

Journeys of Locatedness
in *The Poisonwood Bible* and *A Thousand Acres*

by

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introduction
Adrienne Rich's "Locatedness"

My interest in exploring Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) in conjunction with Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) stemmed from a fascination with the serendipity of two passages' page numbers:

For time and eternity there have been fathers like Nathan who simply can see no way to have a daughter but to own her like a plot of land. (*The Poisonwood Bible* 191)

We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops. (*A Thousand Acres* 191)

The shared page number is striking because of the passages' thematic congruency. That is, from different perspectives—the first from a mother's and the second from a daughter's—the two quotations describe a father who views his daughters as objects to “own,” to “do with as he [pleases].”

The fact that both novels take place in markedly distinct, specified historical and literary contexts makes this congruency all the more compelling. *The Poisonwood Bible* is the result of Barbara Kingsolver's twenty-year endeavor to create a fictional, accessible account “out of the real history” of American colonialism in the Congo (“Writing the D.A.B.” 7). Set in the imaginary Congolese village of Kilanga in 1959, the novel tells the story of the Prices, an American family relocated to the Congo on a Baptist mission—a mission championed by Nathan, the family's patriarch and Baptist minister. As Kingsolver writes, Nathan is a “symbolic figure” of “how Western nations have approached Africa with a history of arrogance

and misunderstanding” (“About the Poisonwood Bible”). Inherent to Nathan’s ideological dogma is the abuse of his wife, Orleanna, and their daughters, Rachel Leah, Adah, and Ruth May: while Nathan works to impose his doctrine on the villagers, he also attempts to control Orleanna and his daughters through chauvinistic “words and worse” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 68).

A Thousand Acres, on the other hand, is a contemporary retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* that relocates the tragedy to a fictional Iowan town called Zebulon County in 1979. The novel centers on the consequences for the Cook family when the father, Larry, resolves to divide his thousand acres of farm land among his three adult daughters: Ginny (the first-person narrator and protagonist), Rose, and Caroline. Smiley’s text has been described as a feminist revision of Shakespeare’s play, as it “reverses the reader’s sympathies in the subsequent family feud” (McDermott 393): in Smiley’s version, Larry has sexually abused Ginny and Rose when they were children. In this sense, the novel connects Larry and his neighbors’ intensive farming of the land with the exploitation of his daughters. Both acts, in other words, are justified by “a patriarchal discourse of property” that is “implicitly condoned by his community” (395).

Evidently, through utterly distinct temporal and geographic settings, both novels contend with versions of patriarchal exploitation. This congruency between the two novels evokes another similarity: if both texts unearth the patriarchal borders inherent to their respective contexts, so, too, do the journeys of their female protagonists. Elaine Ognibene notes of Orleanna in *The Poisonwood Bible* that “the longer she lives in Kilanga, the clearer Orleanna’s vision becomes” of Nathan and of

the colonialism he represents (Ognibene 22). Evocative of Orleanna's heightened awareness, R.A. York writes that Ginny's narrative evolution in *A Thousand Acres* consists of the "discovery of a truth, a genuine repressed truth" (York 137); John Faragher writes that "Ginny's coming to terms with her own place in history is the core struggle" of the novel (Faragher 155).

In this thesis, I set out to explore how Orleanna and Ginny's journeys of "vision" and "truth" toward their respective "[places] in history" work in relation to Nathan and Larry's patriarchal exploitation. My understanding of these journeys revolves around a concept that poet, essayist, and feminist Adrienne Rich popularized during a lecture she gave in 1984 at a feminist conference in the Netherlands. This concept was then called "the politics of location" and has since been coined "locatedness." The politics of location is based in an effort to recognize "the dangers of generalising statements about the position of women, of speaking 'for' other women as if their positions are identical to one's own" (Eagleton 300). Locatedness, rather, attempts to acknowledge each woman's idiosyncratic "place from which [she] is speaking" (Martin and Mohanty 163). This "place" is at once a literal and figurative location, as each woman is uniquely situated with a specific geography, history, and memory. *Locating oneself*, then, consists of working to situate one's identity in the context of its particular geographic, historical, and political location.

My contention is that Orleanna and Ginny's narratives are journeys toward locatedness—toward implicating themselves in and engaging with the literal and figurative terrain that informs their conception of identity. My first chapter explores Orleanna's process of locating herself in *The Poisonwood Bible*. I argue that

Orleanna's journey toward implicating herself in the geographical and political place that surrounds her is evident through the destabilization of the Price's home in Kilanga. Using Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity," I establish the significance of the domestic space as a microcosm of the domestic/foreign binary inherent to colonialism—a binary that Nathan works to maintain. I then examine how Orleanna breaks past Nathan's enforced colonization through the active dismantling of the home. In addition to tracing Orleanna's path towards locatedness, my close readings demonstrate how her reclamation of agency marks the concordant loss of Nathan's.

The second chapter tracks Ginny's journey towards locatedness in *A Thousand Acres*. I argue that Ginny's process of locating herself consists of unearthing the past and perspective inherent to her "location in a female body" (Rich 214). Evocative of the physical borders Larry has imposed upon the land, he has bordered off Ginny's history through a constructed narrative of stability. Analogous to Nathan's policing the Price's domestic borders, Larry's narrative relies upon active maintenance and repression. I then demonstrate how Ginny breaks past the borders Larry has built around her past, situating herself with her bodily and narrative specificity. Ginny's uncovering of her own, idiosyncratic perspective is implicitly connected to her awareness of the land that the beginning of the chapter establishes. Her flowing narration destabilizes Larry's narrative of stability, as she reimagines her body outside of Larry's ownership over it.

Once Orleanna and Ginny have broken past their respective patriarchal borders, what sort of resolutions—if any—do Kingsolver and Smiley leave us with? In Chapter Three, I analyze Orleanna's final narration and Ginny's epilogue in

relation to their respective processes of locatedness. I first situate my readings in the context of the literary criticism that deals with the characters' concluding passages. While most critics view Orleanna and Ginny's endings as debilitating, I argue that these last narratives are testaments to the relentless persistence inherent to the process of locating oneself. That is, I explore each woman's unique way of continuing to acknowledge "the fundamentally relational nature of [her] identity" (Martin 297). For Orleanna, this process consists of opening herself up to the motion of Kilanga that surrounds her. For Ginny, her continued engagement with her past manifests itself through the way she describes—and, through this description, becomes—her inheritance.

As is the case with the best texts, *The Poisonwood Bible* and *A Thousand Acres* are novels with an infinite capacity for analysis; this thesis offers one particular reading of two endlessly prolific novels. Because many critics have already explored the relationship between *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear* (Keppel; Leslie; Schiff), I do not take up this intertextual dimension. *The Poisonwood Bible* has led to critical examinations of its intertextuality, as well, most notably between Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Meire; Demory) and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* ("The Neodomestic American Novel"). While addressing these dialogues is beyond the scope of this thesis, the criticism has implicitly shaped my treatment of the novels as works that have been situated in a larger conversation about literature and history.

* * *

It is perhaps worth noting that Adrienne Rich is one of Kingsolver's favorite poets (Barbara Kingsolver: An Authorized Site). In fact, both women published

through the Francis Goldin Literary Agency, a boutique agency in New York founded in 1977 whose mission is to concentrate on “serious, controversial, progressive non-fiction and literary fiction that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships” (“Francis Goldin Literary Agency: About”). Of Francis Goldin herself, the agency writes, “All of her books embody the philosophy that a better world is possible and it is her goal to get books published that will help speed that process” (ibid).

While Jane Smiley did not publish through the Francis Goldin Literary Agency, both *The Poisonwood Bible* and *A Thousand Acres* share this willingness to “[address] issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships” (ibid). As Kingsolver once put it, “I’m a political writer. Why is everyone in the United States so uncomfortable with that?” (*Signature: Barbara Kingsolver*). Above all, this thesis is rooted in the belief that as long as protagonists, novels, and their novelists are willing to struggle with history, politics, and their places in them, so should the criticism.

chapter one
Orleanna's Journey in *The Poisonwood Bible*

As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938)

As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times 'As a woman my country is the whole world.'

Adrienne Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984)

A quarter into Kingsolver's twenty-year process of writing what she called the "Damned Africa Book," Adrienne Rich gave her lecture in the Netherlands that has since altered the terrain of feminism through the concept of "locatedness."

Locatedness stands in direct opposition to the kind of universal, transcendental version of feminism Virginia Woolf's quote embodies; as Rich's retort implicitly states, "the claim to a lack of identity or positionality is itself based on privilege, on a refusal to accept responsibility for one's implication in actual historical or social relations" (Martin and Mohanty 306). The politics of location, rather, attempts to acknowledge each woman's idiosyncratic "place from which [she] is speaking" (163). This "place" is at once a literal and figurative location, as each woman is uniquely situated with a specific geography, history, and memory. *Locating oneself*, then, consists of working to situate one's identity in the context of its particular geographic, historical, and political location.

The female protagonists' journeys within—or, rather, with—the Congo in *The Poisonwood Bible* are journeys of locatedness, of the messy struggle with identity that comes through electing to engage with place (i.e. geographic location and “place from which one speaks”). Situated in the remote Congolese village of Kilanga in 1959, Orleanna Price and her four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May, navigate their experiences through narrative as the family's patriarch and Baptist minister, Nathan, works to impose his doctrine on the villagers. Each daughter's narrative is individual yet interpersonal, carrying both idiosyncratic and overlapping perspectives, motifs, and words. Their accounts of the same events clash and coalesce, forming an intricate pattern of subjective viewpoints. By the end of their journeys, each daughter ultimately champions her own distinctive way of “[living] with” the colonialist complicity inherent to her geographical and political location (*The Poisonwood Bible* 9).

Nathan, on the other hand, does not attempt to locate himself with Congolese culture and the colonialist practices he has brought there; he warrants no first-person narrative. As Kingsolver unapologetically asserts, Nathan represents the “attitude” of the industrialized nation and its white colonialists, one that “[carries] into Africa a set of beliefs about religion, technology, health, politics, and agriculture...in a high-minded way, very certain of being right” (“About *The Poisonwood Bible*”). Given that Nathan is an allegorical figure of American colonialism in Africa, he is implicitly representative of the CIA's involvement in the 1961 assassination of the country's prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. While Nathan's impact on the Congo is of course not comparable to the scale and gravity of the CIA's, Kingsolver's political allegory

seems to suggest the imperialist impulses that drive Nathan are, in fact, representative of those behind colonialism at large.

While both Nathan and the Price daughters have their own, idiosyncratic relationships (or lack thereof) to locatedness, my treatment of locatedness in *The Poisonwood Bible* focuses specifically on Orleanna. With a retrospective point of view, Orleanna is the only protagonist who offers a comprehensive (yet wholly inconclusive) historical consciousness: while the daughters' accounts are chronological beginning when they arrive in Kilanga in 1959, Orleanna narrates from the present, reflecting on and grappling with her family's time in the Congo from her home in Georgia. In other words, Orleanna's narration is "a syncretic process, as she aims to reconcile what has gone before" (Ognibene 198). Unlike her daughters, Orleanna is located with her geographical and political past at the beginning of the novel. Her passages, then, narrate the (continued) struggle behind how she got there.

This chapter argues that Orleanna's process of locating herself—of better understanding "the place from which" (Martin and Mohanty 163) she speaks—coincides with the destabilization of the Price's home in Kilanga. The Price's home, viewed through the lens of Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity," can be read as a microcosm of colonialism. That is, Kaplan explores how the ideology of the domestic sphere has been complicit in the United States' expansion. The term *domestic*, she explains, "has a double meaning that not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home" (Kaplan 581). Concordantly, the earliest definition of *foreign*, according to the OED, is "out of doors" or "at a distance from home." In

other words, maintaining both the domestic sphere and a nation relies upon the domestic and the foreign existing (only) in opposition to each other.¹

The upholding of this violent domestic/foreign opposition is decidedly antithetical to *The Poisonwood Bible*'s political project. Kristin Jacobsen discusses the destabilization of the home in *The Poisonwood Bible* as a prototype of the genre she terms "neodomestic fiction": whereas traditional domestic novels "struggle to renegotiate and stabilize" the domestic/foreign binary (Kaplan 600), Jacobsen argues that neodomestic novels such as *The Poisonwood Bible* consciously work against this stability ("The Neodomestic American Novel" 106). For instance, the very setting of the novel—the fact that it takes place in the Congo—"unmoors domestic fiction's celebration of stable domesticity, exposing its imperial drive and intimate connections with the foreign" (108).

My close readings suggest that it is precisely the breaking down of the Price's stable home, of its domestic/foreign binary, that enables Orleanna's journey of locatedness. As I demonstrate, Nathan attempts to violently maintain the separation between his family (the domestic) and the Congo (the foreign), policing the home's borders through physical force. In this sense, the Price's domestic stability is predicated on Nathan's active enforcement and his wife and daughters' submission. I then explore how Orleanna breaks past this enforcement through the active dismantling of the home—a process set in motion by the deaths of Ruth May and Patrice Lumumba. As the home destabilizes and Orleanna begins to reclaim agency,

¹ For example, the idea of foreign policy relies upon our perception of the nation as a sort of home, and of the space outside the boundaries of that home as "alien and threatening" ("Manifest Domesticity" 582).

Nathan loses his. While Nathan fades into the narrative and spatial background, Orleanna begins the process of locating herself, of engaging with and implicating herself in the geographical and political terrain that surrounds her.

* * *

At the beginning of the Price family's arrival in Kilanga, Orleanna and the Price daughters attempt to treat the home as a refuge from the unknowns of the Congolese jungle. Leah, less apprehensive than her sisters, underscores their fear about leaving the house: "In the beginning my sisters bustled indoors, playing the role of mother's helper with more enthusiasm than they'd ever shown for housework in all their born days. For one reason only: they were scared to set foot outside the house" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 35). Their first task, she explains, was to "pull out all the mosquito netting...to cover our four identical cots and my parents' larger one" to protect them from Malaria. As one of the first appearances in the daughters' narratives of the house itself, Leah's observation not only creates the distinction between "indoors" and "outside," but also yokes the fear her sisters have of "outside" to the act of doing housework. The fact that the girls' "[bustling]" around indoors entails putting up mosquito netting to "cover" the cots suggests that housework is not simply an evasive strategy. Rather, the act of putting up netting ensures another barrier between the family and the Congo's "outside." This kind of action inside the home is, then, a productive manifestation of the daughters' fear of the Congo: through retreating into their house, their domestic sphere, Rachel, Adah, and Ruth May help Orleanna to substantiate the (perceived) security of that sphere from within.

This building from within the domestic sphere to heighten its boundaries mirrors an imperialist trope that, Kaplan argues, pervades traditional domestic literature. She notes that, counterintuitively, “narratives of nation and empire” often emerge “where the domestic novel appears most turned inward to the private sphere of female interiority” (Kaplan 601). This pattern is what she calls the expansionist logic of domesticity: “by withdrawing from direct agency in the male arena of commerce and politics, woman’s sphere can be represented by both women and men as a more potent agent for national expansion” (Kaplan 586). In other words, women’s lack of agency outside the house actually helps substantiate the imperialist project. With colonialism as their framework and the female protagonists as the new imperialist actors, traditional domestic novels reproduce a sort of microcosm of the nation as they heighten the boundaries of the domestic sphere, rendering those outside of that sphere as foreign in the process.

The Poisonwood Bible is, of course, no traditional domestic novel; rather than perpetuating the home’s domestic/foreign binary the mosquito net scene establishes, the novel almost immediately subverts it. Shortly after Leah recounts her sisters’ act of imperial domesticity, Adah narrates the first time they experience a Congolese rainstorm: “For five solid hours of downpour we watched small red frogs with immense, cartoonlike toes squeeze in around the windows and hop steadily up the walls” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 60). Despite the Price family’s expectations of their home’s stability and their early efforts to maintain it, frogs—a ‘foreign’ element—infuse its borders. The frogs’ subtle invasion of the Price’s house quietly underscores the fact that their home in Kilanga doesn’t fulfill the family’s desire for an entirely

closed-off, separate entity. It is not an isolated domestic sphere, but rather a space like any other, located in and intertwined with the nature and inhabitants of its Congolese surroundings.

The composition of the house itself analogously highlights its “intimate connections with [what the Prices consider to be] the foreign” (“The Neodomestic American Novel” 108). Comparing their house to the building in Kilanga that serves as a church and a school, Adah writes, “Our house is also mud, thatch, cement, and flowering vines” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 32). Through Adah’s syntax, the house quite literally “is” the materials it consists of—materials that, with the exception of cement, come directly from the Congolese environment. Rather than offering a Western reprieve from the jungle of Kilanga, the home largely “is” foreign, made up of the very Congolese elements the Prices are unaccustomed to and, in fact, expect the house to protect them from.

In her next chapter, Adah talks about the house’s composition once more, this time complicating the foreignness of its materials: “Our house is made of mud-battered walls and palm thatch, but is different from all other houses in Kilanga...Unlike the other villagers’ houses, our windows are square panes of glass and our foundation and floor are cement. All other houses have floors of dirt” (60). This account, as opposed to the comparative “also” that appears in Adah’s first one, contrasts the Price’s home twice with the emphasizing repetition of “different from all other houses in Kilanga” and “unlike the other villagers’ houses.” Whereas the ‘foreign’ presence of mud, thatch, and flowering vines overpowered Adah’s mention of cement in her first description, here, cement moves to the foreground, constituting

a marker of difference. Now, the house is “unlike” its counterparts because of the presence of glass windows and cement—manufactured elements of the traditional American home that offer more rigid separation (both literally and figuratively) from “outside” than the dirt of their neighbors’ floors. If Adah’s previous description emphasizes the house as ‘foreign,’ this description emphasizes the house as American in its materials of traditional domestic stability. Thus, a certain tension between the Congolese ‘foreign’ and the American domestic constitutes the dynamic between Adah’s two descriptions of the house. Indeed, the very materials of the house she describes embody this tension: rather than offering a wholly stable reprieve from ‘outside,’ they complicate the Price’s perceived separation between (American) inside and (Congolese) outside.

Nathan’s physical role in maintaining this evidently tenuous, wholly constructed separation between inside and outside imbues the concept of a “stable” American household with patriarchal force: during moments in which Orleanna or his daughters begin to subtly rebel against him, Nathan enacts a sort of policing-the-borders ritual from different thresholds in the house. When Leah chooses to come back after running away from home, for instance, Ruth May follows up a description of her and her sisters’ excitement with one of Nathan: “But uh-oh, there was Father in his dark bedroom doorway looking out” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 158). This trope repeats itself when another American missionary couple, the Underdowns, question Nathan’s mission. After Orleanna agrees with them, Rachel writes, “Father got up and came to stand in the doorway, facing out toward the porch” (167). During these instances in which Leah and Orleanna question his authority, Nathan is “looking out”

and “facing out” from doorways—physical thresholds that mark boundaries within or outside of the home. Nathan’s policing these thresholds, then, happens during moments of heightened anxiety regarding his control over them.

Nathan’s anxious guarding of his territory is, unsurprisingly, a colonialist trope. Analyzing the impulses behind Manifest Destiny, Kaplan writes that its expansion was “less a confident celebration of Manifest Destiny than a response to crises of confidence about national unity” (Kaplan 584). Nathan’s actions are spurred by this sort of “crises of confidence about national unity,” as well: with the domestic sphere as a microcosm of the nation, his wife and daughters’ occasional acts of defiance pose an increasing threat to its (perceived) unity. This unity, analogous to the home’s semblance of stability, is forced, requiring Nathan’s active policing to maintain it.

Perhaps the most jarring illustration of this motif is when Nathan discovers that someone in the family taught their parrot, Methuselah—a Congolese parrot who quite literally came with the house—to say “damn” (a sin, in Nathan’s mind). Unbeknownst to Nathan, Orleanna was the one who led to Methuselah’s cursing; Leah explains that “Once in a great while we just have to protect her” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 68). As she and her sisters silently accept Nathan’s accusations, Leah writes, “The whole time Father was interrogating us on the porch, in my mind’s eye I was seeing her [Orleanna] slumped over in the kitchen house” (68). Here, Leah’s account juxtaposes Nathan’s “interrogating” at the threshold of the porch with Orleanna’s “slumped over” position, as she is relegated to the kitchen. This

juxtaposition renders an exceptionally spatial and physical portrayal of how Nathan's domestic border policing involves the squandering of his wife's agency.

The memory Leah recounts during this interrogation further establishes the mutually supporting nature of Nathan's enforcing and Orleanna's submitting, of domestic "stability" and the repression it requires: "I remember running to throw my arms around Mother's knees when he regaled her with words and worse, for curtains unclosed or slips showing—the sins of womanhood" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 68). Through the images of open windows and visible slips, the destabilization of the home's thresholds becomes connected to the visibility of Orleanna's body. The "sins of womanhood," in this case, involve the typical sexist expectation that the female body shouldn't be visible, as well as the sinful role an "unclosed" home has in allowing women to be seen. As we learned with Nathan's active policing and interrogation, maintaining this expected order—closed windows, invisible slips—involves active force. Analogous to but more overt than Orleanna's "[slumping] over," this force is physical, as Nathan uses "words or worse" to ensure her and the house's enclosure.

It is precisely this enclosed domestic stability—Nathan's enforced, physical demarcation between the Congo and his family—that prevents Orleanna and his daughters from *locating* themselves, from uniquely situating their identities in the context of the geographic, historical, and political place that surrounds them. Nathan's boundary-oriented anxiety, in fact, doesn't merely prevent his daughters from realizing their own, individual identities; rather, it violently conflates them. At the beginning of "Book Two: The Revelation," Orleanna describes how Nathan's

preoccupation with the “salvation of Kilanga” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 96) makes him blind to the individuality of his own daughters: “He noticed the children less and less. He was hardly a father except in the vocational sense, as a potter with clay to be molded. Their individual laughter he couldn’t recognize, nor their anguish” (98). As we’ve seen, this “[molding]” is a process of forced domestication, of an attempt to cut off his daughters’ experiences with what lies outside the boundaries of their home.

Again, this domestic enclosure stems from colonialist impulses: by viewing himself as a potter and his daughters as “clay to be molded,” Nathan attempts to colonize his daughters’ identities, to violently shape who they are to who he wants them to be by relegating them to the domestic sphere. In failing to recognize his daughters’ “individual laughter” and “anguish,” he fails to acknowledge each of his daughters as a person. Thus, through Nathan’s domestic sculpting of his daughters, he prevents them not only from locating themselves in a geographical (and thus historical and political) sense, outside of the home, but also from locating *their own selves*, their individual understanding of their identity.

Nathan’s violent conflation of his daughters’ identities began with his colonization of Orleanna herself. She writes that, after marrying Nathan, “I encountered my own spirit less and less,” and by the time Ruth May was born, “Nathan was in full possession of the country once known as Orleanna Wharton” (200). Analogous to the subtler clay metaphor, this explicit colonizing metaphor underscores the fact that, to Nathan, his wife and daughters are merely another territory to “possess.” Similar to his role as sculptor of his daughters, Nathan as the possessor of his wife asserts his agency while squandering hers, as he colonizes the

country that is her “own spirit.” The parallel Orleanna draws between her identity and a colonized country offers a striking example of how intricately identity relates to place. Rather, identity *is* a place: a colonized country.

As with the Congo’s independence from Belgium, a colonized territory can become independent. In her narrative at the beginning of “Book Two: The Revelation,” Orleanna hints at this inevitable change: she writes, “A wife is the earth itself, changing hands, bearing scars” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 89). Again, Orleanna puts identity in terms of place. This time, though, she likens “a wife” not to a country, but to “the earth itself.” Interestingly, this descriptive shift calls attention to the manmade force (emphasis on man) required to form a country in the first place. That is, what differentiates “the earth itself” from a country is the active enforcing of boundaries. This enforcement, as we know, is analogous to that which Nathan enacts on the Price’s house, as Nathan works to maintain the same constructed opposition between the domestic and the foreign that a country requires. In this sense, Orleanna’s metaphor foreshadows the inevitable changeability of her place-inscribed identity: when this place—the earth, her identity—“[changes] hands,” its domestic borders will ultimately fade into “scars.”

Indeed, Orleanna’s locating her “self” directly coincides with the destabilization of the Price’s home. This paradoxical locating oneself through the home’s dissolution is brought about through the climax of the novel: Ruth May’s death on January 17, 1961—the same day Patrice Lumumba was murdered. These events are the crux of the allegory, with a personal tragedy mirroring a political one; while the Congolese grieve the loss of an independent Congo, the Price family

grieves the loss of its youngest member. Both losses, we are meant to internalize, stem from the same kind of passive culpability: although “we didn’t call for the assassination of Lumumba” (“About *The Poisonwood Bible*”) and Orleanna’s greatest fear, in fact, was losing one of her daughters, “we” did nothing to prevent it, just as Orleanna continued going along with Nathan’s colonialist mission at the expense of her family’s safety. In other words, it takes the death of her youngest daughter for Orleanna to fully grasp the consequences of her passivity (one that, Kingsolver hopes, will cause us to grapple with our own). Thus, Ruth May’s death marks a sort of rebirth of “the country...known as Orleanna Wharton” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 200).

Orleanna regains her sense of agency through a “strange, tireless industry” of undoing the careful stabilization of the home’s boundaries (372). Leah notes that, as soon as the daughters informed her of Ruth May’s death, Orleanna “set herself to a succession of chores, beginning with tearing down the mosquito netting from all of our beds” (368). As was discussed at the beginning of the chapter, covering the girls’ cots with mosquito netting marked the first active creation of a barrier between the domestic “indoors” and the foreign “outside.” Orleanna subverts this traditional domestic trope: more seditious than taking the netting down in the first place, she uses it as a shroud, adopting the Congolese practice of placing a deceased family member on a table outside. This act marks the incipient destruction of the home’s domestic/foreign binary on two levels: Orleanna not only expels an emblem of boundary-oriented domesticity, but also adopts a “foreign” way of grieving her own daughter.

With Ruth May's body enshrouded outside, Orleanna continues this expulsion of domestic objects. She moves the family's furniture, clothes, books, kitchen appliances, and clothes into the yard for their neighbors to take. Through this ejection of the family's possessions from the house and into the Congolese "outside," the domestic and the foreign intermix, their territories encroaching upon one another. As the border between the domestic/foreign dichotomy begins to fade, the control Nathan has over Orleanna fades, as well. Leah connects her mother's purposeful destabilization of the home to a newfound source of strength: narrating how Orleanna moves beds and desks outside, she writes, "These heavy things she dragged by herself, even though I know for a fact that two months ago she couldn't have moved them" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 371). Leah's surprise that her mother could drag out those objects "by herself" corroborates Orleanna's dramatic shift towards independence after Ruth May's death. That is, Orleanna's meticulous undoing of her domestic enclosure comes from a newfound sense of agency—from the realization that her own passivity is, quite literally, fatal.

When Orleanna reflects on the time she spent in the Congo before this marked dissolution of the home, she connects her lack of geographic awareness to her lack of political/historical awareness. As Rich might put it, Orleanna's sense of locatedness (or lack thereof) is at once geographical and political. Remembering the months leading up to Lumumba's murder, she writes, "*Where had I been? Somewhere else entirely?* Of the coup, in August, I'm sure we'd understood nothing... I recall—what? The hardships of washing and cooking" (323, emphasis added). The fact that Orleanna was so preoccupied with household chores, she notes, caused her to

“[understand] nothing” about the fraught political climate that surrounded her. Interestingly, with the rhetorical question of “where” she had been—rather than, say, what she was doing—Orleanna yokes domestic chores to a sort of placeless location, one that is entirely detached from the sociopolitical terrain that surrounds it. “Somewhere else” was, of course, the house: tasked with maintaining this domestic enclosure, Orleanna became dislocated from the geographical—and thus historical and political—reality outside of it.²

Manifestly, the destabilization of the Price’s home marks an overlooked turning point in Orleanna’s journey towards understanding her own positionality. As we’ve seen, both her daughters’ narratives and her own help to underscore a discernable change in Orleanna, a change incited by Lumumba and Ruth May’s deaths and marked by her active undoing of the home’s domestic/foreign borders. That is, in order to fully implicate herself in the events leading up to these deaths—and, more globally, in the personal and political consequences of colonialism they stand for—Orleanna implicates herself geographically, breaking past the domestic boundaries that prevented her from doing so. In Orleanna’s own words, inadvertently addressing the effects of her movement towards geographical and political locatedness, “History didn’t cross my mind. Now it does” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 368).

² Another moment in which Orleanna connects the unawareness of her own positionality to a lack of locatedness: “There was so little time to ponder right and wrong, when I hardly even knew *where I was*” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 90, emphasis added).

If the destabilization of the home marks the beginning of Orleanna's agency over her own locatedness, over the awareness of her positionality in the Congo, then it concordantly marks Nathan's loss of agency. After Ruth May's death, Nathan loses both Orleanna's compliance as well as Leah's respect (Leah reveres Nathan for the first half of the novel).³ This loss of agency is tied to a sense of placelessness: as Leah describes Orleanna's "moving upon the empty rooms" after she dragged the furniture into the yard, Leah notes, "Our father seemed to be nowhere" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 372). Interestingly, Nathan is "nowhere" while physically remaining inside the house. This metaphorical absence creates a stark juxtaposition with Orleanna's newfound inertia. As soon as Orleanna exercises control over the home's dissolution, Nathan loses the agency that the home's domestic/foreign binary substantiated.

In other words, whereas Orleanna's prior passivity enabled Nathan's policing of the home's borders, her active deconstruction of those borders causes him to fade into the spatial background, into "nowhere."⁴ Nathan fades into the narrative background, as well: after Ruth May's death and once the Price daughters and Orleanna go their separate ways, Nathan is hardly mentioned; the only time the daughters speak about him to Orleanna is in relation to his death. Nathan's spatial and narrative being "nowhere," then, creates a stark juxtaposition with Orleanna's incipient awareness of "where" she is, geographically and politically. Without the

³ After Nathan reacts to Ruth May's death, Leah states, "My father was a simple, ugly man" (368).

⁴ This passage is especially interesting in relation to Larry's *King Lear*-like storm scene discussed in Chapter 2: both men's loss of lucidity parallels the respective female protagonist's regaining of agency.

ability to colonize Orleanna's identity through the home, Nathan becomes placeless, as the domestic borders he once enforced fade into scars (*The Poisonwood Bible* 89).

Kingsolver illustrates Nathan's total loss of agency through a *King Lear*-like storm scene. Immediately after Orleanna moves their possessions out of the home, the draught in Kilanga ends, and, as Leah narrates, "Our father came out of the house and stood looking at the sky, holding out his hands" (373). In one of Nathan's only dialogues that involves multiple exclamation marks, he shouts to no one in particular, "If anyone is thirsty...let him come to me and drink! If anyone believes in me, streams of living water shall flow forth from his heart!" (374). Perhaps the only grain of truth in Nathan's babbling illogicality is that no one "believes in [him]." As Elaine Ognibene notes, "Amidst torrential rains, Nathan appears like Lear, a mad father abandoned by his daughters, wandering in the wilderness and speaking in words that few can understand" (Ognibene 202). This allusion further cements the fact that Nathan's agency was largely dependent on his wife and daughters' compliance: just as Lear's "wits begin to turn" when Cordelia questions him (*King Lear* 30), Nathan begins to lose his sanity when Orleanna and his daughters act against his repressive policing. Without agency over them, Nathan has no agency.

As Chapter Two will demonstrate with Ginny's journey toward locatedness, Orleanna's process of locating herself consists of breaking past patriarchal borders in order to begin implicating herself in the geographical and political terrain that surrounds her. The key word, here, is "begin": Orleanna's struggle toward engaging with her literal and figurative surroundings does not end when she dismantles Nathan's domestic borders. That is, if Nathan's place in both the Price's and the

novel's narrative devolves into one that is spatially and narratively "nowhere,"
Orleanna's place (i.e. geographic location and "place from which one speaks") starts
to constantly shift through dialectical movement.

chapter two
Ginny's Journey in *A Thousand Acres*

Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body.

Adrienne Rich, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” (1984)

The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other.

Epigraph to *A Thousand Acres*; Meridel Le Sueur,
“The Ancient People and the Newly Come” (1976)

While Orleanna's journey towards locatedness in *The Poisonwood Bible* takes place in the Congolese village of Kilanga beginning in 1959, Ginny's process of locating herself in *A Thousand Acres* transpires in a rural Iowan town called Zebulon County in 1979. Like Kilanga, Zebulon County is a fictionalized place rooted in historical specificity, as Smiley situates her characters amidst the Midwestern farm crisis of the 1980s. The Cook family's ultimate loss of their land, in other words, mirrors a larger social crisis of the modern farm community (154). Inherent to this social crisis—and central to my treatment of *A Thousand Acres*—is a deep-seeded culture of violence against women. Smiley places her novel in a time and place where “a woman was something to exploit—for work, for sex, and for bearing children” (Faragher 157). Indeed, Larry Cook views his three daughters, Ginny, Rose, and Caroline, much as he views the land: they are not individuals, but rather resources to be exploited.

Chapter One established that Orleanna's narration "is a syncretic process, as she aims to reconcile what has gone before" (Ognibene 198). The same could be said of Ginny's first-person narration. Writing from the present, Ginny tells the story of her past, reflecting on the sequence of events that led to her family's loss of their thousand acres. If Ginny recounts the loss of one location, though, she implicitly narrates the reclamation of another: of "the geography closest in—the body" (Rich 212). This chapter argues that Ginny's process of locating herself consists of unearthing the idiosyncratic past and perspective inherent to her "location in a female body" (214)—a process that works against Larry's physical and narrative construction of stability.

Evocative of Chapter One's analysis of *The Poisonwood Bible*, Larry's version of the Cook family farm depends upon active maintenance and the repression of his daughters. I use Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to delve into the kinds of violence Larry enacts on his daughters' identities, as well as the reasons behind this violence. My close readings demonstrate how, through physical and narrative power, Larry works to border off Ginny's perspective, altering her awareness of and location in her own body. I then explore how Ginny breaks down the borders Larry has built around her past, situating herself with her bodily and narrative specificity. Interestingly, Ginny's ability to locate herself is tied to her deep awareness of the land, specifically of the water that flows beneath it—a trope explored throughout the chapter. This flowing narration destabilizes Larry's narrative of stability; the power of Ginny's perspective lies in its refusal to divide, to border off, the past from the present.

* * *

Zebulon County is predicated on borders. In the novel's three-page first chapter, Ginny presents a written map of the land, as she describes its roads ("Cabot Street Road was really just another country blacktop"), its topological features ("From that bump, the earth was unquestionably flat"), and, most importantly, the division of its acreage. The people of Zebulon County, as Ginny first describes them, exist only in relation to the divisions of land they own. After introducing her family's neighbors, Harold Clark and the Ericsons, in the context of their farms' acreage, she explains, "Acreage and financing were facts as basic as name and gender in Zebulon County" (*A Thousand Acres* 4).

Given the way Ginny structures her opening narrative, though, the "facts" of acreage and financing actually precede such descriptors of selfhood: we receive a detailed description of the land, of the ownership that divides it, before we learn Ginny's name or gender. In this sense, identity—in addition to the small agricultural town Ginny describes—is predicated on Zebulon County's geographical borders. In other words, the way the land is divided deeply informs Ginny's understanding not only of her town, but also of herself and her family. The amount of acreage the Cook family owns circumscribes both the land and their sense of self-worth; because of her father's possession of a thousand acres, Ginny writes, "our farm and our lives seemed secure and good" (5).

Paraphrasing the lessons Larry has imparted to his children, Ginny clarifies that the acreage's land itself is not what provides this security: "However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not" (15). Rather, stability is a

direct product of manmade intervention. Instead of attributing the farm's fruitfulness to the fact that the land is "flat and fertile" (*A Thousand Acres* 4), Ginny ascribes its success to the tile drainage system her father and grandfather installed: this manmade interference is what "produced prosperity" (15). Laying these tile lines involved a twenty-five year "grand effort" (15) for the Cook family to complete—a process that Ginny's father, Larry, "[talks] about with pleasure and reverence" (15). Ginny notes that, by drawing water into them, warming the soil, and preventing storms from ruining the topsoil, the tile seems to have "created" a "new" land (*A Thousand Acres* 15).

It is this carefully constructed new land that assures Ginny she will "always have a floor to walk on" (15). In other words, the land's metaphorical floor and the stability it provides is founded on an artificial medium, one that consists of harnessing and controlling the natural flow of the land's water. Analogous to the borders that pervade Zebulon County, the drainage tiles further "divide up" (361) the land, containing its water in a synthetic enclosure. While Zebulon County's property lines convey visible borders of ownership, the tiles beneath the soil embody invisible ones: both the property lines and the tiles were methodically imposed upon the land in order to exploit its resources. Both, then, demarcate a rigid, physically rendered possession of and control over nature. Just as acreage informs identity, this boundary-dependent ownership over nature is what constitutes Ginny's perception of their lives as "secure" (5).

Ginny's imagined descriptions of the land before her relatives established the tile system stand in stark contrast to the "pleasure and reverence" with which Larry talks about the tiles. She writes,

For millennia, water lay over the land. Untold generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects, lived, shed bits of themselves, and died. I used to like to imagine how it all drifted down, lazily, in the warm, soupy water—leaves, seeds, feathers, scales, flesh, bones, petals, pollen—then mixed with the saturated soil below and became, itself, soil. (*A Thousand Acres* 131)

By fully imagining the role water and its inhabitants play in the soil's creation, Ginny demonstrates an intricate awareness of and curiosity in her environment—more specifically, in the water that once "lay over the land." From the novel's incipience, her accounts of the ecosystem she lives in are preoccupied with water: "I was always aware, I think, of the water in the soil, the way it travels from particle to particle...endlessly working and flowing" (16). This awareness of the way water moves is unique to Ginny: envisioning the interrelatedness that water facilitates is something she "used to *like* to imagine" (emphasis added), something she "was always" inherently aware of.

Ginny's idiosyncratic interest in the water's natural history challenges her father's narrative of manmade stability. In her conceived retelling of it, water acts upon the land as a unifying force, "[mixing]" natural elements together to form fertile soil. Its power, both of the aforementioned accounts emphasize, lies in its ability to integrate, to coalesce disparate nutrients as it "travels from particle to particle." This natural movement and amalgamation contrasts with and subtly threatens the division and rigidity that Larry promotes: Ginny notes that, even with the drainage tiles, "the sea is still beneath our feet" (16). The sea is as figurative as it is literal, as water's

invisible potential to destabilize the tiles mirrors Ginny's potential to unearth "what is below the level of the visible" (*A Thousand Acres* 9). When she discusses Larry's strange behavior with Ty, Ginny says, "I feel like there's treacherous undercurrents all the time. I think I'm standing on solid ground, but then I discover there's something moving underneath it, shifting from place to place" (104). Analogous to how she perceives the water "endlessly working and flowing," Ginny senses this undercurrent of instability in what her father leaves "untold," in what lies below the surface of the Cook family narrative.

Just as property lines and tile systems require upkeep, Larry's version of the Cook family farm depends upon active maintenance. As Ginny puts it, "Most issues on a farm return to the issues of keeping up appearances" (199). This business of keeping up appearances, she later notes, comes as second nature to her: "I was so remarkably comfortable with the discipline of making a good appearance!" (285). Ginny's explanation for why she cleans her house so rigorously, for example, epitomizes the extent to which she views keeping up appearances as a necessary "discipline." She writes, despite a farm family's best efforts, "the dirt just drifts through anyways," and that "farm women are proud of the fact that they can keep the house looking as though the farm stays outside" (120). Analogous to tiles' attempt to control "the sea...beneath our feet," farm women work to keep the dirt that "drifts through" outside the boundaries of the home—or, at least, "looking as though" it is kept outside. This sort of rigid maintenance of what is allowed in and what must stay out mirrors the way Larry teaches his daughters to talk about their family's story. Relaying how Larry acquired his land, Ginny writes, "It was a satisfying story. There

were, of course, details to mull over but not to speak about” (*A Thousand Acres* 132). Akin to the drifting dirt, these details must at least appear invisible. Indeed, a spotless, wholesome family narrative depends on scrubbing the dirt, the “unaccountable twists in the narrative” (155) from view.

As we saw with *The Poisonwood Bible*, this type of actively maintained stability involves repression. Analogous to Nathan’s constraining Orleanna and his daughters within the house, Larry’s ownership over the land and the narrative that substantiates it includes ownership over his own daughters. This conflation of ownership is not subtle, as language that likens the daughters to farm animals pervades the novel. When Rose and Jess talk about Caroline’s plans to get married, for instance, Rose says, “According to Daddy, it’s almost too late to breed her. Ask him. He’ll tell you all about sows and heifers and things drying up and empty chambers. It’s a whole theoretical system” (10). Larry’s theoretical system, evidently, groups women—his daughters—with sows and heifers. Both, to him, are animals “to breed” for the benefit of the farm and its inheritance.

Perhaps the most jarring aspect about Larry’s view of women as animals to breed is how thoroughly Ginny has internalized it. Narrating the experience of waking up to Ty’s touch, Ginny writes that he ran his hand down her back

so slowly that my back came to seem about as long and humped as a sow’s, running in a smooth arc from my rooting, low-slung head to my little stumpy tail. I woke up with a start and remembered the baby pigs. Ty was very close to me. It was still hot, and he was pressing his erection into my leg. (161)

The baby pigs Ginny remembers are the boars she helped Ty castrate earlier that day. Through this description of herself as a sow, Ginny eroticizes herself in relation to

animals' fertility, as Ty's erection becomes intertwined with a memory of the boars. Manifestly, Larry's "theoretical system" of his daughters as sows and heifers is deeply implicated in the way Ginny thinks about her body and her sex life: just as Larry views Caroline's marriage as an attempt to breed her, Ginny depicts a sexual relationship with her husband in which she is a fertile sow, an animal to be bred and exploited for the farm's benefit rather than her own.

There is, of course, a truth that lies "below the level of the visible" (*A Thousand Acres* 9), below this pervasive trope of women as animals and Ginny's internalization of it. That is, Larry's view of women as resources to be exploited is not merely figurative: the novel's climax reveals that he has raped Ginny and Rose. After Rose leads Ginny to remember that her father raped her as a child, she explains how this abuse is intricately tied to his sense of ownership over them: "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 pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (191). On one level, Rose's explanation demonstrates how Larry views his daughters as an extension of his property. The syntax itself mirrors the interchangeability of Rose and Ginny's bodies with the farm's land, as the anaphora with "or" stresses and equalizes the parts of the farm in relation to their being "just his." This figuratively violent conflation of identity with object enables Larry to enact physical violence on his daughters' bodies, as he does on his thousand acres.

If Larry fails to distinguish his daughters from his material possessions, he also fails to distinguish them from each other: "there is no reason" for Larry to assert his possession of one over the other because, to him, Rose and Ginny are

interchangeable. This account is one of many in which Larry confuses one daughter with another. For instance, when Larry discusses Caroline's childhood with her, he recounts how she wore a velveteen coat, sang like a bird, and dropped pebbles through the drainage wells (*A Thousand Acres* 272). Later in the courtroom, however, Ginny shouts, "Daddy, it was Rose who had the velveteen coat! It was Rose who sang! It was me who dropped things through the well grates!" (321). Larry's version of the past conflates his daughters' identities, distancing Ginny from her own, idiosyncratic perspective. Through rejecting the specificity of each daughter's experience, Larry exploits not only their bodies, but the narrative that comes with them.

Larry's physical and narrative exploitation begins with what Judith Butler calls a "violent response" to the Other: she writes, "the question we pose the Other is simple and unanswerable: 'who are you?' The violent response is the one that does not ask, and does not seek to know" (*Undoing Gender* 35). This response, this refusal to engage with the Other, derives from a desire "to shore up what it knows, to expunge what threatens it with not-knowing" (35). Indeed, the violence Larry enacts on his daughters stems from his fear of them. As Ty says to Ginny, he believes one of Larry's secrets is that "he's afraid of his daughters" (*A Thousand Acres* 103). More specifically, femininity threatens Larry: Ginny speculates that the box of Kotex pads in her father's linen closet remains there because he "never dared to touch it" (228). To him, the female body is the Other—the foreign, a site of "not-knowing." His fear of femaleness is second only, perhaps, to his fear of nature: "Daddy's not much for untamed nature. You know, he's deathly afraid of wasps and hornets" (123).

Larry's exploitation of both the land and his daughters is an attempt to "tame" them in order to "expunge what threatens" him (*Undoing Gender* 35). Raping his daughters, then, is less an expression of sexual desire than a desire for power. As Foucault outlines in *The History of Sexuality*, the body is the principal site of social control, as the very production of the category of sex results from the exercise of power relations. Evocative of Foucault, Smiley herself writes of her novel, "Issues of sexuality are no different from issues of the power hierarchy" ("Not a Pretty Picture" 160).⁵ Indeed, in *A Thousand Acres*, both his land and his daughters' bodies are the sites of Larry's power, the places in which Larry physically exercises his control.

Ginny and Rose's bodies are not merely compared to the land; rather, they are locations in their own right, territories susceptible to conquest and capable of reclamation. As cited in this chapter's epigraphs, Rich introduces the body as "the geography closest in," and in *Notes toward a Politics of Location*, she refers to the body as "our location in a female body" (Rich 214). This location is not only physical, but narrative: she writes, "to locate myself in my body" means recognizing the literal and figurative "places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go" (214). In the context of *A Thousand Acres*, viewing the body as this physical and narrative location offers a uniquely appropriate way of understanding Ginny's repression and unearthing of her abuse in relation to the land's abuse. As the beginning of the chapter delineates, Larry's ownership over the land relies upon

⁵ The personal relationships in most of Smiley's novels revolve around power and exploitation: *Barn Blind* explores the power of a dominant mother; *Duplicate Keys* of a charismatic personality; *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* of a slave-owning society and the allegedly benign family that accepts it.

constructed borders of ownership—the visible property lines and the invisible drainage tiles. His control over Ginny relies upon a version of these borders, as well. These, though, are borders pertaining to narrative, and to memory. With boundaries as carefully maintained as those that mark the land, her father’s narrative control works to contain Ginny’s idiosyncratic perspective “below the level of the visible.”

In other words, implicit to Larry’s power over Ginny’s body is his power over *the narrative* of her body; Foucault writes that both sex as well as “discourses concerned with sex” involve “the exercise of power itself” (Foucault 18). Through controlling Ginny physically, Larry controls her narratively: after Ginny remembers the abuse, she writes, “One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my own body” (*A Thousand Acres* 280). Related to the effects of conflating his daughters’ identities, Larry’s physical control over Ginny distances her from her own, idiosyncratic perspective. Through raping her, he exploits not only her body, but the way she thinks about and remembers her body, as his narrative borders off hers. Put another way, “the politics of rape and incest” *are* the politics of location (Rich 212), as Larry exploits Ginny’s “location in a female body” (214) and the narrative inherent to that location. This violent construction of one narrative at the expense of another is intricately tied to Larry’s exploitation of another location—of his land. As the beginning of this chapter outlines, Larry’s physical and narrative construction of manmade stability attempts to control the water that once “lay over the land” (*A Thousand Acres* 131) and the natural history behind it. Just as he and his forbearers managed to tame the water and its history, Larry attempts to subdue, to contain, Ginny’s body and the narrative of her body.

The narrative borders Larry builds around Ginny's "location in a female body" pervade the novel. Before she remembers the rape, Ginny lies in bed trying to "remember my father," to piece together what she knows about him. She realizes that she cannot: "Every meaningful image was jumbled together with the countless moments of our daily life, defeating my efforts to gain some perspective. The easiest things to remember were events I had only heard about" (*A Thousand Acres* 150). Larry's perspective becomes hard to distinguish from her own; because Ginny believes her lifelong proximity to her father prevents her from "[gaining] some perspective," she allows his stories to supersede "the countless moments of our daily life." Implicit to this dynamic is a deep-seeded doubting of her own perspective, of its adequacy to form a valid point of view. Thus, Larry's point of view dominates hers, as events she has "only heard about" displace ones she has experienced. These, however, are not events; rather, they are stories of events. Analogous to Larry's narrative about the land, they have been carefully curated, perpetuating the semblance of stability upon which Larry's power relies.

When Ginny begins to stand up to Larry, her subsequent guilt for doing so further illustrates how Larry borders off her own perspective. After Larry insists that Ginny drive him into town, Ginny, for the first time, asks her father to treat her with more respect. Larry uses a "story" as a means of subduing her: referring to how he never questioned his own father, he says, "Let me tell you a story about those old days, and maybe you'll be reminded what you have to be grateful for" (175). Larry's rebuke epitomizes his narrative exploitation of Ginny's idiosyncratic perspective. Analogous to the secondhand stories that form her perception of him, "a story"

manipulates her into agreeing with him. Again, Larry's perspective separates her from her own. Furthermore, the use of the phrase "be reminded" underscores how Larry shapes Ginny's own memory: here, Ginny is *told* what to remember. Analogous to his physical and narrative reconstruction of the land, Larry's imposed stories work to reconstruct her lived experiences.

Indeed, Ginny's immediate concession after Larry "reminds her" of his story cements this argument. She writes, "What did we deserve, after all? There he stood, the living source of it all, of us all...Of course it was silly to talk about 'my point of view.' When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it" (*A Thousand Acres* 176). Here, Ginny explicitly articulates the process of Larry's "asserted" point of view supplanting her own. Explicit, too, is the connection between this narrative displacement and the inability to remember her own perspective. Perhaps most importantly, this instance demonstrates the fact that Ginny is not simply aware of her father's reconstruction of her narrative; rather, she condones it. As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, whereas Rose sardonically notes that "we were just his, to do with as he pleased" (191), this observation is a reality that Ginny, at least for the moment, earnestly accepts. While the anaphora that follows in Rose's description ("like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops") underscores the unjust conflation of their identities with the land, Ginny's anaphora—"of it all, of us all"—seeks to justify that conflation. "Us" is syntactically rendered equivalent with "it," as Ginny rationalizes her subjugated perspective; "after all," she thinks, he is the "source," the rightful owner, of both the land and his daughters.

Evidently, through physical and narrative power, Larry works to border off Ginny's idiosyncratic perspective, deeply altering her awareness of and "location in a female body" (Rich 214). This process parallels Larry's abuse of the land, as he both physically "divides up" the land and narratively reconstructs its history with stories that center around manmade stability (*A Thousand Acres* 361). In other words, Larry's exploitation of the land and his daughter pairs physical force with the insidious tool of narrative. This tool attempts to drastically reshape the location of land and body, as seemingly innocuous stories work to impose a new "order of things" (12, 20). Larry's power, though, relies upon its invisibility, its ability to remain "below the level of the visible" (9). As Foucault puts it, "power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to an ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault 86). That is, as Ginny begins to unmask Larry's "mechanism" of bordering off parts of the land's history and her history, he loses that power.

Larry's version of the *King Lear* storm scene—the beginning of his plunge into depression and erratic behavior—happens soon after Jess helps Ginny discover that the toxins in the well water are what caused her miscarriages (*A Thousand Acres* 164, 180). That is, Larry's loss of lucidness coincides with the first time Ginny realizes the tangible consequences Larry's exploitation has on the land and on her. In becoming aware of and talking about the toxins' effects on her body, Ginny exposes the "mechanisms" behind Larry's narrative poison; she renders the invisible visible, unearthing "what lies below the surface" with her voice, her own narrative. Larry's subsequent loss of sanity mirrors how Nathan undergoes his *King Lear*-like loss of

agency as Orleanna regains hers in *The Poisonwood Bible*: Larry begins sounding “ridiculous” (*A Thousand Acres* 181), losing his credibility, once Ginny begins to situate herself with her physical and narrative history.⁶ Since Larry’s narrative of stability depends upon the suppression of Ginny’s narrative, he loses agency as she gains hers. This time, after he insults her, she retorts, “As far as I’m concerned, from now on you’re on your own” (183).

Ginny continues to break down the barriers Larry has built around her past, to integrate the pieces of her fragmented narrative, once Rose tells her that Larry raped them. Ginny’s process of locating herself—of understanding the past inherent to her “location in a female body” (Rich 214)—in part consists of “[facing] the facts” that Rose has already faced (*A Thousand Acres* 90). On some level, this process places Rose at the center of Ginny’s ability to locate herself, as she is the one with the “facts.” As John Faragher writes, “Ginny’s coming to terms with her own place in history is the core struggle of *A Thousand Acres*. She can’t do it without the help of Rose, who unlike Ginny is clear about what happened and why” (Faragher 155). Indeed, Ginny explicitly acknowledges this “capacity Rose had, of remembering, knowing, judging, as if continually viewing our father” (*A Thousand Acres* 280). Rose’s decision to share her “remembering, knowing, judging” with Ginny grants Ginny the truth behind her “self-conscious distance from my body” (227).

⁶ Analogous to Nathan’s loss of agency, too, is that Ty—Larry’s most frequent sympathizer—“was getting us, getting me, nowhere” (147). That is, as Ginny locates herself in her body and narrative, she begins to associate the men in her life with the feeling of being “nowhere.”

While others provide the necessary “facts”—Ty tells her about the toxins; Rose tells her about Larry’s abusing them—Ginny’s process of locating herself is uniquely her own, as she applies her deep awareness of “the water in the soil, the way it travels from particle to particle...endlessly working and flowing” to her own narrative (*A Thousand Acres* 16). Notably, this process begins even before Ginny discovers the “facts.” For instance, after a conversation with Jess, Ginny writes, “my sense of the men I knew had undergone a subtle shift” (113). The word “shift” appears earlier in the novel (and this chapter), when Ginny describes how she feels treacherous undercurrents “shifting from place to place”—a passage that references both the water and her father’s unpredictability (104). Now, however, Ginny is the active agent behind the “subtle shift”: this shift is one not of her surroundings, but of her point of view. Whereas her father and the water’s shifting underscore Ginny’s lack of control over the changes around her, Ginny’s shift represents a change that belongs to her, that is in her control. In other words, she reclaims something she was previously subject to, as her own perspective “[undergoes]” the very movement she once feared.

Put another way, through her diction, Ginny aligns herself with the water’s natural movement that she was “always aware” of (16). Her description of the conversations she shares with Rose furthers this connection: she writes that the men “didn’t seem to have what we [Rose and Ginny] had with each other, a kind of ongoing narrative and commentary about what was happening that grew out of our conversations” (113). Analogous to the water’s “endlessly working and flowing,” their conversations provide “a kind of ongoing” flow of narrative. Like the water with

its nutrients, their narrative is able to integrate, to coalesce disparate elements of “what was happening.”

At the beginning of this chapter, I demonstrated how Ginny’s fascination with water’s natural history challenges Larry’s narrative of manmade stability. Evidently, it is not simply her awareness of the water that interrogates Larry’s narrative. Rather, her perspective becomes an integrating water itself, as it constantly shifts and flows in an attempt to amalgamate what has happened with what is happening. Whereas Larry “thinks history starts fresh every day, every minute, that time itself begins with the feelings he’s having right now” (*A Thousand Acres* 216), Ginny’s ongoing flow of narrative refuses to divide, to border off, the past from the present. Perhaps the most radical aspect of this refusal to “[tie] the present to a fixed past” (McDermott 404) is the acceptance of the unknowability it entails. That is, by continuously questioning and reexamining her past, Ginny implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of a coherent narrative whole. Her flowing narrative is not a stable one: the “sea is still beneath [her] feet” (*A Thousand Acres* 16), as Ginny recognizes the indiscernibility of “the facts” she attempts to remember.

This undercurrent of instability, however, is no longer “treacherous” (104). After unearthing the rape that Larry’s narrative of stability concealed, Ginny seems to embrace the narrative instability this discovery implies, gleaning a sort of imaginative authorship over the factual holes in her narrative. This reclamation of her own perspective is most apparent when she describes becoming “drenched with insight” about her family (305):

The strongest feeling was that now I knew them all. That whereas for thirty-six years they had swum around me in complicated patterns that I had at best

dimly perceived through murky water, now all was clear...All I had to do was to imagine them, and how I 'knew' them would shimmer around them and through them, a light, an odor, a sound, a taste, a palpability that was all there was to understand about each and every one of them. In a way that I had never felt when all of us were connected by history and habit and duty...I now felt that they were mine. (*A Thousand Acres* 305-306)

The passage furthers the motif of perspective as water, as Ginny contrasts the “murky water” through which she viewed her family for thirty-six years with how, now, “all was clear.” This clarity is not based in “the facts” that Rose has recently divulged. Rather, it is Ginny’s own insight that “[drenches]” her, that allows her to see clearly. That is, while Ginny’s “coming to terms with her own place in history” (Faragher 155) involves knowing that Larry abused her, it consists of a deeper reclamation of agency—one that has more to do with her ability “to imagine” than to know. Ginny comes to understand her family through what “[shimmers] around them and through them.” This shimmering materiality is her own insight: an imagined, flowing combination of light, odor, sound, and taste that creates a truth more palpable than the stagnant, murky narrative of “history and habit and duty.”

Here, it is necessary to remember that Ginny “used to like to imagine” (131) the role water plays in the soil’s creation. That is, if at the beginning of the novel Ginny challenges Larry’s narrative of stability through imagining water’s natural movement, her perspective has, in a sense, *become* this water—a clear, flowing lens through which she collects fleeting, sensory memories that, she knows, can never be fully accounted for. This awareness and acceptance of the instability inherent not only to the land, but also to her own perspective is paradoxically what allows Ginny to claim a sort of ownership over her narrative (“I now felt that they were mine”).

Narrative is, of course, an intrinsic aspect of one's "location in a female body" (Rich 214). Thus, Ginny's insight is what allows her to recognize and claim ownership over not only her narrative, but also her body. Ginny distinguishes herself from Rose for the first time after she becomes "drenched with insight": "All my life I had identified with Rose...But after all, she wasn't me. Her body wasn't mine" (*A Thousand Acres* 307). This decisive differentiation between herself (her body) and Rose (Rose's body) stands in stark contrast with the physical and psychological conflation of identity implicated in Larry's abuse of his daughters. Whereas Rose and Ginny's interchangeability distanced Ginny from her idiosyncratic narrative, her reclamation of that narrative involves the recognition of her bodily specificity. Through a perspective that runs against the narrative of "history and habit and duty" (305) Ginny reimagines her body, her story, outside of Larry's ownership over it. Once interchangeable, she is now interconnected, as her unstable yet "clear" narrative parallels the water's natural history.

Evocative of the fact that Orleanna's journey toward locating herself does not end through breaking down Nathan's domestic borders, Ginny's interconnectedness—the result of her working against Larry's physical and narrative construction of stability—does not denote the end of her struggle with her past and perspective. Rather, as Chapter Three demonstrates, she continues to grapple with this geographic and narrative place through the way she talks about her inheritance.

chapter three

Relentless Persistence

I come here with notes but without absolute conclusions. This is not a sign of loss of faith or hope. These notes are the marks of a struggle to keep moving, a struggle for accountability.

Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a politics of location" (1984)

Motion became my whole purpose.

Orleanna, *The Poisonwood Bible*

This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all others.

Ginny, *A Thousand Acres*

Orleanna and Ginny's respective journeys of locatedness do not culminate in neat, happy resolutions of empowerment. In fact, they do not culminate at all. As mentioned at the beginnings of Chapter One and Chapter Two, Orleanna and Ginny's narrations are retrospective, as they "[aim] to reconcile what has gone before" (Ognibene 198). However, diverging from the past tense that these retrospective narrations necessitate, both the end of Orleanna's last chapter as well as Ginny's epilogue employ the present tense. That is, at the end of both protagonists' journeys, Orleanna and Ginny have not located themselves; rather, they *are locating themselves*, as we leave them continuing to grapple with their idiosyncratic, constantly shifting place of geography, history, and memory.

Indeed, as Mary Eagleton paraphrases Adrienne Rich, since we are all located in multiple, changing ways, "to understand 'the place from which one is speaking' involves us in an ongoing, never-to-be finalised analysis" (Eagleton 300). This sort of

constant reconciling of place cum identity is perhaps the most responsible and difficult political act, as it involves the relentless persistence in “the fundamentally relational nature of identity” and the concordant negation of “the assumption of a singular, fixed, and essential self” (Martin and Mohanty 297). It requires, in other words, the perpetual rewriting of oneself in relation to “shifting interpersonal and political contexts” (308).

Viewed from one angle, Orleanna and Ginny appear to lose this relationality towards the end of *The Poisonwood Bible* and *A Thousand Acres*. Once Orleanna and Ginny have broken past their respective borders, the novels’ plots share strikingly similar trajectories—ones that seem not to champion “the fundamentally relational nature of identity” (297). Time speeds up, as years pass between chapters, and the characters move geographically away from each other, away from the geographic sites in which they located themselves. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah and Rachel move to disparate parts of the Congo while Orleanna and Adah return to Georgia. Orleanna’s last narration, in fact, occurs before the Price family moves away from Kilanga. In this sense, we seem to leave Orleanna in the Congo, as she grieves Ruth May’s death. In *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny moves to Minnesota, waitressing and living in an apartment off an interstate. The only time Ty visits Ginny is to ask for a divorce, and Ginny visits Rose only when she is dying.

It is easy to understand, then, why most critics view Orleanna and Ginny’s endings as debilitating, as offering no resolution to the trauma they experienced. Elaine Ognibene, for instance, describes Orleanna at the end of the novel as “plagued by unanswerable ‘if’ questions” (Ognibene 23); Anne Marie Austenfeld writes that

each of *The Poisonwood Bible*'s protagonists falls on a continuum, with Orleanna representing the "paralyzed end" of it (Austenfeld 301). Of *A Thousand Acres*, Amy Levin writes, "Smiley offers no satisfying resolution. The cleanness in Ginny's life is purchased at the cost of connection and an accompanying loss of detail" (Levin 30). Jane Smiley herself says Ginny undergoes an inevitable, "almost mechanical" downfall ("Taking It All Back"). In other words, to many, both Orleanna and Ginny's characters devolve into a sort of irreconcilable stupor (one that is even said to mark a failure in the text, in *A Thousand Acres*' case). From this point of view, locating oneself is not a redeeming process, but a rather futile exercise: what merit exists to working towards this geographic and historical awareness if it results in a paradoxical loss of connection or state of paralysis?

The places in which we leave Orleanna and Ginny, as I read them, are not ones of disconnection or paralysis. Rather, my close readings suggest that Orleanna's last narrative and Ginny's epilogue are testaments to the relentless persistence that being located entails, as both women develop idiosyncratic ways of continuing to acknowledge "the fundamentally relational nature of identity" (Martin and Mohanty 297). In her last chapter in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Orleanna engages in a relationship of movement with the community of Kilanga, opening herself up to the motion that surrounds her. The change inherent to this motion allows Orleanna to both be marked by and move past Nathan's colonialist borders. In the epilogue to *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny materializes her past in the present through the way she understands her inheritance. Through this materialization, I argue, Ginny's narrative is able to both surpass and continue engaging with Larry's narrative of stability.

* * *

Orleanna introduces the motif of movement through her own account of the home's destabilization. While Orleanna's dismantling of the home is first illustrated through Leah's perspective, Exodus begins with Orleanna's, as she herself reflects on her process of regaining agency through the dissolution of Nathan's domestic barriers. She illustrates how, at first, it is her impulse to *move*, to physically distract herself from grief—"As long as I kept moving, my grief streamed out behind me like a swimmer's long hair in water" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 381); "I tried to flee from grief" (382)—that causes her to drag the first piece of furniture, the table, into the yard. In other words, this act of agency stems solely from a grief-ridden "instinct" (382). Unlike the previously careful, intentional maintenance of the home and its domestic borders, here, action precedes thought.

Orleanna's instinct to move comes not only from her, but from the Congolese forest that surrounds her: right before she moves the table outside, she writes, "the trees roared and danced as if they were on fire in the pouring rain, telling me to go on, go on" (382). This is the first instance in which Orleanna cites nature as directly influencing her action. If Nathan once was the driving force behind her lack of action, now, the movement of nature itself drives Orleanna to "go on." In other words, through the strange, instinctive physicality that comes with grief, Orleanna's action becomes contingent not on a restrictive inside force, but on a provocative outside one. She allows these trees—living, "foreign" elements outside the domestic borders of the home—to affect her, as their fiery "[roaring and dancing]" heightens her ardent state and prompts her to move the first piece of furniture into the yard. That is, as grief

disarms her, Orleanna embraces the “relational nature” (Martin 297) of her identity, opening herself up to the influences of what surrounds her.

While Orleanna’s dismantling of the home is at first the result of this natural movement, spurred only by grief and the trees around her, it quickly becomes intentional. She writes, “Once I’d moved our table outside, with my baby laid out upon it, I could see no sense in anything but to bring out the rest...I needed truth and light, to remember my baby’s laughter. This stuff cluttered my way” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 382). Markedly, Orleanna’s impromptu act of moving the table outside—a movement as natural and unplanned as trees “[dancing]” in the rain—becomes all that makes logical “sense” to her. That is, dragging the table outside presages her realization that “this stuff cluttered my way” towards “truth and light.” The fact that intuitive action heralds logical thought further illustrates the extent to which Orleanna has allowed her surroundings to influence her—to affect both her movements and her thoughts. Her openness to the trees’ motion has, in this sense, incited Orleanna’s deliberate process of locating herself, of working towards this geographical and emotional place of “truth and light.”

Orleanna’s relationality to Kilanga is dialectic: as her surroundings act upon her, her resulting movement entwines her with the community of Kilanga. Motion beautifully entwines her with the community of Kilanga: “My household would pass through the great digestive tract of Kilanga...It was a miracle to witness my own simple motion, amplified” (382). No longer is her household an emblem of enforced separation, confined within the boundaries of the home. While these domestic, American objects previously delineated Orleanna’s disconnection from the rest of

Kilanga, they will now seamlessly “pass through” the village because of her “own simple motion.” Through movement spurred by the trees’ influence, the individual becomes communal, as Orleanna and her possessions bleed into the bodily entirety of Kilanga’s “great digestive tract.” It is this willingness to move within a larger ecosystem, to be a part of its constantly shifting interconnectivity, that embodies Orleanna’s journey towards locatedness. Counter to the anxious enforcement and effort that Nathan’s maintenance of the domestic/foreign binary requires, Orleanna’s breaking past this binary stems from a place of openness—a place that is shaped by and interwoven in its surroundings.

Manifestly, motion—rather than paralysis—pervades the final pages of Orleanna’s narrative. This movement is the quintessence of Orleanna’s ability to locate herself, to integrate herself and her once-domestic possessions into her once-foreign surroundings. Put another way, movement liberates Orleanna from Nathan’s colonization of her identity, allowing her to reclaim agency over “the country...known as Orleanna Wharton” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 200). As Orleanna articulates this causal relationship, her emancipation from Nathan comes down to the fact that “I moved, and he stood still” (384).

Orleanna explicitly connects her movement and Nathan’s stagnancy to what she believes defines the colonizer/colonized dynamic at large:

But his kind will always lose in the end. I know this, and now I know why. Whether it’s a wife or nation they occupy, their mistake is the same: they stand still, and their stake moves underneath them...Chains rattle, rivers roll, animals startle and bolt, forests inspire and expand, babies stretch open-mouthed from the womb, new seedlings arch their necks and creep forward into the light. Even a language won’t stand still. A territory is only possessed for a moment in time. (384)

She writes, as well, that the ground “may bear the marks of boots on its back, but those marks become the possession of the land” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 384). These passages explicate a trope that suffuses the novel, as Orleanna contrasts the change inherent to nature with the sort of enforced stagnancy that defines Nathan’s border policing and the practice of colonialism at large. This time, Orleanna describes colonialism not as an all-powerful repressor, but as an aberrant “mistake,” a way of being that is startlingly irreconcilable with the world’s innate tendency to move and to change. The verbs Orleanna attaches to everything from chains to seedlings encapsulate the transformation inherent to their respective nouns’ functioning. In this way, movement becomes not merely a form of resistance, but a biological, ecological, and semiotic fact of life—one that colonialism’s “[standing] still” will fail to alter. Instead, footsteps, boundaries, languages, and other “marks” of colonialism will devolve into remnants of only one “moment in time.” Through the passage of time and the change inherent to it, Orleanna suggests, each colonized territory will ultimately outgrow its colonization, expanding and stretching past the stagnant borders that attempt to contain it.

Orleanna has and will continue to do just that—to move beyond Nathan and the colonial history he represents, constantly rewriting ‘the place from which she speaks’ in the present tense (Eagleton 300). Evidently, this narrative movement is deeply physical and relational, as well: as she persists in grappling with her location as a privileged white woman back in Georgia with imperial ties to the Congo, she mirrors the perpetual expanding and stretching inherent to her surroundings. The seedlings from the aforementioned passage, for instance, reflect her journey towards

locatedness: just as they “arch their necks and creep forward into the light” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 384), Orleanna continues to work towards a geographical and emotional place of “truth and light” (382).

This language of change and light appears in Rich’s “Notes Toward a Politics of Location”: Rich writes, “Trying to see so much, aware of so much to be seen, brought into the light, changed. Breaking down again and again the false male universal” (Rich 216). Here, the lack of a grammatical subject underscores the same sort of interconnectivity that Orleanna shares with the seedlings. That is, by obscuring who or what is “brought into the light,” Rich implicitly highlights how each woman’s journey towards her specific positionality is also part of a larger system of movement. That is, each woman’s individual location forms a collective of women that is infinite in its specificity, and thus impossible to name. Paradoxically, it is the recognition of this endless specificity—the undefined subject—that enables the collective movement of “breaking down...the false male universal.”

In a sense, this amorphous subject is reminiscent of Kilanga’s “great digestive tract”—a bodily system that belongs not to an individual, but to an entire ecosystem of idiosyncratic moving parts. Analogous to Rich’s subject-less motion, Kilanga’s myriad of inhabitants—again, infinite in their specificity—are connected through movement, through the sort of constant motion towards light that the seedlings and Orleanna share. Because of the openness to the “relational nature” (Martin 297) of her identity, Orleanna breaks past Nathan’s borders, becoming a part of this larger (eco)system of continuous motion and change. By actively engaging with Kilanga,

the Congo, and the personal and colonial baggage she brought there, Orleanna has become an inextricable part of these geographical and figurative locations.

As Rich writes of her own notes, Orleanna's final words "are the marks of a struggle to keep moving, a struggle for accountability" (Rich 211). At the end of her narrative, we find Orleanna persisting in "trying to wear the marks of the boot on my back as gracefully as the Congo wears hers" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 385). She writes, too, "To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know. In perfect stillness, frankly, I've only found sorrow" (385). Firstly, Orleanna's interpretation of what it means "to live" builds off the passage in which she juxtaposes colonialism's contrived stagnancy with the world's natural tendency to move and change. That is, whereas to colonize is to "stand still" (384), to oppose change, this passage reiterates that to live is "to change." Thus, even Orleanna's final meditation contains an implicit critique of colonialism: through this logic, colonialism is the antithesis not only of the change inherent to life, but of "the only celebration we mortals really know" (385).

In contrast, Orleanna's geographic and narrative journey has been a process of being marked, of changing and acquiring the words of a story. For her, continuous movement is what allows her to "wear the marks of the boot on my back" with grace. The physicality of this metaphor underscores the fact that Nathan's colonization of her identity will always affect Orleanna and her "location in a female body" (Rich 214). While Orleanna has engaged with and become a part of Kilanga's "great digestive tract," there is another part of her location, her positionality, that consists of the boot marks of colonialism. The marks may have devolved into remnants of only

one moment in Orleanna's life, but they are not forgotten remnants. In other words, moving past Nathan's borders does not mean forgetting them. These footsteps and borders have marked and changed her, forming an intricate part of "the words of [her] story" (*The Poisonwood Bible* 385) in the process.

* * *

Ginny's epilogue subverts the version of inheritance that the novel's title embodies. If a thousand acres symbolize the boundaries that the continuation of Larry's "stable" narrative and patrimony depend upon, the way Ginny talks about her inheritance deconstructs those boundaries, as her body becomes infused with the elements of the past that she has woven into her own destabilizing narrative. In this sense, Ginny's version of inheritance seems to fully embody the concept of locatedness: what she inherits is the complex and "never-to-be finalised" (Eagleton 300) interaction of narrative, memory, and place that informs her "location in a female body."

Ginny first addresses her fiscal inheritance—one that she sardonically describes in contrast to the inheritance taxes Larry feared would overwhelm the land's legacy: "Caroline and I did share a legacy, our \$34,000 tax bill on the sale of the properties" (*A Thousand Acres* 368). In other words, taxes for selling the land replace taxes for keeping it. Rather than inheriting and maintaining the family farm, Ginny and Caroline have been forced to sell it, as the bank foreclosed the mortgage. They are left not with the price of Larry's decision, but of its failure. Because of her father's loss of the land, Ginny's identity is no longer predicated on the geographical

borders of the thousand acres. That is, while the debt is a burden, it is a burden at least symbolic of Larry's loss of narrative control over his daughters' histories.

Chapter Two established that, analogous to the water's natural movement, Ginny's new perspective is unstable yet "clear" (*A Thousand Acres* 305). This sort of unstable clarity is developed through the symbolism she attaches to her debt: she states that the tax bill is her "regret money," and that "though what I am regretful for mutates and evolves, I am glad to pay it" (368). Paradoxically, despite the fact that Ginny's regret is amorphous and shifting, she is both aware of it and "glad to pay it." This awareness and embrace of this unstable version of regret is evocative of how she embraces the instability inherent to her own narrative. In this sense, Ginny's illustration of how her regret "mutates and evolves" is reminiscent of how both the water and her perspective "endlessly [work] and [flow]." Concordantly, the way Ginny considers her regret reflects another passage in which she talks about her physical and narrative "location in a female body": "I was as stuck with my old life as I was with my body" (307). Ginny is "stuck with" her body, her past, and the regret that comes with it, but she is perhaps "glad to pay" the price of this specific, interconnected, and constantly shifting inheritance.

Through Ginny's illustration of Pam and Linda, inheritance becomes material; the perpetual interaction of narrative and memory that forms one's "location in a female body" is rendered visible, almost tangible. She writes, "I see in them...the fusing and mixing of their parents. I see how their inheritance takes place right there, in the shape of their eyes and their glance, the weight of their bodies and their movements" (369). Evidently, even biological inheritance is an unstable fusion of

parts in Ginny's eyes, as the diction "fusing and mixing" mirrors the language of her regret's mutating and evolving, and of the water and her narrative's working and flowing. Perhaps more importantly, though, is the fact that Ginny "[sees] how their inheritance *takes place right there*" (emphasis added). Inheritance has "shape" and "weight"; Pam and Linda's idiosyncratic narratives are physical, as their inherited histories coalesce in "their bodies and their movements." Indeed, their inheritance is a kind of "place," a location that is always "right there" in the present, working to integrate the "fusing and mixing" elements of the past.

Ginny's awareness of Pam and Linda's physically rendered inheritance helps her become aware of her own. She writes that looking at Pam and Linda forces her to know that

although the farm and all its burdens and gifts are scattered, my inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory...All of it is present now, here; each particle weighs some fraction of the hundred and thirty-six pounds that attaches me to the earth, perhaps as much as the print weights in other sorts of histories. (*A Thousand Acres* 369)

This passage is perhaps the most compelling counter to the critique that Ginny's new life "is purchased at the cost of connection and an accompanying loss of detail" (Levin 5). The phrase "the farm and all its burdens and gifts are scattered" seems to hark on Ginny's apparent lack of a place-based, historically specific identity present in the chapters leading up to the epilogue. However, Ginny's literal displacement from her geographic past is, this passage suggests, irrelevant: "my inheritance," she writes, is still "with me." Even though Larry and Rose have died and Ginny has sold the farm and moved far away from Zebulon County, what she has inherited from

these people and that place has helped form the narrative inherent to her “location in a female body.”

The fact that Ginny describes her inheritance as “sitting in my chair” underscores its materiality. Her inheritance is, in the most material sense, her body; what her body consists of—its “molecules”—are both molecules of toxins as well as “molecules of memory.” The combination of these literal and figurative molecules perfectly depict how locating oneself consists of grappling with physical and narrative elements at once. On another level, both kinds of molecules are, in a sense, narrative elements. As was explored in Chapter Two, the first time Ginny exposes the “mechanisms” (Foucault 86) behind Larry’s narrative is when she realizes that the toxins in the well water led to her miscarriages. In other words, Larry’s narrative of stability is a narrative of poison—in this case, of “atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel.” With the molecules of toxins as representative of Larry’s narrative, the “molecules of memory” are evocative of Ginny’s, of her remembered natural history. Both narratives of molecules are present; the fact that Ginny recovers her own perspective does not write over her father’s past narrative and physical exploitation. Rather, “all of it is present now, here”: both Larry’s repressive version of her history and the one that is hers, that flows against his, fuse and mix in the location of her body.

These “particles” of experience are what “attaches [Ginny] to the earth,” materially grounding her in her bodily perspective. Ginny then compares the weight of these narrative particles to how much “the print weighs in other sorts of histories.” Through positing that her inheritance weighs “perhaps as much” as printed histories,

Ginny establishes the figurative weight—the importance—of her own history. This contention highlights a true reclamation of agency: whereas at the beginning of the novel, “when my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished” (*A Thousand Acres* 176), Ginny now asserts not only her point of view, but also its narrative significance. The fact that Ginny contrasts “the particles” of her history with “print” suggests that these “other sorts of histories” are traditional ones. In this way, Smiley perhaps alludes not only to *King Lear*, but to all narratives that, in some way or another, supersede others. *A Thousand Acres* “offers a feminist retelling” of *King Lear* (Faragher 147), subverting the arguably patriarchal perspective the tragedy presents; Ginny’s inheritance—her story—challenges Larry’s narrative of poisonous stability.

Thus, if Ginny’s inheritance is physically rendered through her body and its “particles,” it is also physically rendered through text. Perhaps Ginny’s most radical and redemptive act at the end of her story relates to the fact that there is a story in the first place: Ginny’s history *is* in print, as she has put her flowing narrative into words. The novel’s final passage implicitly calls attention to Ginny’s ability to articulate what Larry could not:

I can’t say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all others. (*A Thousand Acres* 371)

Central to the significance of this passage is Ginny’s return to the motif of imagining. The end of Chapter Two established that Ginny’s ability “to imagine” allows her to

understand her family, to reclaim agency over her own narrative. For Ginny, “imagining” consists of embracing the unstable yet clear fluidity of her own perspective, of incorporating—rather than bordering off—fleeting, sensory memories and images into her history. This final passage, then, contrasts Ginny’s natural flow of perception with what Larry “chose never to remember.” In other words, Ginny “can imagine” and articulate her father’s experience better than he can himself; she names what he found “unthinkable.” In this sense, the novel ends not with forgiveness, but with a tool more powerful: articulated awareness. As we saw in Chapter Two, Ginny’s imagined, flowing insight creates a truth clearer and more palpable than Larry’s “murky” (*A Thousand Acres* 305), “impenetrable” narrative of stability. Her subversive last act is the ability not only to create her own truth, but to engage with Larry’s, to confront that which reduced him to silence.

It is fitting that a history of “particles,” of a bodily location, ends with the material—the “gleaming obsidian shard.” As she does through her “location in a female body” and through text, Ginny solidifies her version of the hard, sharp truth that this shard seems to signify. Again, this awareness and materialization of her idiosyncratic perspective allows her to claim ownership over it, as she “safeguards” this materialized perspective “above all others.” The shard is, then, is an object of narrative redemption—a visible, tangible rendering of her ability to name and engage with Larry’s narrative and her own.

coda
Not an Ending

This is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending.
Adrienne Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984)

Rather than espousing an ahistorical notion of self once they break past Nathan and Larry's patriarchal borders, Orleanna and Ginny work to situate themselves with their constantly changing geographic, political, and narrative contexts. While Orleanna reflects this change inherent to her relational identity through movement, Ginny does so through the understanding and materialization of her inheritance.

My hope is that these close readings have done justice to the integrity inherent in Orleanna and Ginny's journeys toward better understanding "the [places] from which" they speak (Eagleton 300). This integrity lies in both protagonists' refusal to "[tie] the present to a fixed past" (McDermott 404), and in their relentless persistence to grapple with the instability this refusal carries with it. That is, if Orleanna and Ginny's processes of locating themselves expose their respective patriarchal borders, they also call into question "the notion of a coherent, historically continuous, stable identity" (Martin and Mohanty). This semblance of stability—whether of a home, a narrative, or an identity—is what Nathan and Larry's patriarchal borders are predicated upon. It is what pacified Orleanna into being "just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to

conquer another in war” (*The Poisonwood Bible* 89), and it is what lulled Ginny into thinking that “what is, is, and what is, is fine” (*A Thousand Acres* 137).

This semblance of stability and the political stakes it conceals are not fine, and so, through their last narratives, Orleanna and Ginny work to rewrite themselves in relation to their surroundings. If Orleanna’s movement with Kilanga is dialectic, so, too, is the reader’s journey with these novels, as the recognition of relentless persistence requires the continued involvement of others.

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