

## Taking Cereals Seriously in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*

In this essay, I revisit Martha Ostenso's 1925 novel *Wild Geese* in order to consider how the framing that literary critics bring to their analyses can either support or disrupt anthropocentric and settler-colonial ideological and discursive frameworks. Throughout the twentieth century, Canadian prairie literature was read predominantly as either regional tales that offer Naturalist representations of human life struggling against the conditions of an inchoate frontier, or as realist texts that convey human dramas that transcend the strictures of place. With its insistence on disregarding hierarchies and viewing humans and other-than-human beings as co-constitutive, ecocriticism can perhaps counter the abstractions of the latter form of realist criticism and allow a return to what might seem to be a more capacious, adapted, and updated Naturalism. Prairie fiction is a genre about settlement, so reading it in a new way is important for supplementing twentieth-century literary criticism as well as for challenging the normative discursive formations that Canadian literary analysis can unintentionally reproduce, such as Lockean notions of individualism and property that have been used to simultaneously ignore other-than-human subjectivity and dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands. Anthropologist Anna Tsing's essay "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species" advances a provocative ecocritical framework responsive to the agency of vegetal life that may be particularly useful for analyses of prairie literature, especially with its attention to the influence of grain crops on human society both at the level of the family and at the level of the state. Tsing's historical and conceptual study is of particular interest because it identifies plants as agents

in burgeoning agricultural societies, insofar as they have shaped human families and directed state policy. This phenomenon is likewise at work in *Wild Geese*, wherein, seen from an ecocritical perspective, cereal crops arrange for their *own* survival by fashioning the novel's central family into an apparatus of agriculture, as well as by consecrating the bond between the fledgling provincial bureaucracy and the homesteader family. An ecocritical reading that reflects Tsing's enticing conceit that "cereals domesticated humans" (145) therefore allows us to view the other-than-humans in *Wild Geese* as subjects, not just symbols. A model thus emerges for reading Canadian literature in a way that notices, acknowledges, and responds to the array of subjects, human and otherwise, in whose company we seek a sense of belonging.

Ostenso relocated from Norway to Minnesota with her family when she was a toddler and later moved to Manitoba, where she earned a university degree and worked as a teacher. In 1925, she entered the manuscript for *Wild Geese* into a contest for best North American first novel, where it beat nearly fourteen hundred competitors. Shortly after her now-famous win, her novel was published, and later made into a film. *Wild Geese* is the only novel that Ostenso published while living in Canada; after its publication, she returned to the US, which became her home base for writing and publishing. Ostenso's novel is the story of a homesteading family living in the fictional region of Oeland, west of Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the 1920s. It is perhaps best known for its tyrannical patriarch, Caleb Gare, and much scholarship has focused on his death at the novel's climax. Caleb is a despotic father figure, and yet strangely bonded to his cereal crops—especially his flax. He terrorizes his family, compelling them to work and think in ways that ultimately support the prosperity of the flax. While Caleb's most obvious trait is his cruelty, this quality seems both related to, but also difficult to reconcile with, his uncompromising affection for his crops.

### **Reading the Patriarch**

Midway through the novel, the reader finds Caleb gazing at his crops. As the narrator observes, "[t]here was a transcendent power in this blue field of flax that lifted a man above the petty artifices of birth, life, and death. It was more exacting, even, than an invisible God. It demanded not only the good in him, but the evil, and the indifference" (152). After ensuring that no one is watching, he "run[s] his hand across the flowering, gentle tops of the growth. A stealthy caress—more intimate than any he had ever given to woman" (152). Caleb's tyrannical rule over his family and community is underpinned by a strange

tenderness for his cereal crops—particularly the flax. The land's influence on Caleb has inspired various readings of the novel, such as the suggestion that it depicts the individual, human experience of prairie life in the early twentieth century. Rosalie Baum contends that the land's strange agency, as well as its supposed tendency to stifle human ingenuity, dramatizes “the effect that an austere environment can have in the development of a person's sensibility and on a person's dreams and ambitions” (127). Here, the land symbolizes determinism, a prominent feature of Naturalist fiction, and is thereby responsible for the family members' inability to take the sort of decisive action necessary to change the conditions of their lives (129). Other critics have expressed unease with the Naturalist reading, contending that labelling regional literature as such means that characters' “behaviour will be seen as a function of their relation with the place in which they live” (Loriggio 14), although early criticism of prairie literature has seen this as a positive quality. For instance, Desmond Pacey, in an essay from the 1960s, writes that “the best [Canadian] novelists” of the early twentieth century shunned fable and romanticism, and evoked “the actual conditions of Canadian life” (658).

A recurring critical concern with the Naturalist reading, however, has been that overemphasizing the influence of environmental conditions on human existence (and, by extension, literature that captures that existence) excludes regional literature from the broader Canadian canon. Alison Calder observes that prairie fiction's reputedly local character has sometimes led critics to view it as irrelevant to Canadian literature proper (53). In the context of a developing national literary canon, regional fiction had been seen, at least by some, not as fiction, but as “representative of a typical regional ethos” (Calder 55). Colin Hill allays such concerns and defines Canadian realism as a form of *modernist* writing, in part by suggesting that a “national-referential ideal” persists therein, insofar as the literature embodies ontologies and aspirations that extend to the burgeoning nation (20). He refutes the idea that prairie realism is isolated and inconsequential, arguing “that prairie realism is not a conservative, mimetic, and regional genre at the periphery of Canadian literary development. It is a major, even central, component of the modern-realist movement that was unfolding across Canada in the early twentieth century,” especially given that it was one of “the most modern forms of writing to appear in Canada before the 1950s” (80).

More recent criticism of *Wild Geese* has tended to read Ostenso's prairie realism through the poststructuralist frameworks that have been developed to counteract the once-conventional Naturalist reading, whereby the novel

offers readers a glimpse into 1920s Canadian prairie living (Pacey 679). Brian Johnson interprets the novel as “an attempt to represent the experience of settlement in psychic, rather than realistic or romantic, terms” (“Unsettled” 24). It is the characters’ “superstitious fear that ascribes eerie malevolence to the land itself” (26). The landscape is “animate[d]” by the unconscious (26), making the flax a “fetishized node” of Caleb’s desire (27). The land merely symbolizes fear and erotic desire; it is a “projection of animism” (28), not the representation of an actual agent. In 1981, Marta Gudrun Hesse took a similar stance on the land’s metaphorical status, claiming that “the Gares’ submission to the land—exact[ed] by Caleb of all the family—is spiritually destructive because it is, in fact, poisoned at its roots” (49). Hesse interprets the family’s closeness to the land as a failure of human ingenuity, a bitterness over bright futures irredeemably darkened by past events. In this view, the prairie is both a backdrop to, and a metaphor *for*, human drama.

In attempting to assess prairie fiction in a way that undercuts the essential environmental characteristics of the region, while also making it relevant as *Canadian* literature, much literary criticism has tended to undermine the relevance both of place and the agency of other-than-humans—oversights that ecocriticism is especially positioned to remediate—while consequently forgiving Caleb’s truly horrid behaviour. At the same time, critics often read the fact that he saves his affections for the plants as either emblematic of his disaffection for his family or as symbolizing the multiple despairs endemic to early prairie life. Thinking through Tsing’s interspecies genealogy of grain agriculture, by contrast, encourages us to think of Caleb’s “tyranny” (Ostenso 17) and his affection as not only related, but as intertwined in a way that serves the pervasive cereal subjectivity in the novel. Tsing traces early agriculturalists who “transferred their affection from multi-species landscapes to shower intimacy upon one or two particular crops” (145). Agriculture was founded on a transition from a promiscuous affection for the multiple offerings of the wild to a “love affair” (145) with a select few species. As agriculturalists developed intimacies with a limited number of favoured species, tending to one’s most cherished crops became an act of fulfilling one’s devotion. Humans and crops thereby participated in a process of mutual domestication (145). Caleb’s relationship with a single plant species—the flax—exemplifies this sort of “love affair,” suggesting that the crops, rather than being subordinated to Caleb’s will, are actually exploiting his affection and loyalty. The flax is Caleb’s “pride—his great hope” (Ostenso 127), but it is also a sort of deity. The literature on its “cultivation had become

to him the Word of God. . . . [T]he flax was a thing to pray over” (127). Caleb is unwavering in his tyranny over the humans in his life, but becomes deferential when facing his fields, the crops less an object of his labour than a seductive force, whose voice only he can hear.

*Wild Geese* provides a sweeping alternative to anthropocentric presumptions about other-than-human life. Critics have become increasingly wary of the culture-nature dichotomy, but finding ways to speak that do not simply reproduce the binary proves difficult. Addressing the link between ongoing and future environmental degradation and contemporary humans can often convey a sense that nature is “passive” (Alaimo 2) and thus exists solely at the pleasure of humans. Ecofeminism, for example, often holds up the notion that hegemonic power operates in a separate sphere from other-than-human life, which, strangely, is a claim that validates the logic that ecofeminists aim to scrutinize. Narrativizing human existence as a process of self-alienation enacts an erasure of other-than-human agency, thus re-establishing traditional subjectivity, which is traditionally assigned to men. In *Undomesticated Ground*, which challenges the conventions of ecofeminism to take nature seriously, Stacy Alaimo references Luce Irigaray, who wonders, “[i]f there is no more ‘earth’ to press down/repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one’s own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains the ex-sistence [*sic*] of the ‘subject’?” (qtd. in Alaimo 7). In other words, if we know ourselves through subordinating, representing, and longing for “nature,” then our subjectivity is ultimately dependent on our various other-than-human *others*. Irigaray’s question foregrounds nature’s role in *producing* the speaking, acting subject, in line with Judith Butler’s conception of subjects as unavoidably vulnerable, ever “given over to the Other in ways that [we] cannot fully predict or control” (38). Indeed, the notion of the individuated subject relies upon a false distinction between agents and objects. The subject is constituted through a literal pressing down, which is regularly actualized in traditional accounts of agriculture as acts of plowing and sowing (plants), but also taming and disciplining (animals, both human and other-than-human). These entanglements of violence, dependency, and desire thereby instill nature with a sort of voice—a radical reversal given that “the silent ground is not supposed to speak” (Alaimo 7). Do objections to Naturalist readings of prairie fiction evince perhaps a similar disquiet?

Burgeoning scholarship on plant intelligence intent on enhancing biological and philosophical understandings of vegetal life (Marder 125)

might also have much to say to literary studies. If making space for vegetal intentionality and subjectivity—if not a form of consciousness as such—can help us “gain admission into the yet-uncharted terrain of plant-thinking” (126), as Michael Marder proposes, then perhaps a similarly expanded conception of subjectivity can help unearth new possibilities in literary criticism. Tsing’s historiography does not examine plant life with the intention of better understanding the essential qualities of plants as such, but instead views plants as exerting social and political agency. Such thinking, if applied to a literary work, would allow us to view *Wild Geese* as profoundly intersubjective. In the novel, the crops exceed their status as a symbol of humankind’s experience of the prairies insofar as they dictate Caleb’s actions, even when he exerts his ostensible mastery over the lands. They seduce Caleb, as we witness his enduring commitment to the crops, while also laying out a test through which Caleb can prove his competence: “There was a spirit in the flax—the growing of it was a challenge to a man’s will in this gaunt land. It took Caleb Gare to raise flax” (Ostenso 285). The narrator signals Caleb’s subordination to outside forces with wording that offers multiple readings: not only does flax require Caleb to raise it, but *something takes him* (“It took Caleb”).

### **Family Matters**

While literary criticism has tended to emphasize the symbolic nature of vegetal life, the social sciences have perhaps better attended to the significance of people encountering other-than-human influence when developing land. Geoff Cunfer and Fridolin Krausmann, for example, adopt a socio-ecological approach to suggest that the interplay between the “highly managed” but dynamic landscapes of agriculture and its human attendants might influence thinking around “agro-ecology and sustainability science” (361). They write that, historically, taming frontier lands through agriculture “created hybrid human-natural landscapes that then required further readjustment by settlers to accommodate both natural forces and the new environmental conditions of their making. It was an adaptive, evolutionary, and recursive process” (356). In this view, agricultural societies have grown thanks to resilient humans who could respond and adapt to a range of conditions. Conversely, Tsing’s radical claim that “cereals domesticated humans” invites us to consider that other-than-humans might have played a vital role in dictating how people have acted across time. Hence, human adaptation or “readjustment” in the face of other-than-human pressures is

not an act of the liberal individual overcoming obstacles to ensure their own success; rather, such strategies are ways in which cereals discipline humans to do their bidding. Crops, then, are not simply the result of an “adaptive, evolutionary, and recursive process”; instead, they fundamentally inform how humans conceive of their application.

Baum writes that Caleb “is the counterpart of the land: just as the land and its power have enslaved him, he enslaves his family and his neighbours” (125). An ecocritical reading allows us to ponder whether Caleb’s confidence in his own independence is in some way an extension of the crops’ agency—a compelling reversal. At the very least, the reader knows that Caleb’s insistence that the farm’s prosperity is a result of his own industriousness is a delusion: the novel makes clear that the farm’s success depends almost entirely on the labour of Caleb’s family. However, taking into account the historical agency of cereal crops invites us to see how the patriarch’s faith in individual striving works directly to support the proliferation of the plants. By contending that he alone has brought prosperity, Caleb embodies a rabid loyalty to the farm that does not serve him in any obvious way. He is both unloved and unloving, paranoid, an eccentric surrounded by people whom he cannot trust. Rather than nurturing a family—what else is a farm *for*?—Caleb works in the service of the crops. Not only that, but while Caleb might destroy “dreams in others” (Hesse 52), the crops seem to work *through* him, compelling him to structure the Gare family as an apparatus of agriculture. Caleb assures his wife’s (“illegitimate”) son, Mark, that the Gare children are “too close to the land” to ever leave (Ostenso 201). Regardless of the fact that his daughter’s departure late in the novel belies this claim, Caleb is desperate to instill his family with loyalty to the land.

The Gares’ compulsory commitment to place accords with Tsing’s account of how plants have influenced human history, which notes that the advent of agriculture required people to produce more children; bluntly put, “the family needed more labour for the cereals” (Tsing 146). To care for his crops, then, Caleb must increase his family’s workforce. He is thereby compelled to train the appendages of the family structure so that it develops a singular allegiance to the crops. Caleb *must* refuse to hire outside help for the “haying,” not because his family’s unpaid labour increases his profits; rather, hired help is “treacherous, rapacious” (Ostenso 13) because their commitment to the land is not established through flesh and blood. Taking note of the cereal crops’ cross-species manipulations in *Wild Geese* explains why the Gares “all have a monstrously exaggerated conception of their duty

to the land” (93), as the children’s teacher and consummate outsider, Lind, reports. Caleb’s tyranny is a demonstration of his devotion to his crops, and by compelling Caleb to codify his devotion in the practices of the family, the crops domesticate all of the Gares. What Ostensio presents as the attitude of Caleb’s wife, Amelia, towards her children is at once a product of Caleb’s psychological violence and a way for Caleb to extend the will of the crops. In order to protect Mark from knowledge of his illegitimacy, Amelia consents to “bend” her children “to the land like implements, just as Caleb wished her to do” (108). Amelia’s internalization of her own domestication is ritualized in, and symbolized by, her commitment to the tomatoes: they “were last in her thoughts before she had gone to sleep, and first when she had wakened, although her heart was heavy with other things” (106). Not the benevolent spirit of life-giving nature, nor a prosaic deity that humbly offers up her fruit, nature exerts a “sinisterly passive influence” that ties the Gare children “hand and foot” to the land (121).

Caleb, while unquestionably a tyrant, is also strangely vulnerable, at least insofar as he depends upon the (underacknowledged) labour of his wife and children. He worries that, should his wife become disloyal, “the results of his labour would be swept from these fields like chaff from a barn floor” (13). His standing as a “symbol of the land” (93) is dependent on the proliferation of the crops and the boundedness of the family, both of which he is unable to sustain: his crops burn (309-13) and his daughter Judith departs the homestead (302). Caleb and his crops perish together. Their simultaneous demise is part of a broader assemblage of effects that includes the reorganization of the Gare family. Indeed, our initial introduction to the flax crops foreshadows the precarious nature of the bond between Caleb and the flax, which he fears will “vanish like a vision” (90). This awareness of the crops’ potential impermanence informs and echoes the anxiety that drives Caleb to perpetually reassert control of his family. In fact, the novel opens with a gesture to the limits of his control: “Out here in this unorganized territory things go on much as the weather sees fit” (6). The patriarch’s determination and vision are ultimately subordinated to the whims of nature. Struggling across his burning fields after discovering that Judith has left, Caleb bears both the knowledge of his fields’ destruction and his daughter’s departure, the wildfire “taunting him with human ingenuity” (311). A pervasive superhuman subjectivity thus brackets the novel, leaving the chaos of other-than-human being as a primary organizing structure. The land proves a fickle lover, mocking Caleb’s loyalty as well as his delusions of



individual agency. His status as patriarch is impossible to disentangle from the authority of the crops. Lind realizes that Caleb's favourite daughter, Ellen, has a "contorted sense of loyalty" that has "overrun every other instinct like a choking tangle of weeds" (86). This is not to suggest that we should blame the land for the countless ways in which Caleb torments his family. Rather, the land benefits from Caleb's tyranny. His influence is an undergrowth, both fecund and deadly; not feral, but abjectly domestic. The weeds are not only a metaphor for Ellen's subjugation, but a gesture to the *actual* plants that shaped frontier existence.

Canadian frontier myths have frequently centred on the phantasmagoric figure of the modern human who heroically masters the natural world. Settler societies in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Canada embraced a "liberal vision" that "saw individuals as separate from, and acting upon" nature, "fired by a utopian vision of progress, rationality, and individualism" (McKay 631-32). Accordingly, the novel's homesteader family is driven by notions of property and improvement that distinguish between land as raw material for a person's sustenance and *the land* as a threatening, undeveloped—possibly *undevelopable*—entity, beyond property, and beyond literary apprehension. This distinction is seen in the Gares' embittered loyalty, which extends to include a disdain for wild, undeveloped spaces that seems at least partly inherited from Caleb. Early in the novel, Jude seems at peace with the wild spaces beyond the homestead, lying naked in the forest. In an instant, however, she thinks of her "hatred of Caleb" and her body becomes "rigid on the ground, and suddenly unnatural in that earthly place" (59-60). Her father's influence, even *in absentia*, prevents her from fully exiting the strictures of property and improvement that structure the family.

In his foundational study of Canadian prairie fiction (1977), Dick Harrison distinguishes between two meanings of the word "land": "land as natural environment" (110), with which Jude is associated, and land as "a human construct, property, a means to power" (111). Harrison's distinction between different "lands" recalls John Locke's political theories of property and personhood. Turning to Locke is productive because he proposed that humans gain personhood when they improve and develop land, and thus transform it into property; his ideas have resonances for understanding latter-day orientations towards non-human beings as objects through which humans express their ingenuity, rather than as subjects in their own right. In *Two Treatises of Government*, originally published in 1689, Locke contends that when nature's ingredients acquire usefulness through cultivation, the

product also becomes the property of the individual (and Locke explicitly had only men in mind here). Nevertheless, Locke must do some rhetorical manoeuvring to explain how individuals who are equal in their liberty can also own things, and thus prohibit others to access or make use of those things. The answer derives from the idea that a person has an inviolable claim to his own self:

Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This noBody has any Right to but himself. The *Labour* of his Body and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his Labour with it, and joyned [*sic*] to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property. (185)

A person has dominion over himself, so when he applies his labours to nature's raw materials, he renders those products proper to himself—both owned by him and, in a sense, an extension of himself. Moreover, not only does a thing's status as property come from its being improved upon, but a thing's value also comes from the work invested in it; according to Locke, "'tis Labour indeed that puts the difference of value on everything" (195). This ability to claim land through making it property—by labour and "improvement"—relies on the idea that all individuals are independent and self-determining, born with the right to live freely and to seek sustenance unencumbered. Locke's conception is based on a unidirectional assertion of authority, with the self-determining person imposing his labour—and perhaps his will—onto the passive other-than-human entity.

An ecocritical framing for literary analysis can upend the vectors of agency that Locke presumed to structure human/other-than-human encounters, and which Harrison also presupposes. Harrison reads Caleb as an archetypal "oppressor of the land" (111) typical of prairie fiction, later describing him as someone who "sees land not as something he lives with, or from, or upon, but as possession, almost as though it were moveable property which someone might steal" (112). Regarding Caleb's affinity for the flax, he describes the patriarch's desire as simply another aspect of life that he "must conquer" (113). Harrison's analysis of the flax's symbolic status espouses Lockean ideas about property and personhood, even though he expresses concern that the land might be a companion rather than a possession. Moreover, both Harrison and Locke disregard that establishing dominion through development does not eliminate one's reliance on the thing that one aims to improve; indeed, development as a prerequisite for

full personhood subordinates man to the elements of life that are supposedly subject to his will in the first instance. Recalling Irigaray's insights regarding the co-constitutive character of humans and other-than-humans, a person's need for sustenance similarly indicates a state of dependency—even vulnerability—that necessarily undercuts the notion of the bounded, discrete self upon which Locke's rationalization of property relies.

Humans might be self-determining, but our ability to sustain ourselves is wholly dependent on what the earth offers us—both the raw materials of nature *and* the fruits of our labour. Accordingly, in *Wild Geese*, Caleb is engaged in a project that looks like something other than straightforward conquest. He experiences a “pang of regret . . . at the thought of the cutting of the flax. It had grown with such pride, such rich dignity. It was beautiful, stretching out and stirring with life, as though nothing could end its being” (224). Caleb's sense that “nothing could end [the flax's] being” highlights his subordination to the crops' supremacy. In his mind, if briefly, the flax has an invincible spirit. He is seen by community members as a successful farmer; but while his relationship with the flax recalls status quo modes of property development, his devotion often exceeds the logic of production and improvement. Caleb is cruel and tyrannical in ostensibly human spaces, but his world view acknowledges the sovereignty of the flax. Cereals, strangely, thus pose a threat to conventions that promote “man” over all other beings. Judith Gare's description as she watches the farm from afar presents a vision of this reorganized hierarchy: “[H]ere was the prairie, spare as an empty platter—no, there was a solitary figure of a man upon it, like a meagre offering of earth to heaven” (143). Man might stand on the land, but here he is figured as a sacrifice, a conduit for the fears and desires of something bigger than himself.

### **A Vegetal Dominion**

The novel highlights multiple strata of dependency that structured prairie settlement, particularly in how the individual and land dovetail with the state. Land use is a thread that links these three sites of settler-colonial legitimation. Individual dominion over the homestead is determined by proper usage—improvement, in other words—which, in turn, naturalizes the state as the body that distributes deed, thereby confirming its authority. Returning to Locke, cultivation denotes sovereign authority, whereby “subduing or cultivating the Earth, and having Dominion, we see are joynd [*sic*] together. The one gave Title to the other” (191). For Locke, as it appears in the novel as well, an individual's improvement of the land is thus necessary

for state control. Caleb is despotic, but he is also subject to forces beyond the household. In addition to nurturing the crops, his loyalty to the cereal crops marries the family to the farm, as well as to the incipient state. Caleb is not the only character subject to what had become an agricultural imperative for early settlers. Anton Klovacz, a homesteading acquaintance of Caleb, represents the way that crops organize state and family. He notes to Caleb: “I will try to make these improvements the government wish. Then it will be mine—the homestead. And my children will have a home” (Ostenso 196). Whereas burgeoning “[s]tates encouraged family-based households and guaranteed the forms of family property and inheritance that drew lines within and between families” (Tsing 146), so does cereal agriculture in the novel acquire a position of prominence in ties between individual, family, and government.

*Wild Geese* illustrates the relationship between the homestead and the state, in keeping with the 1879 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act: “Every person claiming a homestead right on surveyed claims on land must, previously to settlement on such land, be duly entered therefor [*sic*] with the Local Agent within whose district such land may situate” (Canada 14). Ownership in the eyes of the state is contingent upon “proof of settlement and improvement” (14). A legitimate family, having children who “have a home” (Ostenso 196), is recognized as such based on observable care of the land. By properly tending to his land—by demonstrating his *devotion*, in other words—a man can prove up his homestead (261). The “strange unity between the nature of man and earth” in “the north” that Mark and Lind discuss (93) is political. This is an effect, in part, of the state’s reliance on the crops to organize the homesteader family. Wrapped up in the processes of state-sanctioned place-taking and property-making is the strange influence exercised by the products of the land, which provide the evidence *of* and serve as the necessary condition *for* the homesteader’s legitimacy.

Caleb depends on the crops to feed his body, while the state is, in a way, reliant on the crops to foster a sense of allegiance within Caleb, the agricultural adherent. In fact, Caleb is perhaps too eager a disciple. He is unable to remain emotionally detached from the flax’s well-being, which not only demonstrates his deference for the presumably lower-order being, but also belies his performance as a person who relies only on his own labour. In his diligent attention to his crops’ needs, he exposes the fallacy that underpins the idea of the discrete man as fundamentally proper to himself. Indeed, the novel culminates with the flax succumbing to a brush fire and

with Caleb drowning in the swamp that has rendered a portion of his fields useless. His death might be retribution “for his fanatical possessiveness about his land,” as Faye Hammill argues (81); however, it also serves as the ultimate example of his and the flax’s intractable interdependence. His death also signals the failure of his labour to maintain the boundaries between the untamed and the cultivated, insofar as the fire that he succumbs to also destroys the border between his fields and the forest. These multiple and interlocking dependencies, as well as Caleb’s submission to the crop’s authority, express *Wild Geese’s* central anxiety: that claims to colonized place are based on false premises regarding human vulnerability, as well as parochial ideas about Indigenous land use.

In the 1920s, Manitoba was a relatively new addition to Canada, having only become a province fifty years prior with the Manitoba Act of 1870. In the waning years of the nineteenth century and at the start of the twentieth, Manitoba instituted a scrip system to assign land to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Manitoba Métis 17). However, the system targeted Indigenous inhabitants, as the government issued deeds in exchange for treaty rights. As the Manitoba Métis Federation reports, the scrip system served the government as a politically expedient and economically sensible technique for “pacifying the troubled Native population” in the years following what is now commonly referred to as the Red River Rebellion (and sometimes Rebellions), but which was long known as the “Half-breed Insurrection of 1869-70” (17). The Red River uprisings were not far from the minds of government officials, and distributing land was not only less expensive than “resort[ing] to armed invasion” (18), but also worked in the interest of government policy that equated “civilization” with land ownership and agriculture.

The Manitoba scrip system, as well as countless other instances of settler land-taking, drew on notions of individual property and legitimate land use that mirror Locke’s proviso. Of particular salience is Locke’s assertion that “several Nations of the *Americans* . . . are rich in Land and poor in all the Comforts of Life . . . for want of improving [the land] by labour” (244). Of course, considering Locke’s claim that dominion derives from pacifying the earth, especially with the benefit of hindsight after hundreds of years of colonial violence, his distinction between proper and improper use is not an innocent claim. Here, we get two aspects of Locke’s proposal that are the basis for settler-colonial rationale: first, there are people who are not using their land in the right way—i.e., sharing it, not seeming to cultivate it, not settling down in one place; and second, a person with the right attitude and

proclivity for hard work might claim this land by mixing their labour with it, by making the resource proper to themselves. In the case of Manitoba scrip, the relationship between settlement, agriculture, and citizenship is made particularly obvious, as beneficiaries of the system were meant to gain citizenship by giving up treaty rights in exchange for land. The road to citizenship was not so clear, however, given the government's confusing and inefficient patent system, by which Métis applicants would lose their homestead, or have their scrip cancelled or reassigned by state intermediaries, "the so-called Attornies [*sic*]" (Manitoba Métis 20-22).

Set against the backdrop of a historic moment of settlers re-establishing certainty in the Manitoban prairie, *Wild Geese* is haunted by the Indigeneity at its margins. Aside from some mention of "Indians," the only Indigenous character of some direct importance for the Gares as a family is Malcolm, a Métis hired hand and trapper "with Cree blood two generations back" (169). Indeed, Malcolm's Indigeneity is figured as a threat to the structure of the family. Not only does he show an interest in Caleb's daughter Ellen, but he is a man who comes and goes with the seasons, in time with the agricultural cycles (44). His is the transient way of life, which is anathema to colonial settlement principles (169). Malcolm's sporadic visits bring forth the family's unease with its place on the land, including the fact that settler belonging must be constantly worked towards, and therefore worked *at*. As Ellen watches Caleb speak to Malcolm, who hopes to take her to the North with him, the narrator reveals the stunted sorts of rationale required to reconcile Caleb's family to his tactics:

Caleb was her father, and any wrong that he had committed must, necessarily, reflect upon herself. Hence she strove to vindicate in her own mind Caleb's conduct of the lives and affairs of the farm. . . . The coming of Malcolm into her life again was like the scene in a mirage which she hoped with her whole heart were solid land, even while she knew it to be only a vision. It could not materialize. (171)

Malcolm's presence causes Ellen to reflect on how she adapts herself to the methods of settler colonialism embodied in Caleb and his other-than-human affiliations. It is in these moments of longing and loss that Ostenson's novel gives a glimpse of another possibility—the ephemeral "it" that cannot "materialize." The future that Ellen envisions is the condition of possibility that the homesteader life must preclude in order to foster modes of being that are amenable not only to state and family, but to those products of improvement that the family serves.

Much is at stake if we read—and, I suggest, misread—the other-than-human agency in *Wild Geese* as metaphorical—as “symbolic and yet almost incidental,” so much like “many areas of the modern world” (Baum 133). Such an argument dismisses the particularities of place, and how they might play out in a novel that is so explicitly *about* place. Literary criticism that emphasizes the symbolic status of other-than-human agency risks not only reinscribing human exceptionalism, but also reproducing the types of dismissals and abstractions that support settler colonialism. Accordingly, through an ecocritical reading that takes place seriously, we can refuse to view the seeming lack of hope and ambition in the novel as a symbol of homesteading’s burdens, and instead consider how the life and labour described in *Wild Geese* are so fundamental to the place-making project unfolding in Manitoba at the time.

In Caleb’s death, the novel thus reveals its own anxieties about settler society’s future, reflecting upon the tenuous nature of settler “fantasies of entitlement” (Mackey 42): the stories that settlers in North America tell themselves to feel that they have a legitimate claim to illegitimately attained lands. The novel both observes and acts in “the settler-invader’s ‘endless quest’ to escape the anxiety of dwelling in an uncanny national space” (Johnson, “Beyond Regionalism” 142). The patriarch perishes in the fire that crosses the woods to the Gare fields (Ostenso 309-12), incinerating the line between the wild and domestic. The deadly, never-quite domestic symbolizes the porous barrier between the domestic and the wild, and casts doubt on the Lockean extended family that enrobes crops, family, and state. While Caleb’s death is a break in the family’s life, however, it is also a moment when the family’s narrative folds back on itself, with Caleb’s son, Martin, becoming the new master of the Gare farm (314). Here, the novel reproduces the settler family, as Caleb’s son imaginatively reconstructs a familiar orientation towards colonized space. The development logic driving the agricultural imperative persists, so that even with the death of the settler patriarch, the thematics of prairie settler colonialism continue. Martin has hitherto been made to bow unquestioningly to the exigencies of agriculture, but the novel leaves open the possibility that the son will inherit his father’s affection for the flax, and thereby germinate a new love affair.

Ideas of human supremacy and exceptionalism that are central to property regimes do not account for human vulnerability to other-than-human subjectivity, and are thereby internally contradictory; however, in practice, such notions have been used to naturalize settler claims to place, in part by



ignoring other-than-human beings, in the service of what Shaun Stevenson calls “settler sanctification and sacrifice of landscapes” (54). In assigning a purely symbolic status to other-than-human subjects, past literary criticism of prairie fiction, in general, and *Wild Geese*, in particular, risks normatively re-centring settler subjectivity, while rendering invisible not only the multi-species subjectivity that pervades the novel, but Indigenous presence as well. In offering this call for taking cereals seriously as a model for reading Canadian literature, I look forward to a literary criticism that sees this place we call Canada as full of histories and voices, not as a ground that must be silenced in order for us to make a home.

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