

English

Interdependence and Interconnectedness in Barbara Kingsolver's Fiction: Self-Revelations and Thriving Relationships Contingent Upon Connection to Nature in *The Bean Trees*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, and *Flight Behavior*

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While many novelists topping the best-sellers' list write fiction for entertainment value to draw in readers, Barbara Kingsolver utilizes fiction, not only to divert the readers, but also to engage them in a world of humanitarian, political, social, feminist, and environmental issues. Although some critics have claimed that Kingsolver is idealistic, she envisions a world where people are capable of implementing change. Although she did not initially see herself as a "political" writer, she does not reject the label if it means that she writes about "things that matter." In addition to multiple pressing concerns, she brings an environmental awareness to the reader in both her fiction and non-fiction. She is a part of a growing environmental movement that informs people they are neither a separate nor dominant part of an increasingly fragile ecosystem. Rich with biological and ecological detail, her work provides an illuminating picture of humanity's interdependence with the environment, prompting the reader to recognize that man is not a separate entity disconnected from nature, but rather a small integral part of an interconnected system. Through her novels, *The Bean Trees*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, and *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver reveals the detrimental effects of humanity's belief that the natural world exists solely to provide for man, and argues that our every choice and act affects the entire ecosystem that sustains us. Further, she conveys how a closer and humble relationship with nature is necessary for humans to understand themselves and their relationships with others.

Growing up on a small farm in Kentucky, with highly educated and socially conscious parents, Kingsolver was immersed in a humanitarian household that respected the beauty and the importance of nature (Wagner-Martin 6). A keen observer and explorer of the woods surrounding her family's farm, she cultivated an early appreciation for nature, and through her observations, began to learn and write about the ecosystem as a teenager: "Certainly an appreciation for nature is an important feature of my work, and it arose in part because I grew

up running wild in the woods with little adult supervision, studied biology as a college student, and then went to graduate school in biology. I am one of thousands of species that live in this place, and I don't ever forget the other ones are there" (qtd. in Fisher 4). Kingsolver not only dedicates her powerful narrative voice to the environment but also to underrepresented social and racial groups. As the daughter of a doctor who accepted payment in the form of vegetables and other goods, Kingsolver witnessed the hard-working, lower class of farmers who were struggling to come out even. She also spent a stint in the Congo as a young child, where her father volunteered his medical services, learning early, that the "idea of normality itself was a cultural construct" (Wagner-Martin 18). The African children found her appearance bewildering and exotic and were hesitant to interact with her — she and her family were a minority. A voracious reader, Kingsolver gravitated towards female writers, like Virginia Woolf, who proved to her that "women's stories could be art" (27). Although she had been writing stories since she learned to read, Kingsolver did not envision herself having a career as a writer. She left Kentucky and attended DePauw University in Indiana, where she earned her bachelor's degree in biology. She continued to write during those years, devouring the library's entire collection of Cherokee legends and drawing inspiration from her Cherokee family history (36). After college, Kingsolver spent some time being a self-described "rolling stone," traveling to Greece and later working in France (38). When she returned from Europe, she left for Tucson, Arizona, where she knew almost no one, and had no prospective employment. She soon, however, secured a position at the University of Arizona as a medical technician. She spent her free time becoming acquainted with the "Spanish-speaking culture" and "Native American influence" (40). Kingsolver also became actively involved in the Sanctuary movement for Latin American refugees, writing poetry protesting the abusive mistreatment of immigrants by the United States government (44). She began an active campaign of ecological activism that "paralleled her involvement in the Sanctuary movement" (46). At the University of Arizona, Kingsolver met Joe Hoffman, her first husband, who encouraged her to earn her master's in biology and ecology. In 1981, while she was in a doctoral program, Kingsolver secured a job as a science writer for the University of Arizona. Soon, she began to write pieces for local newspapers, and within two years, was able to fully support herself through freelance journalism (47). Kingsolver covered the 1983-1984 Phelps Dodge copper mine strike, which would become the "action of women strikers against the mega-corporation" (53). The strikers, mostly Mexican immigrants, had to leave and obtain other work because they could not support their families on the "\$40-a-week strike pay" (53). The wives of the strikers replaced their husbands' positions on the picket line. Kingsolver recorded hundreds of women's stories and witnessed the brutality of the National Guard toward the strikers (58). The result of 18 months of research and years of effort, *Holding the Line*, was published in 1989. The experiences involved in researching and writing *Holding the Line*, taught

Kingsolver how powerful the narrative voice could be against injustice (59). Her involvement in the Sanctuary movement inspired her first novel, *The Bean Trees* (59). Kingsolver did anticipate the novel's success. Harper Collins offered her an advance large enough to support her for a year (65). The list of both fiction and non-fiction works that Kingsolver has published since is extensive. Published in 1998, *The Poisonwood Bible* was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize and also a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner award (111). Throughout Kingsolver's work, there is an acute awareness of issues that plague the world. It is, however, environmental issues that pervade all of her work: "When Barbara Kingsolver early in her writing career confessed to a number of *-isms* — humanism, feminism, environmentalism—as well as being a 'social advocate,' she may have not given emphasis to one of the most significant: her belief that people could save the planet." (Beattie, ed., 163) (115). While many other issues figure prominently in Kingsolver's work, the environment and humanity's relationship with it, is a central concern worthy of study.

Acknowledging that novels are written to entertain, Kingsolver, however, does not believe that they cannot also educate readers simultaneously. She is sometimes labeled as an ecofeminist, as her primary characters are often women who discover their strength in conjunction with a closer relationship to nature (Demarr 21). In her essay, "Making Peace," from her collection, *High Tide in Tucson*, Kingsolver states, "Ownership is an entirely human construct...to own land, plants, other animals, more stuff than we need — that is the peculiar product of a modern imagination" (*High* 26). It is through this false conception of ownership of land, that humans have destroyed the environment, and strayed from their natural role in the ecosystem — believing that nature exists solely to quench humankind's thirst for power and dominance, leaving the ecosystem unbalanced and stripped of natural resources. In Kingsolver's 1998 bestseller, *The Poisonwood Bible*, the overly zealous Baptist preacher, Nathan Price, uproots his wife and four daughters from Georgia and moves them to the Congo in an attempt to convert the "heathens" to Christianity. The women of the family quickly learn, however, that they are the outsiders, and in order to survive, they must submit to nature and adapt. Nathan's stubborn belief in his seemingly righteous cause, leaves him abandoned by his family, and subjected to an inner madness that leads to his death. "Her fourth novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, is about wanting. The personal wants of the increasingly deranged missionary Nathan Price mirror the political wants of the West, obsessed with controlling the uncontrollable and indecipherable territory of the Congo" (Cockrell 183). Kingsolver's time in Africa, as a child, and then as an adult, yields beautiful and rich, detailed descriptions of the land in the Congo, and conveys the awe-inspiring power of the natural world. Leah Price, who in the beginning of the novel, reveres her father and his "Christian" cause, comes to realize that she and her family are far from being in control of the land or its people. Her father attempts to plant seeds, as he did in Georgia, assuming the land will bend to his will. He ignores the native Mama Tataba's warning that a plant he is touch-

ing will “bite,” and that he must “make hills around the seeds in order for them to thrive. Nathan awakes with a horrific rash from the plant that “bites,” and discovers that Mama Tataba has made hills for him. He destroys the hills, confident in his ability to manipulate the land. The garden, however, washes away after the first large rain:

Then we found the garden...Leah fell to her knees in a demonstration of grief on Our Father's belief. The torrent had swamped the flat bed and the seeds rushed out like runaway boats. We found them everywhere in caches in the tall grass at the edge of the patch. Most had already sprouted in the previous weeks, but their little roots had not held them to the Reverend Farmer's flat-as Kansas- beds against the torrent...He declared he would make them grow, in the name of God, or he would plant again (the Reverend, like any prophet worth his salt, had held some seeds in reserve) if only the sun would ever come up and dry up this accursed mire” (*Poisonwood* 62-63).

As Leah begins to understand that she and her family are merely one of the species, subject to the whims of the natural world, her growth manifests both inwardly and in her relationships with others. She eventually sees her father in a realistic light, as an ignorant bully, and realizes that although the natives live in primitive conditions compared to those of America, they are no less intelligent. Indeed, their ability to survive with such meager resources is incredible. As Leah grows in years and wisdom, she eventually falls in love with, and marries a native, Anatole. The impetus for her maturation is the unpredictable and the unknown in the environment of the Congo —acknowledging that the natives are more advanced and prepared for life on their own ground:

Perhaps we've eaten the wrong fruits in the Garden, because our family always seems to know too much, and at the same time not enough. Whenever something big happens we're quite taken aback, but no one else is the least bit surprised. Not by a rainy season come and gone where none was supposed to be, nor by the plain green bushes changing themselves bang into poinsettias. Not by butterflies with wings as clear as little cats-eye glasses; not by the longest or shortest or greenest snake in the road. Even little children here seem to know more than us, just as easily as they speak their own language” (103-104).

In Kingsolver's 2012 novel, *Flight Behavior*, she presents the notion that humans “own” land as both absurd, and a dangerous pattern of thinking for all living things and beings: “Species diversity is a biological fact. I think a lot about the world out there beyond the artifice that human beings have created” (qtd.in Fisher 4).

Dellarobia Turnbow is a young wife and mother of two small children. When she became pregnant at 17, she regrettably had a shotgun wedding, marrying the well-meaning, but less intelligent Cub. She climbs a mountain on their farm to have a liaison with a younger man, and she discovers the mountainside covered with monarch butterflies, so dense, they look like fire. Much of the small town sees it as a miracle — the manifestation of God's approval. Dellarobia's mother-in-law, Hester, seeks to make money, charging spectators for a view, while her father-in-law, who decided to sell the land for logging before the arrival of the butterflies, intends to follow through with his plans — despite the killing of the butterflies' habitat. In an interview about *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver reveals the flawed belief that humans are the dominant species, and every other part of nature is subject to humanity's ownership and control:

If you could ask a monarch what are people are [*sic*] good for, they would say, absolutely nothing. Humans are set decoration, something to land on. If you ask any species what species are important, they would say we are. Every one of us thinks we're the only species that matters. We think all butterflies do is flutter around because we don't understand their agenda -- it looks random to us. The more you know about a monarch, the more you'll see them like Japanese businessmen. They're very driven" (Crossen 4).

When an entomologist, Ovid Bryon, sets up a research site on Dellarobia's land, she begins to work for him, helping him and his team study and conduct research on the butterflies. Entering a scholarly study of the natural world, Dellarobia transforms from a stifled and self-deprecating housewife, into a more confident and realized being. Through a comment made by Dellarobia to Cub, explaining the situation of the butterflies, Kingsolver reveals humanity's need to control nature according to its own needs: "The trouble with that," she said finally, "with what those guys are saying about the butterflies, is that it's all centered around what they want. They need things to be a certain way, financially, so they think nature will organize itself around what suits them" (*Flight* 256). As Kingsolver reveals the flawed thinking in the construct of ownership of land, she also expresses the need for humans to return to their natural role.

The material world that humans have created contains the illusion that nature is a separate entity. Without an understanding of our vital, yet humble role in the ecosystem, we separate ourselves from our innate purpose and wreak havoc on the rest of the natural world:

According to Kingsolver, the creation of a materialistic culture has created a divide between humanity and nature. As a result, Kingsolver emphasizes, we have forgotten how to appreciate and connect with nature. She

argues that civilization, and its fast-paced agenda, muddles our minds and makes us forget what is important about life: the living environment and all its harmonious living components (Battista 54).

In order to understand one's self and to forge meaningful connections with others, one must rediscover nature and reclaim one's natural role. Kingsolver conveys this truth through her characters' self-discoveries and intimate connections with others, while they are immersed in nature. The characters' personal connections to the land transform their relationships with themselves and with their fellow humans. Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, is about a young, small town Kentucky woman, Taylor Greer, who picks up her meager belongings and heads west with no particular destination. While stopping for rest in Oklahoma, a Cherokee woman thrusts a seemingly mute baby girl into Taylor's car, imploring her to take the child, leaving before Taylor can object. Taylor quickly discovers that the girl, whom she names Turtle, has been sexually abused. The car breaks down in Tucson, Arizona with the tires blown out, and Taylor finds Jesus is Lord Used Tires. Mattie, the owner, takes Taylor and Turtle in, and soon Taylor settles in Tucson, finding a companionable roommate, Lou Ann Ruiz. Eventually Taylor is able to adopt Turtle when two Guatemalan refugees pretend to be her parents and sign Turtle over to Taylor. The women in the novel find strength within themselves and their connections with each other, often in the presence of nature:

Although Kingsolver focuses on the relationships in terms that reflect the human world, she describes these relationships in terms that reflect the natural world. By doing so, Kingsolver compares the connections between people with the relationships essential in the plant and animal world, as seen in Taylor's description of Turtle's holding on... Whether between people and plants or between soil and animals, productivity only occurs through relationship (Himmelwright 38).

Turtle, who is initially mute, traumatized by sexual abuse, begins to speak when she discovers Mattie's vegetable garden in the back of the tire shop, where plants thrive and grow out of used auto parts. Taylor shows Turtle different types of seeds as they are planting a summer garden, showing her white beans. Turtle speaks her first word:

'Bean,' Turtle said. 'Humbean.' I looked at Mattie.
'Well, don't just sit there, the child's talking to you,' Mattie said.
I picked up Turtle and gave her a hug. 'That's right, that's a bean. And you're just about the smartest kid alive,' I told her. Mattie just smiled. As I planted beans, Turtle followed me down the row digging each one up after I planted it and putting it back in the jar. 'Good girl,' I said. I could see a whole new era arriving in Turtle's and my life (*Bean* 102).

Turtle's subsequent words are the names of vegetables. She becomes an expert at identifying vegetables, clinging to a seed catalogue. Interest in nature and growth keep Turtle concentrated on the beauty in life, rather than on her traumatic past, allowing her to bloom in conjunction with the plants around her. Wisteria vines, which Turtle calls "Bean trees," because of the pods that hang from the branches, grow in poor soil because of their symbiotic relationship with rhizobia: "These are microscopic bugs that live underground in little knots on the roots. They suck the nitrogen gas right out of the soil and turn it into fertilizer for the plant. The rhizobia are not actually part of the plant, they are separate creatures, but they always live with legumes: a kind of underground railroad moving secretly up and down the roots" (241). The growth of wisteria with the help of rhizobia parallels the characters' relationships with each other. Supporting one another creates a fertile environment for growth: "The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles" (241). Taylor, who ran away from Kentucky where most girls give birth straight out of high school, becomes a loving mother and is able to officially adopt Turtle. Turtle is able to cultivate a trusting and loving relationship with Taylor, despite a history of abuse. Although trauma stunted her growth, through her connection with nature and others, she begins to thrive:

Facing a role she initially tried so doggedly to avoid, Taylor has been initiated in the role of mother. Through this acceptance of responsibility she has dramatically transformed a small, abused, silent little girl into a growing child who is able to play, sing, and dance. Yet Turtle's life is not the only life to be transformed...[Taylor] has turned her back on an individual approach for one of nurturing help and assistance through community (Himmelwright 43).

Nature is also the impetus for Dellarobia's internal growth and changing relationship with others in *Flight Behavior*. Dellarobia is on a direct path to self-destruction, because she has found no other outlet for feelings of missed opportunity and resentment in a static marriage:

Her mother-in-law basically hates her and lets her know that. So she's -- she has this sweet husband Cub, as dumb as a box of rocks, and she just has no -- and she's taking care of her two little kids whom she loves dearly. But this is just -- she spends her life with people who rolled plastic trucks on the floor. And she sees nothing else ahead of her. And so what happens when she discovers this miracle is that somehow she -- well, through surprising events, she becomes sort of -- this miracle is a tribute to her in the global media and she becomes of [*sic*] our Lady of the Butterflies ("Barbara" 5).

When she is on her way to begin an affair, however, she discovers a mountainside filled with monarch butterflies. An entomologist and his team comes to research the reasons for the butterflies' unusual migratory pattern, and she soon begins to work for him—in the process, rediscovering her intelligence and capability, while also transforming her relationship with her mother-in-law and husband. She is also the link between the seemingly unintelligible scientific world of the monarch butterflies and her small, Baptist Tennessee town. Working and learning about the butterflies make her often stifling domestic life bearable:

If her kids wanted to pull everything out of the laundry basket to make a bird's nest and sit in it, fine. Dellarobia could even sit in there with them and incubate, if she so desired. Household chores no longer called her name exclusively. She had an income. She'd never before understood how much her life in this little house had felt to her like confinement in a sinking vehicle after driving off a bridge...To open a hatch and swim away felt miraculous (*Flight* 286).

Working with the butterflies gives Dellarobia the courage to confront her unpleasant mother-in-law, Hester, and through that interaction she faces the reality of her dead marriage. As the butterflies take flight at the end of the novel, so does she, with plans for attending college and renting an apartment with her children and best friend. Like the monarch butterflies flying away to begin a new life at the end of the novel, Dellarobia, too, faces a new beginning, transformed by their visit and the resulting consequences: "The sky was too bright and the ground so unreliable, she couldn't look up for very long. Instead her eyes held steady on the fire bursts of wings reflected across the water, a merging of flame and flood. Above the lake of the world, flanked by white mountains, they flew out to a new earth" (432). To reclaim one's place in the natural world, one must understand one's vital role in the ecosystem.

Another branch of Kingsolver's environmental theme is her assertion that every choice that one makes affects the entire ecosystem. As illustrated in human communities, nature is a system of interrelatedness and interdependence. Kingsolver declares that seeing ourselves as separate, independent entities is a form of denial. She stresses both nature's and humanity's dependence on other life forms in her fiction, revealing an intricate web of connections. When asked about community and individualism in her work, Kingsolver responded:

It's ridiculous to imagine that we don't depend on others for the most ordinary parts of our existence, let alone the more traumatic parts when we need a surgeon or someone to put out the fire in our home. In everyday ways we are part of a network. I guess it's a biological way of seeing the world. And I don't understand the suggestion that interdependence is a

weakness. Animals don't pretend to be independent from others of their kind — I mean no other animals but us (qtd. in Fisher 6).

In Kingsolver's novel, *Prodigal Summer*, published in 2000, three characters are woven into a story during an Appalachian summer. Deanna Wolfe, a wildlife biologist, lives a self-imposed solitary existence in a secluded cabin on top of a mountain, working for the National Park service and tracking and observing wildlife. She, however, meets the younger hunter, Eddie Bondo, and the two enter into a summer courtship of copulation, like the wildlife species around them. Down the mountain, Lusa, a relative newlywed, loses her husband Cole. She must navigate the farm and the relationships with her in-laws who resent her and her claim on the farm. Garnett Walker, a somewhat elderly and obstinate man, fighting to restore the American Chesnut tree, tangles with his neighbor, Nannie Rawley, disagreeing with her on almost all fronts. Though the two are older, they find that they are not exempt from this summer of pheromones and love. The novel opens with the theme of interdependence and the flawed notion of solitude: "Her body moved with the frankness that comes from solitary habits. But solitude is only a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed" (*Prodigal* 1). Though Deanna has created a life in the comfort of solitude, she is drawn into an affair with the young Eddie through biological instinct. Seemingly, two people unable to reconcile their differences, Deanna, a conservationist, and Eddie, a hunter, are able to learn from each other and are irrevocably changed through their interaction:

Upon meeting Eddie, Deanna realizes that 'she'd forgotten how to talk with people, it seemed — how to sidestep a question and hide what was necessary' (10). As Kingsolver reveals, Deanna's commitment to the nonhuman world is complicated by the fact that she loses her ability to relate to the human world. While Deanna's isolation allows her to develop a deeply ecological sensibility, it does very little to help her understand and confront the human motivations that ultimately lead to ecological devastation (Battista 59).

Deanna becomes pregnant, and at the end of the novel must come down the mountain to seek help from Nannie Rawley. Lusa, an entomologist of Polish-Jewish and Palestinian descent, fights the loss of her husband, while trying to manage the farm he left behind. Her five sisters-in-law resent her claim, but through her interaction in the natural world with the youngest, Jewel, Lusa wins the respect and acceptance of her in-laws: "Lusa's gardening and canning represent the quintessence of the garden ethic, working with nature to sustain life at its most basic and to please the higher sensibilities as well... Through a series of interac-

tions involving gardening and canning, Jewel and Lusa gradually form a bond that becomes the basis for Lusa's acceptance by the family" (Leder 247). Lusa discovers that Jewel, with an absent husband, the father of her children, is dying of cancer, and offers to adopt her two children. Lusa bonds with the children, especially the initially hostile Crys, through observing nature and teaching Crys about the inter-relatedness of nature and the world. When Crys suggests she cut down the trees to make money, she explains that it takes a forest hundreds of years to form its current, working ecosystem, with every component affecting another: 'Just how it is, a whole complicated thing with parts that all need each other, like a living body. It's not just trees; it's different *kinds* of trees, all different sizes, in the right proportions. Every animal needs its own special plant to live on. And certain plants will only grow next to certain other kinds, did you know that?' (*Prodigal* 354). Garnett Walker, an anthropocentric and a fundamentalist, fights to revive the American Chesnut, using insecticides and pesticides. Nannie Rawley, his feminist and Unitarian neighbor, tries to make him think about how his choices will affect the ecosystem as a whole: "Garnett, a religious fundamentalist, believes humans have dominion over the earth and so thinks nothing of the consequences of using herbicides to keep his property weed-free and broad-spectrum insecticides to protect his hybrid chestnut seedlings... Certain he is right, Garnett does not think about how his choices affects others" (Jones 293-294). Although his relationship with Nannie Rawley does not drastically alter his fundamental beliefs, he "becom[es] less self-centered—a primary step, to be sure, in perceiving one's world ecologically" (294). *Prodigal Summer* is a reminder that humans are just one species in a complex web, our every action affecting the environment through a system of chain reactions.

Kingsolver aims to remind readers of their status as natural creatures, animals, subject to their biological impulses. *Prodigal Summer* features a series of copulations, with humans, animals, and insects alike. The sex scenes, however, are far from pornographic. Kingsolver states that writing about sex and "making it beautiful is no small trick. The language of coition has been stolen, or rather, I think, it has been divvied up like chips in a poker game among pornography, consumerism and the medical profession" ("Forbidden" 3). She portrays and attempts to reclaim sex as a natural act, necessary for survival, and a continuing, thriving ecosystem. Sex, driven by biological instinct, links humans to nature, all driven to the act to propagate their species:

Prodigal Summer is about sex: people sex, bug sex, coyote sex; about pheromones and full moons, and the drive to pass your genes. Lacewings, newly hatched, are 'everywhere suddenly, dancing on sunbeams in the upper story, trembling with brief, grave duty of their adulthood: to live for a day on sunlight and coitus... All are linked in ways not apparent at first, by old connections of blood and marriage that in the end will not be ignored. They are like the giant saturniid moths that live in the hollows of the mountain (Cockrell 188).

When Deanna and Eddie meet in the forest, the creatures surrounding them are engaging in coitus, and they follow suit, despite the differences in their fundamental beliefs. Though their sexual relationship begins due to instinctual urges, they both undergo transformations as a result of the physical act. Deanna realizes her need for human contact, although she initially resents it, and she attempts to teach Eddie to see predators as a crucial part of the ecosystem—not the enemy: ‘Foolish choice, Eddie. People make them every day, but hating predators on principle is like hating the roof over your head on principle. Me, I’ll take one snake over fifty mice in my house any day. A snake is a roof’ (*Prodigal* 266). Lusa, an entomologist, whose specialty is “moth love,” has an erotic dream featuring a giant moth. She has been unable to sleep since her husband, Cole’s death, and unsure of her next step, is numbed by grief. Her sister-in-law, Jewel, gives her a sleeping pill, and Lusa has a dream that reaffirms her identity and helps her to make the decision to stay on the farm:

He was covered in fir, not a man at all but a mountain with silky, pale-green extremities and maroon shoulders of a luna moth. He wrapped her in his softness, touched her face with what seemed to be the movement of the trees...It was those things exactly, his solid strength and immensity, that comforted her and as he shuddered and came into her...It seemed impossible but here she was after everything that had happened, still herself, Lusa...What she’d loved was here, and still might be, if she could find her way to it (79-80).

Cole communicates to Lusa through her dream, and she feels love again and thus, “Nature, in the form of the man/moth who knows her *by name*, has restored her sense of identity, as well as her courage and her faith in her own imagination” (Hanson 255). In *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver renders sex as something natural, beautiful, and essential, without a pornographic element.

Kingsolver grew up with circumstances which generated her social-political and environmental conscience early in life. Her father, a doctor, who would often accept vegetables as payment from patients, and for a time, volunteered his services in the Congo, encouraged Kingsolver to ‘do what you think is right regardless of whether or not that’s financially or otherwise regarded’ (DeMarquid. in Nizalowski 19). She learned the concept of American privilege during her stay in the Congo. Her hometown in Kentucky was largely segregated and she witnessed racism. Her Kentucky childhood also had “landscapes [of] beauty [that] inspir[ed] Kingsolver, planting the seeds of her environmentalism” (20). When Kingsolver moved to Tucson, the desert was a new place for ecological study and preservation, and further spurred her environmental awareness. Kingsolver proudly accepts the label of a political writer:

I'm only going to write a book if it's addressing subjects I care about. Otherwise, why write a book? It's not worth the time, and it's not worth the reader's time, and it's not worth burdening the world with another pile of pages. It surprises me constantly that almost everybody else in the United States of America who writes books hates to be called a political writer. As if that demeans them (qtd. in Nizalowski 17).

Her overt political opinionseven attracted the FBI's attention in the mid 1980's. They tapped her phone (Wagner-Martin 112). Kingsolver successfully balances story and political intention: "She has also, through her work, demonstrated that there is a strong connection between everyday life and the socio-political sphere" (Nizalowski 33). Although all her books are filled with multiple political themes, all touchingon protecting nature, environmentalism pervades *Prodigal Summer* and *Flight Behavior*. In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver levels humans with animals, reminding the reader of his/her delicate place within the ecosystem. The relationship between the characters and the land is a prominent theme in her novel. Deanna, the wildlife biologist, fights to protect coyotes. Kingsolver is asking the reader to be concerned about a real problem: "According to a 1999 article in *Audubon Magazine* by Mike Finkel, 'every year 400,000 coyotes are exterminated in the United States'" (Battista 60). Kingsolver seeks to reveal the beauty of the coyote, and by doing so, encourages the reader to see beyond their status as a predator: "That only the alpha female would bear young, for instance; the other adults in the pack would forgo reproduction. They'd support the alpha instead, gathering food, guarding the den, playing with the pups, training them to forage and hunt after they emerged with their eyes open" (*Prodigal* 57). Deanna tells Eddie that "Predation is a sacrament... Predation is *honorable*" (317). Lusa's character is Kingsolver's entry into discussion about local farming — small farmers are increasingly unable to compete with industrial farming. Lusa wrestles with whether or not to grow tobacco, otherwise unable to see how to make a profit. She eventually, and successfully, farms goats. Kingsolver conveys the problem of diminished local farming through Lusa's interaction with Crys. Lusa explains to Crys how people used to grow their own grain. Crys asks why they don't anymore, and Lusa explains: 'Because they can't afford to grow grain anymore. It's cheaper to buy bad stuff from a big farm than to grow good stuff on a little farm' (292). Lusa's goat enterprise is successful because she "understand[s] both the human and nonhuman ecology of [her] bioregion" (Jones 292). The women in *Prodigal Summer* "emphas[ize] the need for an environmental ethic of care to bring balance to the ecosystem and prosperity to local farmers" (286). Kingsolver's engagement of environmental issues in *Prodigal Summer* is worthwhile and thought-provoking.

In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver confronts global warming and the overwhelming crisis that is ensuing. Monarch butterflies that should migrate to Mexico in the winter, land on Dellarobia's mountain instead. Their migratory patterns

are disrupted, due to global warming. The mountainous area in central Mexico to which they usually migrate has been destroyed by deforestation, causing a massive landslide. Climate change has also caused the area to become too warm for the monarchs. They instead congregate in the Tennessee mountains, where the colder weather threatens their survival. This particular story about the monarch butterflies is fictional; however, the conditions surrounding it are not. As Kingsolver explains in an interview about *Flight Behavior*, flowers blooming earlier than they should due to climate change, create a great disruption in the ecosystem:

Blooming, that's right. And so what is the problem here? Well, some species, let's say, of insects or a hummingbird that was dependent on this flower when it came back from migration is going to get to an empty grocery store. There are thousands, millions of these kinds of interactions in which species depend on each other in terms of timing, in terms of climatic cues that are going awry. It's a bigger mess than almost anyone can really explain, because we're only beginning to be able to get a handle in studying it (Kingsolver "Barbara" 6).

She also notes that many birds' migratory patterns have shifted in the last 10 to 15 years (6). In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver reveals the dire situation of the environment due to global warming without being didactic. Conversations between Dellarobia and Ovid often contain information about climate change and how it is affecting the environment. Kingsolver's explanations are clear and accessible. When Dellarobia asks Ovid if there is anything about global warming you that you can see, he explains: "A trend is intangible, but real," he said calmly. "A photo cannot prove a child is growing, but several of them show change over time. Align them, and you can reliably predict what is coming. You never see it all at once. An attention span is required" (*Flight* 280). Her message is urgent but Kingsolver does not condemn non-believers. Dellarobia explains to Ovid why people don't want to believe in global warming, and how ordinary people feel separated from the scientific world, coaxing the skeptical reader to consider and think about the possibility:

'I'm sorry. I'm probably speaking out of turn here. You've explained to me how big this is. The climate thing. That it's taking out stuff we're counting on. But other people say just forget it. My husband, guys on the radio. They say it's not proven.'

'What we're discussing here is clear and present, Dellarobia. Scientists agree on that. These men on the radio, I assume, are nonscientists. Why would people buy snake oil when they want medicine?'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. You guys aren't popular. Maybe your

medicine's too bitter. Or you're not selling to us. Maybe you're writing us off, thinking we won't get it. You should start with kindergartners and work your way up.' (320-321).

The environmental politics of Kingsolver's work are seamlessly integrated into her fiction, addressing pressing issues about humanity's role in the destruction of the environment and presenting viable solutions for change.

Kingsolver's social and environmental conscience pervades her fiction. While creating compelling stories and interesting, believable characters, Kingsolver is also able to teach her readers and engage them in a political discussion. She asserts that novels are not solely for entertainment, but also a vehicle for potential transformation: 'I don't consider a novel to be a purely recreational vehicle. I think of it as an outlet for my despair, my delight, my considered opinions, and all the things that strike me as absolute and essential, worked out in words' (qtd. in Kentoff 64). In *The Bean Trees*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, and *Flight Behavior*, communion with nature transforms her characters' relationships with themselves and others. She reminds her readers that they are an integral part of nature —neither a separate nor a higher entity. Emphasizing the importance of humanity's connection to nature, Kingsolver's characters become more self-aware and develop stronger relationships with others, as they are immersed in the natural world. She conveys that the material world that humans have created has become a vehicle of destruction both for humanity and for the rest of nature. Though humanity's self-imposed destruction is alarming, Kingsolver does not believe that the damage is irreversible. Her work is a call to readers to become part of a combined, global effort to restore the natural world and our place within it. With a scholarly background in biology and ecology, Kingsolver renders beautiful, detailed images of nature that compel the reader to see his/her self as part of a vast and intricate ecological web. Kingsolver reveals to her readers that their every choice affects the entire ecosystem, gently prompting them to become environmentally aware and responsible for their actions.

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