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Capitalism vs. Localism: Economies of Scale in Annie Proulx's Postcards and That Old Ace in the Hole.

Wes Berry, *Western Kentucky University*

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From her first novel, *Postcards* (1992), to the recent *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), Annie Proulx has explored the nexus of economy and ecology in her fictional geographies. Proulx's ecological communities deal with the injustices of capitalism, from the dissolution of family farms to the depletion of aquifers, from the poisoning of eagles to the poisoning of air and water by industrial hog production. Readers desiring tightly-plotted novels may fail to appreciate Proulx's accomplishments, but readers who value the development of character, theme, and a strong political voice should appreciate Proulx's agrarian critique—her vision of individual lives and communities tied to an economic life that can be destructive or hopeful, depending on the scale of the production and consumption. *Postcards* and *That Old Ace in the Hole* serve as appropriate book ends for this critique, for both novels delve into the lives of individuals whose fates are shaped by a culture that glorifies unbridled economic growth and the idea of unlimited material wealth, a growth that has coincided with a destruction of community life in America in the 20th century.

My attention to economic matters in Proulx's fiction has been shaped by the writings of several cultural critics, including those of Wendell Berry, whose book *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977) offers a powerful critique of modern agribusiness and an analysis of how agricultural and community life have declined in rural America during the 20th century.¹ A younger generation of writers influenced by Berry's agrarian vision—his insistence that our ecological crisis arises from a crisis of character, agriculture, and culture—include Bill McKibben, whose recent book *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (2007) explores the dangers of our exaltation of the individual and pursuit of maximum economic production, and also Norman Wirzba, editor of *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future*

of *Culture, Community, and the Land* (2003). These writers value ecological health, economic good sense, and the durability of community life. A few selected quotations reveal this kindred vision. In an essay entitled "Health Is Membership" from his essay collection *Another Turn of the Crank* (1995), Berry states his core belief in the value of community health: "When the choice is between the health of a community and technological innovation, I choose the health of the community. I would unhesitatingly destroy a machine before I would allow the machine to destroy my community." He continues, "I believe that the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms."² Echoing his mentor over a decade later, Bill McKibben, seeking a way to curb climate change and begin healing our fractured communities, promotes an economy that will be more local and more responsible than free-market capitalism. "Localism," McKibben writes, offering a contrast to individualist suburban lifestyles, "offers a physically plausible economy for the future, and a psychologically plausible one as well: an economy that might better provide goods like time and security that we're short of."³ His vision is for the "kind of village life that can still be found in most of the developing world, but which melts away daily under the ever-hotter sun of economic modernization."⁴ As we transform our economic system, he argues, "The key questions will change from whether the economy produces an ever larger pile of stuff to whether it builds or undermines community—for community, it turns out, is the key to physical survival in our environmental predicament and also to human satisfaction."⁵ In a similar vein, Wirzba catalogues a list of cultural and environmental problems that have emerged with the "modern industrial/technological/economic paradigm," and argues for agrarianism as a "compelling and coherent alternative."⁶ Among the litany of problems linked to industrial economics are communal disintegration, poor working conditions and wages, biological/genetic pollution, species loss, climate change, resource depletion, soil erosion, water and air pollution, etc.⁷ Agrarianism offers a more responsible way of living, Wirzba claims, because the agrarian lifestyle "tests success and failure not by projected income statements or by economic growth, but by the health and vitality of a region's entire human and nonhuman neighborhood. Agrarianism . . . represents the most complex and far-reaching accounting system ever known, for according to it, success must include a vibrant watershed and soil base; species diversity, human and animal contentment; communal creativity, responsibility, and joy; usable waste; social solidarity and sympathy . . . and the respectful maintenance of all the sources of life."⁸ I highlight these measures of ecological health because they closely resemble the hopeful community spirit portrayed near the end of *That Old Ace in the Hole*; we arrive at this vision of hope, however, only after Annie Proulx pulls us through a country of disintegrating communities, endangered species, human and animal misery, toxic wastes, and wholesale destruction of the sources of life.

To trace this progression from horror to hope, let's begin at the beginning, with Proulx's first novel, *Postcards*. A subtitle of this novel could be "The

Unsettling of America," since the social upheaval the novel describes reflects the cultural problems Wendell Berry describes in his book of the same name. *Postcards* begins with an act of violence, as Loyal Blood, a young man who has invested much sweat equity in his family farm in Vermont, kills his girlfriend during an act of sexual violence.⁹ Although Loyal's motive is not clear, the action propels the narrative by thrusting him away from the farm, out onto the American highways, which enables Proulx a broad East-West survey of American life during the 20th century. One of the greatest ironies in a novel full of irony is that Loyal Blood—his name testifying to his attachment to his familial landscape, a point illustrated by how he continues to dream of the farm when he's far away from it—leaves his vocation of farming and never again views any other American place with the sense of peacefulness and satisfaction he experiences when observing his small patch of Vermont soil for the last time. Loyal's flight provides structure to an oftentimes random narrative, and his leaving home starts the decline of the Blood family farm, as his labor is necessary to keep up the livestock and other farm work. *Postcards* operates on several levels. We can read Loyal as the man-on-the-lam, a fugitive from society and female entrapment, in the tradition of his fictional predecessors like Rip Van Winkle and Huck Finn. Second, we can read the novel as a feminist revision and parody of this myth, with the man who tries to escape family responsibilities facing harsh rather than Edenic nature, unable to discover an ultimate freedom from lover and society. Third, the novel chronicles the passing of rural America and the decay of wilderness; it is "the story of a dying ecosystem—of a farm and family deprived of ambition and an able body, of the spirit that makes it go."¹⁰ Proulx drags us through her modern wasteland—beginning in Vermont and ranging as far as Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Minnesota—and we may feel by the end of the tour whipped and ungrounded like Loyal Blood.

The fragmented narrative of *Postcards* allows Proulx a multi-focused critique of the global economy—and it is on this political level that the novel is successful. The historical subtexts of the novel are the big economic transitions following World War II, including the escalation of fossil fuel use and the corresponding decline of rural communities. Free-market capitalism drove the transformation of American agriculture from the Jeffersonian ideal—an abundance of self-sufficient family farms—to the Earl Butzian ideal of agribusiness monoculture, a type of planting and harvesting enabled by large machinery powered by inexpensive products of oil refining, like diesel. Earl L. Butz, U. S. Secretary of Agriculture in the 1970s, famously encouraged farmers to plow "fencerow to fencerow" and to "get big or get out" of farming.¹¹ Responding to Butz's Big Farm ideals, Berry notes that 25 million people left the farm between 1940 and 1967.¹² The reasons for this decline include WWII's demand for factory workers, government policies that encourage large-scale agribusiness, and the technology and fossil fuels that enables a small number of farmers to produce massive yields of corn and soybeans. The opening chapters of *Postcards* dwell on this historic shift away from the farm, as big agriculture replaces soil husbandry with chemical fertilizers and expensive machinery, and Proulx's critical vision opposes the change; she even takes a jab at the

aforementioned proponent of agribusiness, Earl Butz, slipping it into a conversation between Loyal and Jase, who discuss “how small farms were doomed, [and] was that son of a bitch Butz doing any good at all in the world or selling them out to the big corporations[?]”¹³ Loyal’s story is one of several interconnected narratives about multiple species in trouble, and these narratives are tied to the growth of “arterial roadways” in Proulx’s fictional geography, a representation of the interstate system that shuttles goods and people across the United States as the economic system shifts from local to global, and landownership shifts from families who live where they work to absentee landholding.

Proulx’s concerns about agricultural decline are evident from the opening chapter, which begins with an act of salesmanship—another quality that dominates 20th century American life—in the form of a direct mail advertising postcard addressed to Mr. Blood and dated October 1944: “Our national agricultural program is the biggest job we’ve ever tackled—and there is no ‘maybe’ about it—the job *must* be done. It’s our obligation to put up the best electric stock fence money can buy. When you call on us YOU KNOW YOU CAN DEPEND ON ELECTROLINE.”¹⁴ The name of the fencing brand, “Electro line,” provides a clue to understanding the extent to which fossil-fuel technologies abetted the unsettling of rural America. Consider the year, 1944. World War II has drawn people away from farms and into cities to work in war industries, furthering the rural migration that escalated after WWI. Fossil-fuel technologies, like tractors and electric fencing, are swiftly replacing solar technologies like draft horses and wooden fencing. Rural markets for farm products are disappearing as people leave rural communities, and agricultural specialization is replacing diversification. Proulx notes this agricultural shift in the opening chapter, as Mink Blood, the patriarch, chastises his son Loyal for wanting to leave the farm:

For ten years I been hearin’ about what you wanted to do with this place, how you wanted to switch off the Jerseys over to Holsteins, ‘get a milkin’ machine after the War as soon’s we get electricity in, specialize in dairy.’ Get the pastures and hayfields up, alfalfa, build a silo, grow more corn, concentrate on commercial dairy farmin’. Profit. Put time into dairyin’, don’t bother with no big garden, or pigs or turkeys, it’s quicker and efficienter to buy your food.¹⁵

Here, in brief, is a picture of the shift from a diversified local solar-powered food economy to a specialized long-distance fossil-fuel powered food economy, and cheap oil is the commodity behind the change.

Postcards, with its fragmented narratives of multiple characters (including nonhuman characters like black bears), its patchwork of postcard messages and the “What I See” chapters recording random images of contemporary American life, portrays remarkably well this abrupt historic shift from a local to a global economy, and the discontinuity we associate with contemporary life. On the issue of time, imagine being settled on a farm in Vermont before the automobile transformed America. One’s geography would be necessarily limited. Livestock ties one to your place, and since no stores exist nearby with produce shipped

from California, one needs livestock for food and to increase the fertility of one's soil. One's need for food necessitates paying attention to weather patterns and seasonal shifts for proper planting. Such a lifestyle creates a sense of continuity of time and place. Contemporary living, on the other hand, is characterized by rapid shifts in time and space. Automobiles, airplanes, televisions, the internet and cell phones disrupt the continuity of rooted agrarian life. Jewell Blood testifies to this phenomenon when at middle age she learns to drive, and as she gazes upon panoramic views of Vermont from mountain roads, "Continuity broke: when she drove, her stifled youth unfurled like a ribbon pulled from a spool. . . . All her life she had taken the tufted line of the hills against the sky as fixed, but [she] saw now that the landscape changed. . . . When she turned the ignition key and steered the car out of the drive . . . she went dizzy with power for the first time in her life."¹⁶ This newfound freedom is a mixed bag, for the commercial economy that releases Jewell from farming life brings with it multiple problems. On one hand, Jewell appears liberated from domesticity: "She was alone for the first time in her adult life, alone in a solitude that tasted like a strange but sweet tropical fruit."¹⁷ On the other hand, Jewell is unsatisfied with the new commercial diet, complaining that the beef and chicken she bought at IGA had no flavor, and how "baked goods were not the same as they used to be. Instead of brownies, square chocolate cake still in the pan, apple pies, oatmeal cookies and home-baked bread, there were cake-mix things with three times as much frosting as anybody needed."¹⁸ These details—the factory-made cake mixes, supermarket meats, and cans of vegetables Jewell helps produce at the factory—point to a fuel-intensive food system that replaces the local food economy represented by Jewell's gardening, which becomes more complicated as she ages because "good rotted chicken or cow manure" is needed for soil fertility and her neighbors no longer keep chickens and cows,¹⁹ another detail indicating a rural economy in transition.

In addition to this fuel-intensive food system, other ecological problems emerging from the shift from local to global economics revealed in *Postcards* include illegal trading of threatened animal species, the abuse of migrant labor, and the aforementioned sense of discontinuity or displacement suffered by people who are uprooted from their homes. One storyline exposes a black market for the gallbladders of black bear. Taking advantage of a profitable global market, villains kill the bears in various American states and ship the gallbladders and claws to Japan, Korea, and China to be used as aphrodisiacs.²⁰ Another character making money through global trade is Ray, Mernelle's husband, an absentee timber buyer who attends lumber conventions in Spokane, Denver, and Boise. His business takes him to far away places like Sweden, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. A postcard notes that Ray buys mahogany in the Philippines, a clue that he works for a corporation that logs the world's forests. This detail comes at the beginning of a chapter entitled "The Tropical Garden," in which the opening paragraph shows Dub Blood, now rich from real estate development in Florida, dining on "country ham and the quail eggs flown in from Japan."²¹ Many details point to this global system of trade: bear gall bladders flow into Japan, quail eggs are shipped to the States, and absentee

timber companies log places far from their corporate headquarters. This destructive economy drives Proulx's political vision, as her characters are all affected by it. For example, Jewell dies ironically in her automobile on a logging road, lost in the skeletal remains of a spruce forest. The irony is situational; the absentee economy, the one responsible for the cake mixes and "tasteless" meats Jewell does not like, is also responsible for the poor logging methods—the "Branch slash, decaying trunks, green saplings" and a "gully crisscrossed with trees, boiling with brambles"—that trap her.²² Another character negatively affected by free-market economics is Loyal, who joins "the Stream" of transient migrant laborers who harvest produce from Idaho to California. The "What I See" chapter 49 notes that "It's easier to get into the Stream than out again;"²³ another chapter reveals a violent Idaho potato farmer who uses Mexican laborers to harvest his crops and then, to avoid paying them, kills them.²⁴

The sense of the unsettling of rural America intensifies throughout the novel, as Proulx piles up images and symbols of 20th-century ecological destruction coinciding with the loss of rural community life. A recurring motif is that of circulatory system malfunction. Early in the novel, a bear photographer dies of a subdural hematoma, a death caused by blood that has been forced out from the proper vessels, which is Loyal's condition, more or less. He is a Blood who is forced from the farm, his proper occupational track. Furthermore, Witkin's half-brother, Larry, claims after years of visiting the hunting camp that he can no longer endure the hill-climbing: "Too much easy living," he says. "You don't get exercise selling pictures." Larry is fatally seized by a "[f]ull coronary block" while sunbathing on a boat—another artist dead from bad arteries.²⁵ Additionally, Jewell dies from an aneurysm, "a permanent cardiac or arterial dilatation caused by weakening of the vessel wall."²⁶ The walls that enclose the Blood family weaken, and its members are pushed out onto the new American roadways. The Blood home place collapses years after Jewell, the last family member to live there, leaves, as we view it through Frank Witkin's eyes as he gazes down from his hunting camp: "The roof of the abandoned farmhouse below had fallen in. No one could guess there had been a farm there."²⁷ The farm economy decays, replaced by plastic Disney Worlds and trailer parks.

Along with these circulatory problems emerge images of toxicity and the internal combustion engine. Loyal passes through a vehicular wasteland near the end of the novel, past a sign reading "CONSTRUCTION NEXT 48 MI," where "Power lines dip and climb, dip. White wire." On the road ahead crawl "pickups hauling trailers loaded with mud-spattered ATVs, cars pulling motorboats, grinding their tires across distance. The land erupting with sores, bulldozers tearing." "The voice on the radio warns that tests show the drinking water . . . is polluted. . . ." The side of the road is littered with "twisted mufflers and black half-moons of tires." And this is most important: "Traffic crawls as arterial roadways feed in more cars and hissing trucks with lofty airfoils."²⁸ The exterior landscape mirrors the human body here, and the main problem is congestion. The "arterial roadways" are clogged, like the veins of multiple humans who suffer various blood traumas in this novel. Pollution poisons the air, water, and soil. Government coyote hunters use poison to murder their prey. "Jets of

herbicide spray from the behemoth tractor tanks." Humankind and the land appear tired, dilapidated, like Loyal and his truck: "Worn out, worn down, used up. That's all, folks."²⁹ This echo of Looney Tunes jolts the reader, because the comic style of Porky Pig's voice—"Th-th-th-that's all, Folks"—seems out of place with the heavy tone of the conclusion.

Proulx caps these images of economic/cultural ruination by dropping into the narrative Kevin Witkin (scion of nostalgic, aspirant outdoorsman Frank), who complains of the awful noise of his contemporary world. We receive this auditory imagery in the form of lists, and the piled-up rapid-fire images take on a cumulative power. Inside the house, perched on the hillside above the trailer park that used to be the old Blood farmstead, Kevin Witkin hears: the refrigerator, radio, television, music, VCR, electric shaver, toilet, freezer, fan, and computer. Outside noises include: slamming doors, shouting women, crying children, gun blasts, "cars, motorcycles, snowmobiles, three-wheelers, ATVs," barking dogs. "And on the road below the trailer park the mailwoman's truck, the UPS man. Log trucks, oil trucks, gas trucks, lumber trucks, milk trucks. Federal express, the sheriff, fat Buddy Nipple going to the coon dog trials with his pickup full of howling contestants. The traffic." The skies are likewise congested with "The planes overhead. Thousands of them every day. Jets and fighters. . . . And the helicopters."³⁰ These chaotic details, combined with the aforementioned problems of rural decay, reveal that a primary antagonist in *Postcards* is fossil fuel.

Accompanying the rise of fossil fuels and the transition of the American economy in *Postcards* from localism to capitalism is the shift of land ownership from resident dwellers to absentee land holders. For example, Mrs. Nipple tells Jewell Blood, "I've noticed that with the help so hard to get and the boys off to the War they's quite a few of the farms for sale"³¹ and notes that her neighbors sold the family farm because three boys joined the military, another son works in shipyards, the daughter went into nursing, and the father moved to Maine to be a welder—another example of rural resources being lost to the industrial economy. The buyer of the farm is a teacher from Pennsylvania who only lives there during the summers; this is one of the first examples of absentee land ownership in Proulx's work. A more destructive example appears in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, which we will turn to shortly.

Fighting against such transience and absentee ownership, Mink Blood tries to keep up the family farm—his desire to remain rooted to his place evidenced by the fences he builds: he uses "four strands, one more than anybody else used"³² to enclose his property—but the challenges become too much for him. While milking his cows, he ponders the drastic draining of human resources from the countryside during his lifetime, noting that he gets "Poorer every year, the work harder, the prices higher."³³ When he was a child "everybody had been poor," but "things kept going, like a waterwheel turning under the weight of flowing water. Relatives and neighbors came without asking to fill in. Where the hell where they now when he was sinking under black water?" This waterwheel image is a rich symbol that calls up a helpful technology that runs without fossil fuels, the wheel turned by the power of running water in order to grind grains, in

the case of a grist mill. The wheel also symbolizes a healthy community and sense of wholeness, the different families like spokes radiating outward from a central hub, connected by economic necessity. But of course in the twentieth century American grist mills were replaced by Wonder Bread, as oil and coal power replaced water and solar power. Note how in the same paragraph with the waterwheel image Mink reflects on how the passing of the people from the countryside coincides with these technological shifts: "And the past swelled out at him with its smell of horses, oats and hot linseed poultices. When the horses went the people went." What brought an end to the horses was the internal combustion engine, which enabled movement away from the farms and new economic possibilities in cities, and also new methods of producing abundant agricultural commodities with minimal manpower and fossil-fuel "horsepower."

On the importance of the internal combustion engine in shaping our lives, I once heard poet Robert Hass say that "America is a capital investment in transportation infrastructure," a tragicomic way of describing how the automobile has transformed American society and landscapes. *Postcards* illustrates this transformation. Fossil fuels, highways, automobiles, airplanes, absentee land ownership: all are bound together in Proulx's cultural critique. After Mink hangs himself in prison while doing time, along with his son Dub, for insurance fraud, a Boston dermatologist buys most of the Blood family farm to use as a weekend hunting camp. This fellow, Frank Witkin, visits the property to satisfy an "atavistic yearning" for the woods, a nostalgia for a lost Eden. But in contrast to how a rooted agrarian perceives the multiple relationships of the farm, like the slow process of building soil fertility in a pasture, the newly arrived absentee landlord, Witkin, does not yet understand the particulars of the place. He feels a proprietary urge but does not fully understand the ecological connections: "He had only to walk into the woods far enough to lose the camp, and he was in an ancient time that lured him but which he could not understand in any way. No explanation for his sense of belonging here. He stared, numb with loss, into bark crevices, scrabbled in the curling leaves for a sign. . . . The kernel of life, tiny, heavy, deep red in color, was secreted in these gabbling woods. How could he understand it?"³⁴ The obvious answer is that Witkin needs to inhabit this place, and then maybe, after long study of the relationships in the woods and fields, he will begin to understand how the life forms exist together. Instead, Witkin works in Boston and leaves the city at noon on Fridays for the long drive to Vermont, where, once arrived, "he felt uncertain. It was as if the road between his two lives was the realest thing of all, as if the journey counted more than arriving at the end."³⁵ This passage speaks of transience, a key aspect of contemporary American life made possible by the automobile. "The road was the realest thing of all" sounds a lot like "America is a capital investment in transportation infrastructure."

Witkin's absentee land ownership epitomizes one of the main problems of global economics: the absentee corporate landlords who destroy places far away from where they live and work. Witkin does not cause great damage to his property, but his ignorance of the land characterizes a danger of absenteeism. Since corporations are owned by far-scattered stockholders, they don't really

"live" anywhere, and thus corporate responsibility to places is less likely to be governed by a sense of neighborliness. As Berry notes in *The Unsettling of America*, "When people do not live where they work, they do not feel the effects of what they do. The people who make wars do not fight them. The people responsible for strip-mining, clear-cutting of forests, and other ruinations do not live where their senses will be offended or their homes or livelihoods or lives immediately threatened by the consequences."³⁶ Such destructive absenteeism is prominent in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, in which CAFOs (Confined Animal Feeding Operations) owned by a corporation based in Japan threaten the health of the inhabitants of a Texas panhandle community.

That Old Ace in the Hole serves as a hopeful rejoinder to *Postcards*, for as the trajectory of life moves away from settlement and community in *Postcards*, it moves towards community in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, tracing how the protagonist, Bob Dollar, grows from an unsettled, disconnected individual to one who cares about a particular place and its inhabitants—a counter narrative to American stories of escape from society and responsibility. This novel is Proulx's most explicit agrarian statement, an exposé of how agribusiness corporations threaten the health of ecosystems and community life.

In *That Old Ace in the Hole*, Proulx continues to drop clues into the narrative that link the destruction of community life to fossil fuels and corporate absenteeism. The culprit is once again an agent of abstract global economics—in this case, corporate meat producers that feed their hogs "cheap" corn grown on large pieces of land with big machines that run on "cheap" fossil fuels. I put "cheap" in quotation marks because the ecological costs of industrial corn production make it anything but cheap, but these costs—like topsoil loss, air / water pollution, and carbon emissions causing climate change—are not revealed in the industrial accounting of a bushel of corn. We gain a better understanding of the ecological costs of industrial meat production from such work as Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) and Ken Midkiff's *The Meat You Eat* (2004). In a chapter entitled "The Feedlot: Making Meat," Pollan follows a steer from farm to slaughterhouse. Observing the vast quantities of corn fed to the feedlot cattle, Pollan writes "petroleum is one of the most important ingredients in the production of modern meat, and the Persian Gulf is surely a link in the food chain that passes through this (or any) feedlot."³⁷ Pollan is here addressing the oil needed to power the machinery to grow surplus corn, including fertilizer and pesticide production; transport of corn from farm to feedlot; the machinery needed to deal with animal wastes; and the energy costs of animal processing and meat shipment. Midkiff's chapter on "Big Pig" likewise deals with the "hidden" (for the average uninformed consumer, at least) costs of CAFOs. Midkiff takes us into the same territory that Proulx explores in *That Old Ace in the Hole*—the Texas Panhandle—and digs up similar horrific dirt about industrial hog factories. One detail he notes is that the Seaboard corporation, at the time of the book's publication in 2004, wanted to locate a 16,500-hog-per-day slaughterhouse in the Panhandle; this huge operation would require at least 4 million gallons of water per day to wash carcasses and sanitize equipment, which means that 4 million gallons of waste water would be discharged daily.³⁸

Add to this another water problem—the stress on the Ogallala Aquifer from this water pumping for the slaughterhouse and the numerous hog farms that will supply the slaughterhouse—and you can see why hog farming in the Panhandle is a contentious issue. No wonder that Proulx, with her agrarian proclivities, took it on.

The plot of *That Old Ace in the Hole* is driven by similar conflicts. Bob Dollar, a fellow with minimal attachments to people and even fewer attachments to particular places, is hired to scout the Panhandle for land on which to build CAFOs for the fattening of hogs. The problems of absentee land ownership first raised in *Postcards* are treated more explicitly here; whereas a reader may gloss over the postcard from Mernelle that mentions Ray's visit to the Philippines to buy mahogany (a minor allusion to absentee economics), there's nothing subtle about a massive hog farm, nor about Proulx's voice. Consider, for instance, this slap-you-in-the-face description of a CAFO: "Bob rolled his window down to get a better look and within seconds regretted it, for the wind had shifted and carried a full load of hog farm flavor, a huge fetid stink like ten thousand rotten socks, like decaying flesh, like stale urine and swamp gas, like sour vomit and liquid manure, a ghastly palpable stench that made him retch."³⁹ Subtle? No. Effective? It gets the point across that these hog operations are blights on the land, destroying quality of life in the community and threatening the possibility of a durable future in the region.

Indeed, a lingering issue throughout the novel is whether or not Woollybucket, Texas will ultimately be destroyed by global economics, represented by the absentee corporation that pollutes the place and drains the water, and also by fossil-fuel industries and the dependence on these industries by the people who live there. Long-term economic possibilities in the place are tenuous because of the depletion of the vast Ogallala Aquifer. Ace Crouch, a wizened community mainstay who made his fortune in windmills and from an oil inheritance, elucidates the water problem for Bob, who needs help understanding why agribusiness threatens Panhandle community life. Ace explains how irrigation opened the region to agribusiness and corporate farming, and how these businesses are over pumping the aquifer. "The water is playin out," he says. "The people built their lives on awl money expected it would last forever too. The awl is pretty much gone. And they told us the Ogallala would last forever. Now the Ogallala is finishin up."⁴⁰ The citizens of Woollybucket need an economy built on renewable energy, like solar and wind power, rather than the unsustainable "boom" economy of oil and irrigation-dependant agribusiness. The inhabitants of the region have in a very short time abandoned solar energy for fossil fuels. Consider the old cowboy Rope Butt, who had seen "the panhandle shift from horseback roundup days and a lonesome bed on the prairie to a pickup truck with a CD player and a cell phone."⁴¹ Put another way, solar-powered transport, horses, is replaced by more destructive transport, trucks, which carry inside their cabs symbols of the fossil-fueled economy. After all, without oil and plastics to blast heavy equipment into space, we would not have the satellites needed to operate cell phones. And while Texas is an "oil state," the oil wells around Woollybucket have been depleted, and thus the oil

needed to power the machinery of the ranches—the trucks and ATVs that have replaced horses—is imported from outside the region, and therefore the current ranching and farming methods are unsustainable.

The essential conflict set up in Proulx's fiction between local and global economics is distilled in two characters, both cattle farmers. Francis Scott Keister—his name conjuring images of war and patriotism (Francis Scott Key wrote *The Star-Spangled Banner*) and buttocks (I wonder if Proulx was thinking of Earl Butz when naming this character)—is a scientific rancher, methodical, correct, progressive." He uses computers to record his cattle breeding, and he feeds his cattle "growth stimulants including antibiotics and the pharmaceuticals Bovatec and Rumensin, as well as the implants Compudose, Finaplix, Ralgro, Steer-oid and Synovex-S. At eighteen months his big steers were ready for market and he received the highest prices for them."⁴²

Keister's cattle operation is firmly entrenched in the corporate economic system, as it relies on computers and the products of pharmaceutical companies. In contrast, Ad Slauter's cattle ranch relies on local energy and unscientific breeding methods. His cattle eat only pasture grass supplemented by baled hay in winter, and they breed naturally. Because of their unscientific diet, "they took a long time to put on enough weight for market, twenty-eight to thirty months." Which system is preferable? Proulx obviously values the Slauter method of local, natural cattle raising, for she notes that "Curiously enough the two men's ledgers balanced out at almost the same figures, for Keister's operation was costly and his heifer mortality rate high as the champion bull semen made painfully large calves."⁴³ This championing of local economics and sustainable energy sources is reinforced by the novel's conclusion, which looks forward to alternative possibilities in the Panhandle and to some extent mitigates the ecological collapse brought on by the destruction of localism in *Postcards*.

While *Postcards* closes with images of ecological disaster, *That Old Ace in the Hole* offers a slightly hopeful future for Woolybucket—and since the preservation of local ecosystems is a graspable goal, and certainly a less abstract task than the idea of "saving the earth," I view the promising community life of fictional Woolybucket with considerable optimism. Of course, the *deus ex machina* in this story is Ace Crouch, who because of his massive wealth—ironically, he's a "petrodollar billionaire"—is able to buy out the hog farms that are polluting the Panhandle and draining the aquifer. (If only Bill Gates could purchase the remaining rain forests and put them under a conservation easement, then perhaps. . . .) The conclusion of the novel, despite *the old ace in the hole* stretcher, provides a hopeful vision of economic life. The final chapter is set during the annual Barbwire Festival, a time of community celebration. People are talking, trading, and enjoying the ranch rodeo. The most hopeful detail, though, is that bioregionalists Ace and Brother Mesquite are cooperating to build a business called Prairie Restoration Homesteads and also a bison range. Bison, unlike beef cattle, have the evolutionary traits to thrive on panhandle prairies. The planned development would offer affordable, modestly scaled housing, and as Brother Mesquite explains to Bob, "Each one a the home sites would have a covenant—the buyer would have to agree to maintain habitat for

prairie species—prairie dogs and burrowin owls, prairie chickens, antelope or Baird's sparrow, the ferruginous hawk or native prairie plants.”⁴⁴ They will work on reintroducing indigenous species, like black-footed ferrets. This experiment in “community habitat restoration” is a visionary approach to economic and ecologic life in this particular place. Another hopeful detail is that Bob, who has for much of his life been detached from enduring relationships, plans to return to Woolybucket. Perhaps he will enhance the local economy by opening the bookstore, as he mentions to Brother Mesquite. The community already has one café that serves in-season produce and pork grown on a local, small-scale hog farm, and another café run by local church women that specializes in desserts. Ace and Mesquite's planned development promises to bring human resources to the community, and the appropriately-scaled homes mixed with diverse prairie habitat provide a local response to the corporate unsettling of America.

This fictional resettling of America, and these images of local economic accountability and community possibility, position Annie Proulx near the top of my list of contemporary American literary agrarians—a group that includes, of course, Wendell Berry, and also Barbara Kingsolver, Ruth Ozeki, and Jane Smiley. These writers support biodiversity and nonviolent localized agriculture. They are advocates of health, and they deserve a large audience. Check out Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, covering issues like wildlife conservation, grass farming, and organic horticulture;⁴⁵ Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, dealing with industrial meat production, genetic engineering, and the poisoning of soil and water by potato agribusiness;⁴⁶ and Smiley's *Moo*, a satire of colleges of agriculture who promote a “bigger is better” philosophy of animal raising.⁴⁷ Working out creative solutions for our ecological crisis requires an educated populace to make personal choices on behalf of community health. Ecological literacy will play an increasingly greater role in this education. These literary agrarians should be required reading in schools of agriculture, business, and economics. Read their books, pass them on, and support your local farmers.

Notes

1. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977).
2. Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 90. [Emphasis Mine].
3. Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 122.
4. McKibben, *Deep Economy*, 156.
5. Ibid., 2. [Emphasis Mine].
6. Norman Wirzba, “Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters—Even to Urbanites,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2003)
7. Wirzba, *Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters*, 3.
8. Ibid., 4. [Emphasis Mine].
9. E. Annie Proulx, *Postcards* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 3-5.

10. David Bradley, "A Family Running on Empty," New York Times Book Review, March 22, 1992, 7.
11. Quoted in Berry, *Unsettling*, VII.
12. Berry, *Unsettling*, V-VI.
13. Proulx, *Postcards*, 194.
14. *Ibid.*, 3.
15. *Ibid.*, 10.
16. *Ibid.*, 126-27.
17. *Ibid.*, 128.
18. *Ibid.*, 175-77.
19. *Ibid.*, 175.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 245.
22. *Ibid.*, 218.
23. *Ibid.*, 279.
24. *Ibid.*, 283-89.
25. *Ibid.*, 252-53.
26. "aneurysm," *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed., (New York: Random, 1987), 79.
27. Proulx, *Postcards*, 252.
28. *Ibid.*, 296.
29. *Ibid.*, 298.
30. *Ibid.*, 306.
31. *Ibid.*, 22.
32. *Ibid.*, 76-77.
33. *Ibid.*, 103.
34. *Ibid.*, 165.
35. *Ibid.*, 133.
36. Berry, *Unsettling*, 52.
37. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 83.
38. Ken Midkiff, *The Meat You Eat: How Corporate Farming Has Endangered America's Food Supply* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004), 46-50.
39. Annie Proulx, *That Old Ace in the Hole* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 135.
40. Proulx, *That Old Ace in the Hole*, 111.
41. *Ibid.*, 91.
42. *Ibid.*, 55-56.
43. *Ibid.*, 56-57.
44. *Ibid.*, 356.
45. Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000).
46. Ruth Ozeki, *All Over Creation* (New York: Viking, 2003); *My Year of Meats* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
47. Jane Smiley, *Moo* (New York: Ballantine-Ivy, 1995).