

EXPANDING THE TRADITION: RESISTANCE IN DENISE GIARDINA'S
STORMING HEAVEN AND THE UNQUIET EARTH AND BARBARA
KINGSOLVER'S PRODIGAL SUMMER

Paper

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Abstract

Denise Giardina's Storming Heaven and The Unquiet Earth and Barbara Kingsolver's Prodigal Summer, novels set in Appalachia, continue a long tradition of resistance to exploitation of the people and the environment of the areas in which they are set. Both Giardina and Kingsolver are aware of the interconnectedness of all life, the dependence of species on the "inanimate" world, and the need, through the emotion that is transmitted through fiction writing, to bring these concerns alive for readers through characters that readers are able to care about.

Introduction

Deanna Wolf is a forest service worker who cares about the coyotes that have moved into the Zebulon National Forest which she monitors in Barbara Kingsolver's Prodigal Summer. Deanna, who has a strong interest in predators and their places in the food chain, can scarcely believe that the coyotes are moving back into this area, and she is resolved not to give them away to the hunters who would kill them—especially to the hunter to whom she herself is so greatly attracted: Eddie Bondo. Another character in Prodigal Summer, Lusa Mulaf Landowski is an entomologist who turns farmer after she loses her husband. Lusa's story wraps around and is inseparable from her interest in "bugs," her horror of wanton pesticide use, and her desire for harmony in interactions among people, and of people with nature. Nannie Rawley is an apple grower whose organic fruit flourishes without the pesticides her neighbor Garnett Walker, a former agriculture teacher, wants to employ to kill the weeds that threaten the "neatness" of his farm. Nannie's and Garnett's feuding provides not only comic relief in Prodigal Summer, but also a running commentary on living in harmony with the world, and destruction of species in specific areas.

In Denise Giardina's Storming Heaven, after her husband and sons are killed in a mine explosion, Rosa Angelelli, trapped in a strange land in an unbearable life, speaks with the butterflies that her employer, the mine operator Lytton Davidson, has collected, much as he has collected men from various parts of the globe, pinning them to work in the mines, work that often kills them, or, in the case of the butterflies, in glass cases so that they can be admired. She narrates: "The butterflies weep. Let us out, they cry. The glass case is so hot" (196). As Davidson's house where Rosa is living burns as a part of a strike action, Rondal Lloyd finds her, in the house, breaking the glass of the case with an oil lamp to free the butterflies. Rosa and Rondal Lloyd do free them, tossing them into the creek. Rosa narrates: "He flings and they leap from his hand like purple and gold fairies, their wings shine like precious jewels, they flash like the wine the priest pours." In The Unquiet Earth, Rondal Lloyd's son Dillon Freeman is angry that the cousin he loves has brought a Japanese skull home with her from her work as a nurse in the Pacific during World War II. Disappointed that she is fearful of social disapproval and therefore will not cleave her life to his, feeling that he no longer knows this woman, a woman he knows would not before have carried such an object halfway around the world with her, Dillon drives too fast on a curving mountain road, striking and killing a red fox, a species rarely seen in the coal fields. Dillon takes the fox home with him and buries it in his yard, the Japanese skull he has taken from Rachel wrapped within its body. "I don't know what religion the skull is so I say O Buddha O Christ O ancestors O God," he narrates. "The red fox died for our sins" (60).

Our sins in both of these books are the destruction of the earth, the destruction of species through willful killing, indifference to poisons, casualties caused by mining and overuse of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, and/or the unwitting death that comes with encroachment of people. In her book of essays High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never, continuing in the tradition of Rachel Carson who grew up in the Pennsylvania hills of Appalachia rather than those of Kentucky, Barbara Kingsolver writes of Horse Lick Creek, "a tributary of the Rockcastle River" in Kentucky that has, in part, been purchased by the Nature Conservancy, although some small farms still flank its banks (172). Kingsolver writes:

No one and anyone around here would say that Horse Lick Creek is special. It's a great place to go shoot, drive off-road vehicles, and camp out. In addition to the wild turkeys, the valley holds less conspicuous riches: limestone cliffs and caves that shelter insectivorous bats, including the endangered Indiana bat; shoals in the clear, fast water where many species of rare mussels hold on for their lives. All of this habitat

is threatened by abandoned strip mines, herbicide and pesticide use, and literally anything that muddies the water (173-174).

The mussels rely on clear water for life. They are endangered because the silt that rises from disturbances in the creek bottom as traffic crosses the creek clogs their lungs. Kingsolver notes that although pollution from strip mining and poisoning from pesticide use are apparent in this area, “some of the worst offenders here are. . . cattle and local travelers who stir up daily mudstorms in hundreds of spots where the road crosses the creek. Saving this little slice of life on earth—like most—will take not just legislation, but change at the level of the pickup truck” (174).

It is change and resistance at the local level that both Kingsolver and Giardina realize is so important, not only resistance to major changes like mountain top mining, defoliation through pesticide use, and contamination of water supplies, but also a change in the attitudes that people hold toward the earth and its creatures. Both writers grew up in wild areas, albeit areas that had been invaded by the coal industry in Giardina’s case and farming in Kingsolver’s, and both have strong connections to the land. Both realize that the illusion of control of the natural world is not only dangerous, but that it can be deadly. Both write from the position that living with and in the natural world is vital to survival; that “dominion over” is not only impossible but also dangerous. In High Tide in Tucson Kingsolver writes:

A new question in the environmentalist’s canon. . . is . . . who will love the imperfect lands, the fragments of backyard desert paradise, the creek that runs between farms? In our passion to protect the last remnants of virgin wilderness, shall we surrender everything else in exchange? One might argue that it’s a waste of finite resources to preserve and try to repair a place as tame as Horse Lick Creek. I wouldn’t. I would say that our love for our natural home has to go beyond finite, into the boundless—like the love of a mother for her children, whose devotion extends to both the gifted and the scarred among her brood (180).

Neither Kingsolver nor Giardina have qualms about writing “political” fiction. In fact, Kingsolver has stated frequently that she writes to try to change the world (See 47, “Kingsolver” 68, Signature). She notes that the central issues in her books are “central to my reason for living. . . issues [that] are fundamentally related . . . [that] can be reduced to a certain central idea—seeing ourselves as a part of something larger. The individual issues are all aberrations that stem from a central disease of failing to respect the world and our place in it” (See 47). In High Tide in Tucson Kingsolver writes that she does not view a novel as “a purely recreational vehicle.” Rather, she says, “I think if 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” (252). “The artistic consummation of a novel is created by the author and reader together, in an act of joint imagination. . . . It should not make you feel numb, or bored, or demeaned, or less than human. But I think it’s all right if it makes you cry some, or feel understood. . . or even change your life a little” (253, 256). “Good art is political whether it means to be or not, insofar as it provides the chance to understand points of view alien to our own. Its nature is the opposite of spiritual meanness, bigotry, and warfare.” (234). “One of the extremely valuable things to be done with the power of fiction is the connection of events with their consequences” (253).

In her work, Giardina is cognizant of consequences, and the coal mining areas of Denise Giardina’s books are scarred, but the love of her characters for the land is boundless. Giardina sets up a tension from the beginning of Storming Heaven that illustrates the differences between living with the mountains and living on them. The Homeplace located on Grapevine Creek in Kentucky is tranquil at the opening of Storming Heaven. Carrie Bishop’s farm is a retreat, as yet unspoiled by mining. Although certainly not idyllic, for the life is difficult and conflicts between strong personalities exist, Carrie feels a sense of safety and comfort. She roams the fields, wades in the creek, watches the fog “dancing up [the mountains’] flanks.” Looking back, Carrie narrates: “Every way I turned the lush green peaks towered over me. Had it been winter or spring, they would have been iron gray, or dappled with pink and white dogwood, sarvis, and redbud, but always they would be there, the mountains, their heights rounded by the elements like relics worn smooth by the hands of reverent pilgrims” (32). Up Scary Creek “the mountains closed in and smelled strong and damp, like a wet animal” and the “. . . creek and the rutted road finally . . . merg[ed] into one,” a place where “. . . the sun did not touch . . . save when it stood directly overhead.” The mountains “. . . hovered close and sheltering, like a quilt upon [Carrie’s] back” (44). Here, the mountains may hold dangers, but as a child Carrie cannot imagine disaster like the earthquakes she learns of in school. She “tr[ies] in vain to imagine an earthquake on Grapevine, the river roiling, the mountains moving like bones beneath the skin. But” she narrates, “it seemed impossible our land would turn on us” (32).

While Carrie was still a child living in Kentucky, land in West Virginia was already being appropriated for mining.

C. J. Marcum remembers Dillon Lloyd's retreat into the wilderness because, Lloyd says, "you wont even find a coon in the holler time all that mining starts up. I can't bear to see it, all mud and ugly, men sellin their souls for the almighty dollar" (Heaven 8). C.J., whose grandfather was shot and killed for refusing to sign over his land, lives with and works on Ermel Justice's farm. C.J. tries to think that peace and security are not gone, but when he "would pause in the field, lean against [his] hoe, and the wind would stir and bear a shriek, thin and ghostlike, from up Pliny [Creek]—the death cry of some huge tree, fallen to make mine timbers and houses for American Coal—then [his] dream of sanctuary on the farm seemed a mockery and a reproach" (Heaven 9). Although the Homeplace is long a place of sanctuary for Carrie, a place to which she can return to heal from disappointment in love, after being shot by Baldwin-Felts guards, or after her husband Albion Freeman's killing by Baldwin-Felts for his part in the battle between company guards and the residents of Free Annadale, she, like C.J., finds that the dream of sanctuary does not last. The Homeplace is where Carrie takes Rondal Lloyd after he is wounded in the Battle of Blair Mountain and where Carrie raises her son, Dillon, a "woods colt" conceived with Rondal. But by the time Carrie's niece Rachel enters nursing school, the Homeplace is gone, torn away by those ". . . forces in this world, principalities and powers, that wrench away the things that are loved, people and land, and return only exile" (48).

The changes mining has created stand in stark contrast to Rondal Lloyd's father's description of the previous condition of the land on Blackberry Creek. Instead of a "creek . . . clear as glass" from which the family ate trout and frogs' legs, what Rondal knows of the creek is that it is "black with mine drainage and raw sewage, and acid stain[s] the rocks orange" (13). Yet Carrie saw Vulcan, the camp where she began working as a nurse, as initially rather romantic, "like a painting in a book I once saw of a Spanish town called Toledo, with a sky that looked as though demons streaked across it" for she sees herself on an adventure, ". . . like Florence Nightingale in the Crimean" (Heaven 90). Vulcan was a town where "clouds of black bug dust whipped through the streets, and when the wind was right, the sulphurous fumes from the burning slag heap above Hunkie Holler choked the air in the narrow bottom"; Vulcan is a town in which the "sway-backed houses [grow] right up to the tipples like toadstools about a tree stump" (Heaven 90). The romantic adventure ends soon, however, with warm weather and an epidemic of typhus, the continuing refusal of "the company" to remedy sanitary conditions and poverty in the camps, or to create safer working conditions for miners because those changes would cut into profits.

In the mine and in the community, one of the greatest fears was cave-in. For Rondal Lloyd, going back into the mine as an adult after experiencing a cave in that killed one of the men he was working with while he was still a child is "fearsome." He "spent the first month in terror of a roof fall, and talked little so [he] could listen to the grinding and moaning of the coal seam" (Heaven 76). For Albion Freeman, however, going into the mines is like a calling from God. Although Carrie thinks the tipples "sagged and screeched and spewed clouds of black dust," when Albion first saw it "he said, 'That there is my church'" (Heaven 163). He tells Carrie that the mushrooms growing inside the mine are a "sign from God[.] . . . [if] the least of these creatures can prosper in this place. . . [.]wont I take care of you" (164). Albion describes blasting, a time of great danger:

. . . when we cleared the coal dust, I knelt there for a minute and I thought, 'They aint never been a human being stood in this place before.' Hit was like discovering a new part of God, like being able to touch something precious. And to feel the mountain all round, to be closer to its heart than I ever did think was possible[.] . . . [W]hen I was picking slate I come on the outline of a fern that had growed right in the rock. You could count ever leaf on it (Heaven 164).

For Albion, the mine, the inside of the earth that it shows, is a place of God, one in which he can trace the story of creation, but some others think of it as the province of the Devil. In 1943 Carrie and Rondal's son, Dillon Freeman, enters the mines and is caught in a fall: "[t]here is barely room to stand, and only four feet between us and a wall of rock. We were ready to load bone [slate] when a rumble like a train ran above our heads and long shards peeled off the roof" crushing the buggy (Earth 40). While he and the other men hope for rescue, they talk. Brigham Lloyd calls the seam they were working a "jawbone seam" because it is the "'[j]awbone of the Devil'" (53). Brigham asks, "'Don't you know we're digging the Booger man's bones, boys?'" Sim Gore, the only Black in the group, takes offense:

'Why the Booger Man's bones?' asks Sim.

'Because they're black as pitch.'

'I'm black,' says Sim—his voice with an edge to it—'and I got nothin to do with the Devil' (43).

Brigham talks of a folk story about the Devil's toe that a man digs up and eats, thinking it is a potato. At midnight, the Devil comes to claim the man's soul. "'Devil's bones in the ground,'" Brigham says, to which Sim replies: "'That don't mean this is the Devil's bones. . . .Could be God's bones. God's bones a-holdin up the world, and we got a powerful nerve to be messing with them.'" (Earth 44).

The bone, the slate that the men were going to load into the car for discard, takes on life in Giardina's work, for the slate, too, releases its energy. The side of Trace mountain is covered with slate. "Smoke rises from it for slate burns when you make a pile of it. The fire will burn for years and cannot be put out. . . . It smells acrid, like singed raw sewage, and on a damp morning the stench fills the camp. You can only get away from it by rising above it toward the clean fog of Trace Mountain." (Earth 32). Slate becomes deadly in The Unquiet Earth. Piled at the head of a hollow, the burning, hissing, sizzling slate forms a dam. When it rains long and "so hard that [the rain] seemed to spark and fizz when it hit the flat black water," Dillon Freeman goes to check the bone dam, but is chased away by "gun thugs" guarding the tippie from strikers (326). Returning in the early morning, he "stop[s] to listen. A low moan swells from the water—it is the tormented spirit of Trace Mountain torn apart. [He] hear[s] voices in the moan", and stepping toward them, finds that the dam has gone soft (328).

The bone dam looms black and high as the mountains. Despite the wet, smoke rises from the base where the bone still burns, has burned for generations. A curl of water laps the tops and runs like a tear down the front of the dam then the center of the bone pile sags and melts.

The water waits.

Then the dull boom when the lake touches the fiery slate and a gray cloud swells, rises far up the mountain, another explosion and another and the rising cloud sweeps away the picket shack and the tippie fence before it falls to earth a whirlpool licks across the bottom, rips out a large electrical transformer flames shoot to the top of Trace Mountain the sky crackles (329).

Dillon is one of many killed as the unquiet earth of the slate dam at the head of Blackberry Creek collapses. His body is never found. His daughter Jackie "dream[s] of his skeleton stripped and blackened and mired in sludge, becoming one with the bones of the mountains" (Earth 338).

One hundred twenty five deaths occurred on Saturday, February 26, 1972 when the actual Buffalo Creek slate dam broke and a wall of water washed destruction through the valley. (Deitz and Mowery 1). Gary Bellamy tells of emptying a five gallon bucket of water and letting it sit outside the entrance to the mine on the morning of the day before the flood. When he went back to work at midnight, there were about 14 inches of water in the bucket. Heading home from work in the morning, Bellamy saw black smoke. "It was raining and the rain was real black like soot" (40). Cars stopped on the road. Bellamy saw one car and its occupants swept away. He writes:

My headlights were shining on the railroad tracks, and I saw the railroad rails whipping back and forth like a black snake whip and they broke just above where I was at. All of a sudden they went down the hollow, WHOOOOOOM! It was as if something was pulling on them. . . .I saw a giant wall of water. It was like a tidal wave going over the top of everything. You couldn't see anything except that black water. . . .I never knew water could have such force (43, 44, 46).

The action told in The Unquiet Earth and Storming Heaven is based on actual events. Many economic and social histories of the area document that railroads and coal companies took land by trick, changing the shape of the land and the quality of the environment. In order to keep wages down and in the hope that the union would be kept out by a divide and destroy strategy, African American workers and miners from many parts of Europe were brought into the coalfields. Owner/operators believed that racism and xenophobia would prevent miners from working together in union, a strategy that failed to work. Coal companies have rarely repaired the damage to the land, and certainly have not responded to physical complaints like Black Lung, or to the poverty of the region. Those living outside Appalachia have been socially programmed by news media controlled by large corporations, and by governmental policy makers, to look down on what they have been told is a "backward area" full of "women who are barefoot and pregnant" and their "hillbilly" boyfriends. In fact, as Giardina points out, those companies and policies have played on the lack of other employment in the areas where mining occurs in order to try to keep environmental protests and sanctions at a minimum. And, as both Giardina and Kingsolver realize, history in the United States has been told from the point of view of those with the largest amount of control and money: corporations and conglomerates. Union struggles have rarely been depicted honestly. Few outside of Appalachia or mining areas in Colorado or New Mexico know about the battles for better wages and conditions for miners and their families. Few realize that Baldwin-Felts guards hired by the coal companies made random night raids, shooting into the tent colonies where strikers were living because they had been evicted from their homes which were owned by the company. Few know about the armored rail car that traveled with its lights off through the camps, the machine guns mounted on the car rat-a-tat-tatting bullets into the tents and bodies of sleeping people.

In The Battle of Matewan, Mayor Testerman, like Giardina's creation, Annadel's mayor C. J. Marcum was killed,

and, as Albion Freeman and Isom Justice were in Giardina's books, so Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers were shot by Baldwin-Felts agents on the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse. Certainly the story of Blair Mountain is not told in history texts, for in that battle the United States government made war on its own citizens: union protesters who determined to avenge Sid Hatfield's death, to rid themselves of Baldwin-Felts guards, and gain better conditions in the mines and the towns where they and their families lived. "Blair Mountain was wild, hilly, wooden country, with underbrush so thick in places one could hardly see twenty feet. The mountain actually is a twin mountain, with a pass separating the two sides" (Savage 119). Don Chafin, the sheriff who vowed to keep the union out of Mingo County and who worked for the mining companies, was in control of the pass through the mountain, and the mountaintop. When miners refused to comply with an injunction to return to work continuing the battle with Chafin and his forces, at the order of President Harding, General Billy Mitchell dispatched planes to the area, and tanks and federal troops were brought in. Not wanting to go to war with the Federal Government, not wanting governmental overthrow, the miners retreated.

The stories that Kingsolver and Giardina tell are stories that must be told if Appalachia is to prevent more environmental damage and escape poverty. Giardina is active in politics in West Virginia and writes about Appalachia because she is concerned with environmental, economic and social justice for all of the people of Appalachia. Growing up in the mountains in a mining camp, Giardina knows the history of Appalachia first hand, and she understands the importance of telling that history. As John Sayles, producer/director of the film *Matewan*, the stories of West Virginia and its history "is as much our heritage as that of the Alamo or Gettysburg or the winning of the West" (viii). Its importance goes far beyond Appalachia, for as Sayles states, "When a colonized people learn they can fight back together, life can never again be so comfortable for their exploiters" (viii). The Battle of Blair Mountain was a psychological victory for the miners, one that eventually led to better conditions for workers and for the land—at least for awhile. Ironically, today the site of much action of this battle no longer exists. Blair Mountain is one of the West Virginia sites on which mountaintop mining has been performed. And in 1992, Arch Coal Inc. adopted a plan to buy out residents so that no one would be left to complain about the blasting, dust, and flyrock that is a part of cutting down a mountain. ("Buying Blair").

Early in *The Unquiet Earth*, speaking of Trace Mountain Rachel Honaker says, "You see the world differently on top of a mountain. Up there you might think that you are safe" (76). Where does that sense of safety go when the mountain is no more? Certainly, in her work Giardina is protesting not only past damage, but present damage to the mountains, the environment, and to the people of the mountains as well. By the end of *The Unquiet Earth*, the top of Trace Mountain, that place where Rachel felt safety and was able to see the world differently, was no more. After the flood, as Rachel's daughter Jackie is being airlifted out of the area, Jackie looks out the window of the helicopter. "The mountains are falling away below us. They are ripped and torn like a rumpled gray quilt where the cotton batting shows through. The crown of Trace Mountain is gone, a flat rocky moon pocked by green ponds of acid water" (337).

C.J. Marcum who will become the mayor of Annadale and be killed in the massacre there wishes at times that Ermel Justice ". . . would have just kept on farming his land. Of course if he had, I wouldn't have no drugstore, nor money saved up. I wouldn't have no icebox nor electric nor water inside my house. It keeps me awake at night wondering if I done sold my soul for them things" (*Heaven* 54). For Carrie Bishop, as a child concerned about her own soul, finding God and doing right are personal matters. While still young, Carrie is worried that she is not filled with the Holy Ghost. Carrie's Aunt Jane explains that she herself "git[s] it when I'm working in the garden, when I see the food God gives us spring outen that rocky ground. I may not whoop and holler [like those in the Holiness Church], but I swing my hoe in praise of the Almighty. Carrie muses, "Maybe I get it down by the river. . . . Sometimes they's something special that I feel when the sun lights the mountainsides and everything looks so clear" (*Heaven* 130). When the mountains are gone, shuddering, dropped into the backs of trucks or dumped into what were once pristine valley streams, where will that clarity exist? Where will the species dependent on the wild exist?

Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* is concerned with another type of destruction, the destruction that has too often been a part of improving agricultural yields or the supposed protection of farm animals from wild predators, and it is very critical of animal and habitat destruction that rises from those areas. But more importantly, *Prodigal Summer* is a hopeful book whose storyline rests on the likeness of animal beings, human, domesticated, and wild, and their dependence on nature. Kingsolver speaks through Garnett Walker who would like to tell Nannie Rawley something "about God's plan" (138). Unlike Nanny, Garnett believes God intended people to have dominion over the animals, that people are superior, and he disputes Nannie's statement that humans are "one more species among our brethern"

(139).

Deanna Wolf, whose father was involved with Nannie, and who was herself tremendously influenced by Nannie's ideas, does believe, like Nannie, that humans are no more important than any other species. Deanna finds and protects a coyote den. Although coyotes are often thought to be evil predators, through this character and the chapters "Predators" which tell Deanna's story, the nature of predators and the importance of control of the populations on which predators feed is denoted, as is the role of humans as greater predators who disrupt the necessary balance that keeps the food chain intact. As Kingsolver notes through Deanna, "Plenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system. They were watching it here in her own beloved mountains, where North America's richest biological home was losing its richness to one extinction after another, of plants and birds, fish, mammals, moths and stoneflies, and especially the river creatures whose names she collected like beads" (63). Deanna ponders who is predator and who prey: is the predator she, making use of coyote hunter Eddie Bondo's sex with her for her own purposes as she grows older, nears infertility, and attempts a child before the chance is gone? Or is Eddie Bondo the predator, finding a place to live for a time while he attempts to earn bounty on coyotes, even though he leaves without killing those coyotes Deanna has found? Deanna, who chose a solitary life in the forest after her failed marriage, heals enough while questioning who is predator and who prey to return to the community, Deanna herself, like the alpha female who bears young, will come down from the mountain to join Nannie Rawley for the raising of her child. Nannie, whose orchard creates a prototype for the success of organic farming with significantly less ecological destruction than chemical farming methods allow.

Garnett Walker is Nannie's opposite. As a portrayal of agricultural workers and teachers who have believed the chemical industry's hype about the necessity for pesticides, Garnett is, in the beginning, blind to the damage that pesticides can cause, and a bitter foe of Nannie's ban on roadside spraying. However, through his work to develop a blight-resistant chestnut back into the United States, Garnett comes to understand some of the reasons for and methods to protect and preserve species, and he comes to realize that no one works alone. Through his experiments for propagation, he realizes that the Civilian Conservation Corps gave bad advice when they recommended cutting all the chestnuts, thinking all would die of the blight. When Nannie Rawley tells him that some chestnut trees have survived in her woodlot, Garnett realizes the importance to his attempts at reintroduction: "... if those trees had been shedding pollen all along they might already have helped him out, infusing his fields with a little bit of extra diversity. He thought he'd been working alone. You just never knew" (343).

Although they do not meet in the book, Lusa Mulaf Landowski is connected to Deanna's life through her appreciation of coyotes, her love of the luna moth, and her realization of the importance of species and the dangers of extermination. She also creates other connections with Garnett through the grandchildren with whom he previously had no contact, her niece and nephew by marriage. Lusa, an entomologist doing doctoral work at the University of Kentucky, moved into the western Virginia mountains because she fell in love with and married a farmer whom she met when he attended workshops at the university. After his death in a traffic accident, Lusa decides to stay on. Rather than planting tobacco, the staple cash crop of the region whose propagation often creates erosion of topsoil and chemical poisoning through pesticides and chemical fertilizers used to protect plants and increase yields, Lusa, who is Muslim, decides to raise goats and sell them for the holidays of Id-al-Fitr and Id-al-Adha. Lusa contacts Garnett, the 4-H advisor/former agriculture teacher responsible for introducing many goats into the county as a 4-H project.

Although Lusa herself felt alone, isolated from her husband's family and often at odds with her husband Cole before his death as well because of her status as "outsider" and her beliefs about pesticides and nature, after her decision to stay on the family farm, Lusa makes connections and community with her husband's family, particularly through the lives of the Garnett's grandchildren and their mother who is dying of cancer. Lusa finds family and community, community like that necessary to young coyotes for the raising of young, for as the coyote community has one breeding female but an entire community for the pups' care, it is she who will take on the responsibility of raising her sister-in-law Jewell's children after their mother's death. She learns of the connection with Garnett, and reconnects him with the children.

In a Signature production filmed by and aired over Kentucky Public Television, Kingsolver noted that she does not start with characters when she writes, but that rather her approach to writing has been greatly influenced by her training as a biologist. She starts with a theory or a supposition that she wants to explore, identifying the issues that she wants her audience to examine. Then she creates characters and situations that forward that examination.

Prodigal Summer is a wonderfully told story that involves readers with the lives of its characters while it educates readers about the need for environmental protection, and the need for community to produce and protect life on earth, and she places humans squarely in the animal kingdom. In Prodigal Summer Kingsolver points out the interdependence of the world, and ends with a statement about interdependence: "Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end. Every choice is a world made new for the chosen" (444). In High Tide in Tucson Kingsolver writes:

It's starting to look as if the most shameful tradition of Western civilization is our need to deny that we are animals. In just a few centuries of setting ourselves apart as landlords of the Garden of Eden, exempt from the natural order and entitled to hold dominion, we have managed. . . to wreck most of what took three billion years to assemble. Air, water, earth, and fire—so much of our own element so vastly contaminated, we endanger our own future. Apparently we never owned the place after all. Like every other animal, we're locked into our niche: the mercury in the ocean, the pesticides on the soybean fields, all come home to our breast-fed babies. In the silent spring we are learning its easier to escape from a chain gang than a food chain. Possibly we will have the sense to begin a new century by renewing our membership in the Animal Kingdom (10).

What Barbara Kingsolver says of herself in Signature could also, I believe be said of Denise Giardina: "I write because of the things I love, and the things that broke my heart. . . . I want people to be hopeful. To think they can change the world." Both Kingsolver's and Giardina's books about Appalachia offer resistance to destruction, and hope for that changed world, a hope that culminates in the creation of community. As Hassell Day says at the end of Giardina's The Unquiet Earth as he urges Jackie to come home after the devastation of the flood, "'Come on home. We'll still yet be here'" (339).

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