moving it in and being here and saying, yes, this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to practice what I learned when I ran those gardens and I'm going to really dedicate myself to organic farming and make something of my beliefs. It's not the work. I could do the work. It's saying, that is it (74).

Smiley recognizes the way in which organic agriculture – symbolically expressed by Jess – is the exact sort of counterculture movement that could stop chemical assault on environment. Jess is the fringe of ideas – even though as a modern reader, the audience sees a more mainstream acceptance of organic agriculture – and is held to a positive idealization not imagined elsewhere in the novel. Yet in Jess's angst, Smiley calls attention to the disconnection between philosophical beliefs and the pragmatic concerns of farming operations and profits that push farmers to adopt Green Revolution technologies in the first place.

With a pervading motive of success measured in the capacity for the land to produce, the most transparently efficient and tested methods are those adopted in the past that historically

produce sellable yields. Ginny's husband Ty, who despite being a kind-hearted and loyal husband has a philosophical approach that closely mirrors that of Harold Clark and Larry Cook, scoffs at Jess's musings.

People don't realize that there isn't any room any more for something that might not work out. I mean, when his income comes solely from the farm, and he's got to make up his mind about the fuel and the time for another pass through the beans, or maybe getting forty-three bushels an acre instead of forty-seven...It's more complicated than people think, just reading books (110).

Ty's words emphasize a profound ideological discrepancy between conventional and organic methods that relies on a reimagining of temporal expectations; the former interested in immediate production and profits, and the latter in a long-term forecasting of land-use. Jess Clark is idealization personified, latching onto a set of practices that are not yet adopted in mainstream ideology. Yet while Smiley presents Jess with the possibility of overturning a destructive relationship between humans and landscape, ultimately Jess is dismissed; he flees Zebulon County, and with it he takes the hope of a new agricultural system. As readers, we too are left paralyzed by the daunting force of conventional thinking. It may be fair, as Harold Clark says, to admit that deliverable action takes more than simply reading books, yet Smiley offers the readers a book that does not even provide movement towards such action.

*A Thousand Acres* is concerned not only with these disparate means of agricultural production, but also with the sorts of inter-human relationships of the families by which the land is farmed. In retracing the birth of Cook Farm – from the roots of Ginny's grandparents to the adoption of toxic chemicals – looking towards the sort of rampant patriarchal toxicity within the home rather than that in the fields, I, like many other critics, see a direct parallel in the mastery of non-human landscape and overtaking of carnal flesh. As the reader will undoubtedly see, an increasingly hostile patriarchy correlates psychological taming and sexual molestation with the

forced productivity of land, which ultimately leads to a failure of both conventional farm and traditional nuclear family. Moving from the Cook sisters' childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood, I demonstrate the way in which these daughters are interpolated into a system of subservience. They are taught to fear the father figure – be it their beloved *Daddy* or, later, their husbands – just as they are taught to fear the natural landscape. Sexual molestation, for example, comes to symbolize supremacy over human flesh in the same way that modern agriculture does over the non-human landscape. The domestic world inside the walls of the farmhouse, therefore, becomes a place of intensely subjective experience, where the failure of the interpersonal familial relationships play out to demonstrate a dreary outlook on the future of agricultural production.

In reflecting on her childhood, Ginny notes the way in which her father's rigidity was transformative in her personality, as well as those of her sisters Rose and, to a different degree, Caroline. Following the death of their mother, the Cook daughters became de facto servants for their father, catering to his whims and demands, and silencing their own desires to rebel or become individuals. Their mother's legacy, especially of domesticity, persists decades after her death. Yearly, the Cook women clean the farmhouse from top to bottom, a routine that in and of itself perhaps is not disturbing, but becomes so in the robotic, machine-like way in which it is carried out. "How did we get so well trained, Rose and I, that we never missed a corner, never left a cleaning job undone, always, automatically, turned our houses inside out once a year?" (227). Ginny and Rose are not simply performing chores, but are *trained*, as though they are the swampy useless farmland, tamed at the hands of their father and grandfather. Just as their mother was a servant, subservient to Larry, so too are Ginny, Rose and Caroline responsive to each and every one of Larry's requests.

This training, as Smiley suggests, is based off of a highly complicated dynamic between father and daughter – one that is not, at first, overtly abusive, but instead is built from a highly personalized portrait of farming and farmers. Ginny’s earliest perceptions of her father are rooted in fear: “My earliest memories of him are of being afraid to look him in the eye, to look at him at all. He was too big and his voice was too deep” (19). Larry Cook has always been a man of excess, choosing to instill fear in his daughters much in the same way he demanded the utmost maximum that the earth might provide. He becomes an anonymously titanic force that builds a relationship not from love and reciprocity, but from authority. Such overtly patriarchal dominance is complicated by Ginny’s pervading sense of what is ‘right’ or ‘normal’. The very same titanic presence that prevents a father-daughter relationship built on love is one that feels completely necessary. “At the same time, his very fearsomeness was reassuring when I thought about things like robbers or monsters, and we lived on what was clearly the best, most capably cultivated farm. The biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer. That fit, or maybe formed, my own sense of the right order of things” (19-20). In this portrait of her father, Ginny’s subservience becomes something that is perhaps not equitable or just, but nonetheless feels safe. Just as the monolithic Iowan farm is a testament to hard work, so too is the taming of the wild child. What is obviously missing, however, is a sense of filial love and reciprocity; gestures of affection like kisses and hugs are disturbing, but tolerated if a feeling of safety is to be achieved.

Like the division of Lear’s kingdom in *King Lear*, the transferring of Cook Farm into the hands of the next generation becomes the impetus for the novel’s central conflicts of familial duty and respect. Caroline’s resistance to the formation of a corporation – an idea that would forever keep her on the farm instead of pursuing the career in law for which she was trained, enrages Larry, who immediately cuts her out of the family. Ginny remarks that Caroline had

“spoken as a lawyer when she should have spoken as a daughter. On the other hand, perhaps she hadn’t mistaken anything at all, and had simply spoken as a woman rather than a daughter,” which she and Rose had always been careful to avoid (21). In the eyes of Larry, his daughters become vessels of reproduction that maintain his lineage and thus the Cook claim to land. The role that women play on a farm strongly link the tenets of ecofeminism: because the women do not farm themselves, they exist to reproduce, either biologically – by creating a legacy that enables a continuing of a family’s claim to land – or in a more subdued reproduction of domestic rituals. In resisting, Caroline undermines Larry’s hold over both his family and his acreage, while Ginny and Rose forever assume the subservient position of girl or daughter, never autonomous woman, never detached from the discipline of their father.

Caroline’s ability to resist her father – to speak, as Ginny states, like a lawyer rather than a daughter – speaks to a difference in the degree of control Larry holds over her. By investigating the subjectivity of the eldest, more hostile, daughters (Goneril and Regan, in the source material) rather than the complicit Cordelia-figure, Smiley overturns any vision of an idyllic, cohesive family. Because of Caroline’s relative youth at the time of her mother’s death, she was raised mostly at the hands of her sisters, which meant the most favorable aspects of Rose and Ginny’s childhoods were illuminated, while those of more rigid patriarchal subservience were cast aside. Caroline’s personality – her disinterest in the farming equipment, and her father’s perception of her as a more “Loving Child” – perfectly married Rose and Ginny’s attempts to make her life better than their own. She was allowed to leave the farm after school, be able to have friend and to date. Ginny and Rose’s philosophy becomes about the absence of fierce patriarchy: “These were our principles, and they stood in opposition to Daddy’s proclaimed view that home was best, homemade was good enough, and if we had to pay for the school bus, then by golly she was

going to use it. We were her allies” (64). That Caroline grows up to become an opposing force to her sisters is a testament to their success, in Ginny’s eyes, and a frustration in Rose’s.

Just as Larry’s adoption of chemical fertilizers and pesticides represents a toxicity towards landscape that builds on the legacy of Sam Davis and John Cook, the revelations of his repeated sexual molestation and rapes of Ginny and Rose serve to underscore the hyper-toxic taming of his daughters as subservient objects. *A Thousand Acres* tells the story of Larry’s disintegration into madness just as Ginny uncovers the past that she has shut out. Rose – cognizant of her father’s actions and subsequently filled with rage – attempts to explain to Ginny the rape, even as Ginny denies it. “You were as much his as I was. There was no reason for him to assert his possession of me more than his possession of you. We were just his, to do with as he please, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops” (191). The pond and the houses – drained and built, respectively, by Larry – and the hogs and crops meticulously husbanded and raised by him, are placed on an equal plain to the relationships of family. In the absence of his wife, Larry’s daughters become objects to be controlled, at first in a relatively acceptable albeit dominant psychological father-daughter relationship, but here in a much more viscerally carnal one. An incestuous sexual encounter, however, is clearly not made with goals of producing children, but rather solely serves to create pleasure in the aggressor, Larry. Larry has raped the landscape, enabling bursts of short-term yields and personal profit with complete disregard to the system itself, just as the incestuous sexual molestation fails to uphold any concern for the familial system. The role of Ginny, and especially Rose, as Caroline’s guardian takes on a new gravitas, therefore, as they seek to protect her from the same twisted fate.

It takes several days for Ginny to remember and accept the incestuous abuse made by her father. As she cleans her father’s house – that yearly domestic routine so deeply indoctrinated in

her that she can scarcely root out its origin – she is overwhelmed by the memory of her father’s rape. This one memory is ‘like a strobe light’ (228) intermixed with memories of her mother’s death, for her rape is tied forever to the death of her maternal protector. In her mother’s dying came an overwhelming power of the patriarchy and a forfeiting of her body to the desires of the man of the house. Ginny staves off more memories, concerned that the truth might pollute every aspect of her being: “I feared how I would have to store them in my brain, plastic explosives or radioactive wastes that would mutate or even wipe out everything else in there” (229). Ironically, it is through this truth that Ginny begins to regain a sense of her own subjectivity, yet in the immediate she only feels loss. The control that the fiercely patriarchal Larry holds over his daughters extends to the present, yet is rooted in these initial encounters of sexual violation. In recoiling from the trauma of her past, Ginny loses hold on her entire teenage life. Her marriage and subsequent sexual partnership with Ty marks the restarting of her memory, yet too becomes a dominating figure, to the land and to Ginny, locking her further into the patriarchal complex in which she was molded. Reliable, nondescript Ty farms his own acreage in much the same, production-minded fashion as his father-in-law. Ginny is forever tethered to a “destiny that [she] never asked for, that was [her] father’s gift to [her]” (220). Her home as a grown woman is within eyesight of her father’s farm, and every day, the adolescent edicts to stay in the home after school rather than go to parties are reimagined as regimented breakfasts of the same foods each and every morning. Larry has cemented her role as one that caters to the routines and dynamics of domesticity, necessary to his life but overlooked in its importance. As the world of the home is always second to the labor of farming, production of land overtakes the domestic reproduction; the masculine world dominates the feminine.

The presence of the destructive patriarchy plays out whether or not Larry is present in the scene, as Ginny and Rose, and their husbands Ty and Pete, struggle against a bitterness that plagues the most domestic of interactions. The most traditionally familial rituals become centers of toxic relations: “It was exhausting just to hold ourselves at the table, magnets with our northern poles pointing into the center of the circle...But now I saw with fresh conviction that it was us, all of us, who were failing, and the hallmark of our failure was the way we ate with our heads down, hungrily, quickly, because there was nothing else to do at the table” (101-102). Eating takes on a strictly utilitarian purpose; lives are spent in the field maximizing production but the spoils of such labor are tainted, an assault on family cohesion paralleling the chemical assault on soils. At night, long after Larry has left the younger generation, the two couples along with Jess Clark begin a tradition of playing Monopoly. Much like the rituals of family dinner, the game, which carries an air of easy, familial bonding, becomes ruthlessly and `paradoxically competitive. Pete proposes an expansion of the game, the chief goal of which is to obtain a million dollars of Monopoly, along with a litany of other bonuses for luck and strategy. Thus, much like the hyper-production that the farmers demand from their land, Monopoly becomes amplified and hyper-competitive itself. Slowly, the conversations turn from their ‘lively’ roots about Pete’s adventures hitchhiking across the country to the same rage-filled toxicity that exists elsewhere on the farm. The game becomes a venue to rant about Larry Cook and Harold Clark, the wedge between spouses and families driven ever deeper, until finally, the game table is flipped over and, much like everything else, the anger fully takes over.

Agriculture and female health are not simply drawn as symbolically correlating tales, but are actively reflexive accounts of the dangers that green revolution agriculture plays in the longevity of human survival. Smiley presents spousal and filial interactions, therefore, not

simply to parallel dominance of female bodies and landscape, but to underscore the destructive implications that industrial agriculture holds over the longevity of the human species itself. Over the course of the novel, almost all of the major female characters take ill with some health crisis that can be traced back to anthropogenic action. Ginny recounts her grandmother and mother's deaths, both of whom suffered from cancer in their forties. Her sister, Rose, is thirty-six and also falls victim to the carcinogenic pesticides that poison the apparently clean water. Ginny has suffered five miscarriages as the novel opens, a result, just like her sister's cancer, of leached chemicals in the landscape. Demand for productivity for the land has disabled ability for reproduction, therefore undercutting the longevity of the farm itself. Larry's sexual appetite was fed from an incestuous, immediate encounter – one that mastered his daughters but left them bitter enough to themselves undercut the success of the farm. Ginny's sterility becomes equated with useless land: "You barren whore... But you're not really a woman, are you? I don't know what you are, just a bitch, is all, just a dried-up whore bitch" (181). These insults do not, however, refer to the infidelity that Ginny is guilt of, but rather in Larry's belief that in finding sexual pleasure without reproduction, Ginny becomes a useless landscape. She satisfies her own feminine sensibility without creating children to maintain the Cook legacy or satiating her father's sexual appetite as she had as a child.

Rose reflects on how her grandparents' generation lives into their late eighties and early nineties, but her father's generation is dying in their late sixties. The men, too, fall victim to the poisons of the environment, yet their undoing seems to be a result of the failings of their wives and the land. "Don't you wonder if they all didn't just implode? First their wives collapse under the strain, then they take it out on their children for as long as they can, then they just reach the end of their rope" (187). The land, and their wives, become overworked and stripped of the

possibility to produce and reproduce, and finally, after wives, children, and eventually the land itself become barren and unproductive, the ever-successful patriarch falters. Beneath the success of production is reproduction – of bodies, yes, but also of the routines and habits of daily life. The early morning breakfast of eggs and sausage is a necessary contribution – a reproduction of feminine sensibility. In a system that so clearly delimitates male and female roles, when the capacities of reproduction are gone, so too is the potential for protection.

The text presents organic agriculture as a solution that might both deconstruct the culture/nature binary and halt the assault on female reproductive health. Jess Clark holds a sort of human-nature partnership ideal that might bring landscape into the family, rather than view it as an adversarial swampland to conquer. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that Ginny's personal struggles throughout the novel are rooted in the arrival of Jess Clark and the complication of a singular perception of farming. As she engages in an extramarital affair with Jess, she physically embodies a tension between a traditional and a progressive philosophy, the latter of which has a sort of paradoxical connotation of primacy. Organic agriculture is, in a sense, the absence of chemicals and therefore of 'progress'. In sex with Jess, Ginny embodies this same contradictory mix of the philosophically progressive and physically primal. "It was something: it was deeply exciting and simultaneously not enough. The part of me that was still a sow longed to wallow, to press my skin against his and be engulfed" (162). The sexual and philosophical allure of Jess Clark is not isolated in Ginny, however. Rose, in turn, begins a relationship with Jess that far surpasses the physical desire of wallowing in his organically seductive body.

Yet while Jess flees Zebulon County because of the incompatible nature of his ideology, he never fully escapes the destructive patterns of the nuclear family. He is alternative in his desires to not use pesticides or fertilizers, but traditional in his controlling desire to stand as

monolithic ruler of his family. Rose, on her deathbed under a relapse of cancer, describes the dissolution of her and Jess's relationship to Ginny:

There were all these routines. No more than three eggs a week, always poached and served on browned but never burned wheat toast. Steel-cut oatmeal from some organic store in San Francisco. Ginseng tea three times a day. Meditation at sunrise. If we didn't check the paper the day before and find out the sunrise time to the minute, he was anxious all day. And we had to calculate the difference in time between the sunrise in the paper and the sunrise on the farm. It was something like two and three-fourths of a minute (351).

Meditation and ginseng tea may be far from the desires and needs of Larry Cook or Harold Clark, yet at the fundamental level Jess demands the same mastery of the household that the men of countless generations have. The same sort of diurnal routine of eggs and toast that Ginny and Rose prepared for their father eerily are manifest here. If there were ever a possibility for a new sort of relationship – one founded on mutuality and cooperation – it would be that of Rose and Jess, yet Smiley refuses to allow its longevity. In such a denial is the insistence that in order to reimagine the relationship between humans and soils, the relationship between genders or partners must change as well. Nuclear families, which forcibly command and insist, here quite literally down to minute specificity, are incompatible with a new methodology of farming.

The destructive hold that Larry has on Ginny never ceases, even as she herself divorces Ty and takes steps away from Cook Farm and her life formed around exploitative agriculture. Toxicity permeates both Ginny's physical being – she remains infertile as the novel ends – as well as her mental one. She is left full of rage, towards her father, towards her sister Rose, who ultimately dies, and towards Jess, who flees after realizing that his goals of organic agriculture will never align with the motives of Zebulon County as a whole.

Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and parquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory: the bracing summer chill of floating on my back in Mel's pond, staring at the sky; the exotic redolence of the dresses in my mother's closet; the sharp odor of wet

tomato fines; the stripes of pain my father's belt laid across my skin; the deep chill of waiting for the school bus in the blue of a winter's dawn.

The result is an unsatisfying conclusion that forces the reader to question if the rigid ideologies that subjugate women and the environment can ever truly be deconstructed. The carcinogens that leach into the water remain there for years, just as the harms of sexual violence permeate Ginny's psyche. Ultimately, despite Jess's efforts, or Rose's efforts, or any possible cry to escape the long-solidified history of Zebulon County, an Iowa monoculture built on pesticides and fertilizers is at its very best resistant to change – as resistant as the paternal authority that dictates how kin should act and what they should think. Smiley contends that there is no easy fix for such deeply entrenched ideology, at least not in a place so traditionalist and toxic, and in doing so fails to escape the same sort of problematic, fear-filled rhetoric. As readers, we see characters who are unable to make the change, who are sick with cancer but do not know how they might change to avoid creating their own death. Ginny leaves the story furious, remembering each of her five miscarried babies and the potential lives they never had a chance to live. The reader cannot imagine the lives of these children as any better than those of their angry parents because the children themselves will never exist. Ginny can flee from Zebulon County and take up a monochromatic life as a waitress in a diner, Rose can send her daughters to boarding school in fear that they too will be sexually assaulted by Larry, but running away does not mean a solution has been found or even conceived. I turn now to two novels by Ruth Ozeki in an attempt to demonstrate that conversation need not stop with identifying the problems and fallout of modern agriculture; that, if we allow ourselves to move past the problem, we might see how our lives can be positive and *better* than those of our parents.