

The Plants are Plotting: Political Orders in Ostenso's *Wild Geese*

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ABSTRACT

This article attends to non-human agency and plant communities in Martha Ostenso's 1925 novel *Wild Geese*. As non-humans shape the novel's setting and plot, they are entwined with human action but not subordinated to human agency or political systems; on the contrary, plant communities are political forces who ally, resist, and clash during the implementation of European agricultural practises in the early twentieth century. Thus, the setting details of this CanLit novel can be repurposed to think about the possibilities of community beyond colonial control.

This article begins by drawing on Vanessa Watts' articulation of ecosystems-as-societies as a framework for plant agency. It then follows Margret Boyce's eco-critical engagement with *Wild Geese* to examine how the farm's monocrops are connected to, but not determined by, the heteropatriarchal family and the colonial state. Further, by considering how homoeroticism emerges against colonial heteropatriarchy in non-agricultural settings, queerness is shown to pre-exist and resist the organizing tendencies of settler colonialism. Finally, this article turns to non-human alliances in the novel's finale to demonstrate the ongoing struggle between political powers. To grapple with colonialism and its legacies, non-human agency and political power must also be recognized.

Keywords

Plant Agency; Ecocriticism; Settler Colonialism; Canadian Literature; Agriculture; Queer.

"There's like a farm, a homestead, and the father figure is an absolute terror. There's all these secrets, and you're waiting for them to come out, but they don't..."

"Uh-huh..."

"Well..." I scramble for more words, for more exciting explanations, feeling pathetic as I try to outline the plot of Martha Ostenso's 1925 novel *Wild Geese* to my partner. "Ok, it *sounds* kinda dull, but this book is intense." My memory rummages through the novel's agents and events as I try to understand my own response. Some of the novel's tension emerges from the manipulative scheming and incessant threats of the farm owner and family patriarch, Caleb Gare, but the book's affective qualities cannot be fully explained by the activity of its human characters. Instead, the land—the material setting—is filled with tension, an uneasiness that infiltrates the cracks of the narration. The land is described in contradictory terms throughout the text, acting with intention but not a unified personality: the ground is "insidious" and "taunting" (351, 350), but there is also "freeness... in the depth of the earth" (68). I find myself tracking these nods toward more-than-human agencies, and I realize that I *am* enthralled by the novel's plot—just not the plot I initially explained. I am entangled in the literary descriptions of a *plot of land*, a place active in its own writing, plotting its own plot through the intersections and tensions of multiple plot-makers.

But I've gotten ahead of myself, gotten caught in the reeds of Ostenso's novel while forgetting my roots. I am a newcomer and a settler writing in the lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, governed by the Dish with One Spoon treaty.¹ I write from this place about the literary description of another place: *Wild Geese* is set in an undetermined location in Northern Manitoba, probably the land of the Cree and Métis. Ostenso fails to clearly name or acknowledge Indigenous Peoples and their political orders in her book, though she does apprehend some notion of sovereignty embedded in their lands. Reflecting on her move to Manitoba, she writes: "My novel, *Wild Geese*, lay there, waiting to be put into words" (qtd. in Hesse 47). For Ostenso, the story exists before and beyond her, living in the place. Of course, the narrative is still shaped by her settler perspective, but it retains a sense of land

1. The Dish with One Spoon wampum is a political agreement and philosophy that, as explained by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, represents the non-hierarchical, peaceful, and responsible sharing of land between sovereign Indigenous Nations (37). The wampum does not directly include me, as I am a settler. However, by living on these territories, I believe it is my responsibility to acknowledge and respect Dish with One Spoon principles. This includes continuously committing to be respectful towards other human and non-human peoples.

agency, a sense that the land is *living*—the place acts and is not merely a stage for human actors.

Ostenso's descriptions of this unruly, unbeautiful landscape were likely unappealing to early literary critics,² but in the mid and late twentieth century, scholars began to favour realism's harsher illustrations; "writing that engaged with the power... of the Canadian landscape" became "central to the national literature" (Hammill "Sensations" 88-89). *Wild Geese* was re-appraised and, according to Faye Hammill, accepted as "an early classic of Canadian prairie literature" ("Martha Ostenso" 17).³ The subsequent academic engagements with *Wild Geese* often frame the novel around realist and naturalist trends within the Canadian literary canon, and *Wild Geese*'s land descriptions are taken up by critics insofar as they represent Canadian prairie living and writing. M.G. Hesse, for example, posits that *Wild Geese* depicts "the misery of the lives of people on the prairies," while championing the characters' various "quests" for freedom amid the hardships of early settler life (50). Similarly, Daniel S. Lenoski claims *Wild Geese* focuses on "man's alienation from the prairie environment" and draws attention to the "possibilities for the pioneer spirit" to either love or hate the land (279, 289). More recently, in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, Alison Calder identifies *Wild Geese* as a notable female contribution to the tradition of prairie literature in Canada that grapples with settler motherhood.

I value these readings, especially when they reveal the tensions and contradictions of settler colonialism. Nevertheless, Canadian prairie fiction is "a genre about settlement" and, more particularly, about the concerns, struggles, and ambitions of (some) human settlers building a (supposedly) new nation (Boyce 1). Along with Margret Boyce, I am concerned that centring the book's "relevan[ce] as Canadian literature" within determined literary traditions can lead readers to overlook or oversimplify the text's depiction of more-than-human communities (2). Labels like *Canada* and the *Canadian Prairies* invoke grander narratives that overshadow how the novel's hyper-local social arrangements

2. According to Hammill's analysis, many of Canada's early twentieth century literary critics were invested in "disseminat[ing] an attractive image of Canada to the outside world" (88). *Wild Geese* would not have furthered this aim.

3. Although *Wild Geese* has been generally accepted as part of the national canon, Ostenso herself holds a more complicated position in relation to Canadian literature. Hammill notes that Ostenso's identity as Norwegian-born settler working in Canada and the United States "disrupts nationalist literary histories by crossing political and cultural boundaries" ("Martha Ostenso" 18). Ostenso's status as a Canadian is put into question by her entanglements with other nation states. However, Hammill also posits that Ostenso's immigrant status might have helped her connect with readers in the early twentieth century, many of whom would have also been immigrants ("Sensations" 76).

exceed the settlers' schemes; the entanglements of plants and animals are too easily lost.⁴ So rather than reading *Wild Geese* as a story about the arduous process of settler life within the context of single sociopolitical state, I want to attend to the many political orders proliferating, supporting, and warring over the plot(s) of the Gare farm, forming uneasy alliances and clashing with each other. These clashes are bound to, and seep into, the human world, but they are not subordinated to human agency.

To share this reading, I will begin by thinking with Vanessa Watts' articulation of ecosystems-as-societies in order to clarify my understanding of plant politics. Then, I will follow Boyce's eco-critical engagement with *Wild Geese*, considering how the farm crops—and blue flax particularly—organize bodies and energy on the Gare farm, forming sociopolitical orders connected to, but not determined by, the heteropatriarchal family and the colonial state. Finally, I hope to sit alongside the homoeroticism emerging against colonial heteropatriarchy, recognizing that queerness pre-exists and resists the organizing tendencies of the settler state. Thus, I propose to challenge the notion that the land is governed by a single political order and human agency, and to repurpose elements of this CanLit novel to begin to think beyond Canada.

Plant Politics

Whenever I think through land-based agency, I am returned to Watts' essay "Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)." Watts is a Kanyen'kehà:ka and Anishinaabe scholar whose thinking and seeing are guided by Indigenous cosmologies. I do not share her lived Indigenous histories, but she helps me to notice and respect non-human agency. She writes, "ecosystems are better understood as *societies* from an Indigenous point of view"; these societies have "ethical structures, [and] inter-species treaties and agreements" (23, emphasis mine). Framing ecosystems as societies brings their systematic affects

4. In her survey of Canadian ecocriticism, Pamela Banting identifies a similar concern when writing that "national lines still supersede commonalities of interlinked climate, weather, watersheds, flora, and fauna" in some scholarly practises. Banting points to regionalism and bioregionalism as shelters under which some literary scholars have (intentionally or not) studied environmental literature outside of national narratives. I admire the work of many bioregionalism thinkers and their ability to question colonial boundaries, but I do not draw specifically on bioregionalism in hopes of centering the hyper-local communities and ecological events that cannot be generalized, even within a given bioregion.

and creative power to the forefront: a "society" can be defined both as "state or condition of living in company" and "the system of customs and organization adopted... for harmonious coexistence" (def. 6a). Ecosystems are social, comprised of the interactions of many beings who live together; this collective living is not chaotic or haphazard. Instead, ecosystems organize the flow of matter and energy, developing place-specific customs while remaining open to adaptation. Ecosystems "interpret, understand and implement" changes in their more-than-human orders, re-making their community's customs as needed, and therefore they are alert and agential, systematic but not static (Watts 23).

The *societal* and *political* are closely related. *Societies* are organized forms of co-existence, and the term "political" is "concerned with the form, organization, and administration of a state and its relations" (def. 1a).⁵ Taking a broad understanding of the word "state," I view eco-societies and their non-human agents as forming political orders through their organized and organizing relations. Watt's legal diction—for example, her reference to "treaties" and "ethical structures" (23)—similarly suggests non-humans act as political agents who organize themselves and develop customs, agreements, and habits of cohabitation.⁶ The political orders of a field or a forest undoubtedly look different from those of a human nation state, and there remains a danger of trying to "fit" the non-human into reductive conceptions of social life. Yet, more-than-human communities are organizations administering energy, nutrients, and resources through systems that enable, produce, and care for relational beings living together. I hope that by recognizing eco-systems as eco-societies with localized political arrangements, I can better notice these communities' relationships with each other and ponder how human sociopolitical orders are always, already intermingled with the place-specific non-human lifeways.

Crop Cultivators

Building on the work of anthropologist Anna Tsing, Boyce reads the crops in *Wild Geese* as political agents who "arrange for their own survival by fashioning

5. The definitions for "society" and "political" also include the word "people," which I intentionally avoided in my provided quotations. Drawing from the work of Watts and other Indigenous scholars, (see, for example, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*), I consider non-humans as people, and so the definitions still fit. However, the terminology of personhood is a separate discussion.

6. John Borrows' extensive work on Indigenous legal traditions offer similar insights. See, for example, the chapter "Sources and Scope of Indigenous Legal Traditions" in his book *Canada's Indigenous Constitution*.

the novel's central family into an apparatus of agriculture" (1-2). By framing the crops as *arrangers*, Tsing and Boyce articulate the plant populations' political agency: the crops are actively organizing matter and energy—including human bodies and labour—to support their own wellbeing. In the novel, crops dictate the humans' daily customs: every morning, the Gare family rises early to begin farm work, and they "throw [themselves] down" into bed at night, entirely "spent," all their energy expended on crop care (36, 18). They have "not much time for play," as they expend their days planting, maintaining, and harvesting the fields (36). The family's behaviours—the habitual movements ingrained in their bodies—are inseparable from the needs of the crops. Their plant-dependent routines shape the materialization of farm life, and the organizing power of plants becomes palpable.

More particularly, the novel describes patriarch Caleb Gare as "absorbed" into the process of crop propagation, as he "lend[s]" the crops "his own spirit" (171). His very lifeforce is given over to the crops; he surrenders his power to them, and his energies are employed to support the growth and reproduction of the fields' plant populations. Notably, Caleb's investment is *societal*—he is not working for any single individual plant, but for the agricultural apparatus, a sociopolitical system led by plant lifeways that reproduces plant life. The locus of Caleb's commitment is clarified at harvesttime when he must choose between supporting individual plants and reproducing the agricultural cycle: he struggles with "a pang of regret" at the thought of cutting down a flax field that holds "such pride, such rich dignity" (250). Still, he resolves to cut the flax because the harvest will provide resources for "other years and other yields" (250). He admires the plants but makes his decision to harvest based upon his commitment to agricultural customs that ensure future crops. So, while Caleb is the farm's "owner," he is also a participant in a more-than-human eco-society through which the crops reproduce their populations in an orderly, systematic fashion.

Of course, Caleb still profits from the harvest. Caleb invests in the crops, and the crops offer him the resources that allow him to secure his position as patriarch. Thanks to the farm, Caleb can feed, clothe, and shelter himself, his wife, and his children. To Caleb, the farm's flourishing crops are "testifying" that he is a "successful owner and user of the soil" (249), vindicating his right to claim authority over farm and family. However, by tying his self-worth to his commitment to raising crops, his sense of self becomes inseparable from the monocrop propagation. Boyce elegantly elucidates the depth of Caleb's dependence on his crops by pointing to ambiguity in the narration: as Caleb brags that it "took" someone like him to face the challenges of farming, the text "signals Caleb's subordination to outside forces... not only does flax require Caleb to raise it, but something *takes him*" (3, emphasis mine).

But the crops don't just "take" Caleb—the entire Gare family is affected. They are dependent on patriarch Caleb, and while he feeds and shelters his family, he remains resolutely loyal to the agricultural apparatus, not the lives of his family members. Caleb uses most of the farm's resources to better the lives of the plants, not the humans. He avoids buying much-needed glasses for his daughter, even when her eyesight causes accidents, but he constantly schemes to buy and sell land for the crops (258). He "add[s] to [the land holdings] year after year" (14-15), and tailors his holdings to the crops' needs by "get[ting] rid of the useless land and buy[ing] in its place" land more amenable to farming (14). Here, his assessment of the "usefulness" and desirability of his land is dictated by the needs of the crop societies, whose demands trump his own children's. Caleb *does* value his children—but only for the labour they provide for the crops, and he schemes to keep them on the farm to work the fields indefinitely so as to support the continuation of the agricultural society. He keeps them home from church and school, isolating them so that they only know a life of crop-service (20, 39). As schoolteacher Lind observes, Ellen Gare can think "only as Caleb had taught her" and Martin Gare "understood only one thing: work" (96, 26). The Gare children are also manipulated into continuing their crop labours through fear for their mother, knowing that Caleb will "take it out on Ma" if they disobey him (27). Meanwhile, Caleb blackmails his wife into supporting his efforts by threatening to reveal the secret of her out-of-wedlock son, and so she, too, urges her children to stay, specifically warning the rebellious Judith against leaving (275). Thus, manipulation and entrapment structure the Gares' familial relationships, and Caleb "hold[s] taut the reins of power" with cruel efficiency (37), but he does so because he wants to continue growing crops, because he is committed to expanding an agricultural apparatus that is shaped by the plants' lifeways. Caleb's motives do not absolve him of responsibility for his abuse of his family. Yet, the novel's framing of the relationships between Caleb, his crops, and his family reveals that the agricultural apparatus does not emerge from a single human mind, but is a structure constituted by multiple actors with aligned interests; Caleb and the crops are both interested in his children's labour. On the Gare farm, patriarchy and agriculture are working together.

But while Caleb uses the patriarchal family model to organize his children's bodies and energy to serve the crops, and while the crops support his position as patriarch, the crops themselves are not inherently patriarchal. To paraphrase Boyce again, the crops organize whatever bodies emerge alongside them, appropriating energy to suit their needs; the crops use and support patriarchy because it is made available to them (4). This *availability* points to the influence of another political order—the colonial state. The settlement of Indigenous lands and the spread of European agriculture happened co-currently with the Dominion Lands Act of 1872, which "sells" land to European men and heterosexual

families (Canada 13).⁷ Therefore, colonial policy has a hand in organizing which land and human bodies are present and available for the plants' appropriation. Patriarchal families settle alongside the agricultural plants, and these new, more-than-human communities influence each others' materializations and the materialization of the colonial state. More land is cultivated to take on the appearance of European farms, and farmers pay taxes to the colonial government, who provide the farmers with a pretense of legitimacy. The settler family, the colonial state, and agricultural plant monocultures are interdependent and intersecting, feeding off each other as they occupy the same physical space.

Nevertheless, these various political orders are not the same, even while they are entangled. The crops exist beyond and outside of Caleb's imposed order or the state's pretense of legitimizing. Plant potential is not subsumed by colonial organization, and the crops' customs do not consistently align with colonial or patriarchal political projects. For example, in the novel, Caleb aims to isolate and freeze the children into set roles so that "nothing happen[s]" in their lives (36). However, the crops are always growing and changing, requiring different actions from their human labourers, and thus highlight their human labourers' ability to change as well. While Caleb demands that his daughter Judith spend long, relentless days working in the fields, the plants seep into Judith's psyche, and she envisions her life transforming alongside the crops' shifting cycles; the lifeways of the crops give her a timescape to plan her escape from one mode of being into another. As she toils through the farm chores, she tells herself she'll run away with her boyfriend, Sven, after the hay is harvested (273), and she ruminates on "the other world where they [she and Sven] were going after the haying" (236). When alone with him, she tells Sven they are "going off somewhere—far away" where they will be "somebody else... not like the people round here" (217). Although she can't fully articulate the otherwise that she imagines, she knows change is possible, and the crops help her to structure her thoughts of transformation. Thus, the crops are allied with heteropatriarchy, but their orders can also be re-appropriated to support different relations. The struggle between Judith and her father unfolding throughout the novel—he aims to keep her on the farm, and she tries to leave—is not simply a matter of clashing human wills, but evidence of the complexity and flexibility of the farm crops and the sociopolitical arrangements they allow.

7. Single men over the age of 18 and female-led families (i.e. a widow with children) could claim a homestead. The wording is vague, but a single woman would probably be ineligible, and the document refers to the prospective homesteaders with masculine pronouns (Canada 13).

Following Flax

The crops collectively work through, in, and beyond the familial and colonial order, but specific non-human communities on the Gare farm also have their own particular habits, growing bodies and absorbing energy at different rates, and so organizing other bodies and energies differently. The novel doesn't offer a complete image of the farm and its non-human communities, though scattered references of crops and livestock signal a diversity of non-human beings. As Caleb looks over the farmlands on a spring evening, he mentally catalogues some of these different orders—cattle, wheat, rye—but his attention is fleeting until his gaze finally reaches the crop which is “most precious,” even “transcendent” to him: the blue flax, sitting “beyond the muskeg and a dried lake bottom” (Ostenso 171, 14).

The placement of the flax at the edge of the farm is not incidental. To settlers in the early twentieth century, flax, an intentional introduction from Europe, was a “sodbusting crop” (MacFadyen 216), the crop to plant on land that had not previously been farmed. As Joshua MacFadyen explains in *Flax Americana*: “Flax was thought to outperform other crops on new breaking, preparing the soil and eventually conceding its space to wheat and corn... it became a significant first crop on some of the most fragile ecosystems and unforgiving northern grasslands” (206). From one perspective, everyone on the Gare farm—human and otherwise—serves the flax fields, because all serve the project of farm expansion, and any newly acquired territory is immediately given over to the flax. The flax itself is largely a cash crop;⁸ it too serves expansion by providing Caleb Gare with the finances to buy more land. However, after a few seasons, the flax yields the space to other crops. The flax is only ever a temporary visitor in the soil, so the only way it can reproduce its current political arrangement—a population of flax organized in a uniform field—is to seek out new ground. The flax field becomes an ever-ambitious settler.

Of course, the farm is not expanding into empty space. Just as European settlement occurred through the intentional, non-consensual displacement of Indigenous Peoples' Nations, the flax fields must displace the pre-existing plant orders in order to occupy new territories, simultaneously disrupting the societies in the soil that had formed assemblages and alliances with a diversity of beings—including Indigenous Peoples. Although these pre-existing orders

8. Although flax has multiple uses, during the early twentieth, flax production is driven by the paint industry, which in turn is driven by urban “middle-class house and car consumers” (MacFadyen 21-22). The novel mentions Caleb's desire to sell the flax, and it does not refer to any other possible uses.

were flexible, open to change and new introductions, agriculture's single-species fields required (and continue to require) the complete annihilation of many species from a plot of land. Monocrop agriculture represents a radical reconstructing of how bodies are organized and who is allowed space and energy to thrive. This restructuring happened swiftly and forcefully in the early twentieth century, egged on by the colonial state. The aforementioned Dominion Lands Act not only gave settler farmers land, it stipulated that, within three years, the farmers must prove they were cultivating that land, otherwise their homestead could be taken away and given to another man (Canada 16). With limited time to produce visible results, settler farmers aiming to be recognized by the colonial government would feel pressured to establish the expected appearance and output of a well-functioning European-inspired farm, and so would seek out sod-busting crops like flax to occupy and displace the indigenous plants.

Meanwhile, the need to find a sod-busting crop suggests that the non-agricultural eco-societies were not particularly inviting to these new, single-species plant organizations. The novel calls flax "*a challenge to the harsh conditions under which it grew*": the crop has an antagonistic relationship toward its habitat, and the orders of the soil are organizing *to challenge* the invading monocultures and their alliance with the colonial government and heteropatriarchy (Ostenso 250, 206, emphasis mine). Caleb muses about the great difficulty of "forc[ing] from the soil all that it would withhold" (250): the soil *wants* to withhold support for the crops. As he compels his children to till the land, they encounter "intolerance" in the soil, the land working against them, unwilling to negotiate with their organization of bodies and energies, which would have all undesirable plants removed (68). The "hard labour" of the land is not metaphorical; land shows a material resistance to the political orders that the farm labourers are attempting to spread. So while the Gares are, on the one hand, organizing alongside the farmland (318), the land is not monolithic, and not all more-than-human orders peaceably co-exist. The Gares' service to agricultural fields requires the disruption of other political orders in the soil. And so as the Gares align themselves with the crops' lifeways, labouring to reproduce a particular more-than-human society, they displace and clash with other socio-political arrangements.

Beyond the farm, beyond patriarchy

While the soil's orders resist the intrusion of agriculture, they are not antagonistic towards humans in other contexts. When Judith is too frustrated to bear her father's abuse any longer, she runs away from the farm, and she enters—and

is welcomed into—a different political order emerging from the untilled⁹ earth of the nearby forest. She acts, “[n]ot knowing fully what she was doing,” outside of the logics or knowledges she is accustomed to. She strips down, baring herself, and lies on the ground, where she finds herself amid a “network of white birch” and sees “the bulbous white country that a cloud made against the blue” sky (67-68). The language here—a “network” and a “country”—speaks to the non-human systematic sovereignties she finds herself among. In her naked vulnerability, her body becomes entangled with the forest’s societies, with its corporeality and flow of energies. She experiences an undetermined force “in the freeness in the air, in the depth of the earth” (68). As she is surrounded, saturated, and absorbed into the forest, she is “singled out from the rest of the Gares. She [is] no longer one of them” (68). She is momentarily separated from the heteropatriarchal agricultural family and untangled from their manipulations. For perhaps the first time in her life, she finds herself “strangely free” (67).

Judith is unable to understand her experience; she is swept away by the forest’s affects, not master over them, and the presence of ellipses in the passage signal her inability to articulate her involvement (67). Still, her experience is poignant, and Judith becomes aware of “something beyond” the life she knows, and this “beyond” lies in direct contrast to the agricultural society: “the fields that Caleb tilled held no tenderness... but here was something forbiddenly beautiful” (67). The “but” in this passage emphasizes the break between the two settings—the two political orders—and in the “forbidden[.]” orders of the forest Judith realizes she wants something beyond farm life and “beyond Sven” (68). Judith has previously imagined a life beyond her father, an imagination facilitated by the growth cycles of the crops, but that imagination has consistently been limited by heteropatriarchy. A new patriarch—Sven—has consistently represented her escape from her father. But here, the older orders of the sky and earth allow Judith a different imagination, and she comprehends something outside of heteropatriarchy. In other words, the freedom she senses in this place is not a freedom from one abusive man, but a freedom from systematized male dominance and—perhaps most importantly—a freedom to nurture non-heteronormative relationships. Here, queerness is entwined with the political orders that pre-exist colonial intrusion, and Judith’s rejection of Sven tumbles into musings about the “delicate fingers” of Lind, the female school teacher (67).

Throughout the novel, Judith and Lind live in unrealized homoerotic tension. To make space for an unexpected guest, the women share a bedroom on

9. I use the term “untilled” rather than “uncultivated” intentionally. One could argue the soil is cultivated by bugs, plants, waterways, or other non-human who work within the soil to support its growth potential, but it is not tilled by the settlers.

their first night, and Judith “covertly” watches Lind undress, noticing her “dainty silk underthings”—the first of many references, as undergarments mediate their relationship (12, 259, 265). The text also dedicates significant passages to the women appreciating each other’s physical forms, as Lind admires the “bountiful, relaxed beauty of [Judith’s sleeping] body” (17), and Judith “seek[s] to be near [Lind] for the sake of the physical sweetness of her when the others were not about” (307). Yet, the sexual tension is never clearly recognized by either woman and they both pursue heterosexual relationships. Given their sociopolitical world, Judith and Lind’s romantic decisions are hardly surprising: there is no room for lesbian relationships on the twentieth century family farm. Again, agricultural society is entangled in heteropatriarchy: men run family and farms, allied with monocultural crops and the colonial state—at the time of the book’s writing, the state considers homosexuality a crime. This is not to say queer relationships never occurred in remote colonial-agricultural societies like the one described in *Wild Geese*, but state and familial laws and customs are set up against them, limiting what can be done and what can be imagined.¹⁰

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson’s introduction to *Queer Ecologies* offers further insight into early twentieth-century perspectives. Following some questionable extrapolations of Darwin’s theory of evolution connecting reproductive potential with species’ fitness, heterosexuality during this period is synonymous with “healthy” and “natural,” evidence that a species is “flourishing” (11). Conversely, homosexuality is an example of “dysfunctional sexual biology or behavior” that represents a corruption or failure of nature (11). The natural and the queer become dichotomous terms, and nature-spaces and natural people are assumed to be without queerness (15). Living amongst such societal assumptions, Judith and Lind need to practise heterosexuality to be accepted as normal by their human neighbours. Nevertheless, *Wild Geese* directly challenges this norm by tying queerness to its non-human societies. The novel’s nature-spaces are not “free from the taint of homoerotic activity” (15)—the forest societies invite Judith’s erotic imagination, and they nurture Judith’s homosexual desires beyond and against colonial-agricultural heteropatriarchy.

But even as Judith’s desires are natural and appealing to *her*, the freedom she finds in the forest is not centered on *her*: Judith’s encounter is not about her or her character arc. This is important, because it pushes against the wilderness

10. The opportunities for same-sex relationships would have been differently experienced by different demographics. For example, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson explain that, due to the prevalence of single men in certain rural situations, there was some opportunity for (unsanctioned, illegal) homosexual activity between men (15). Women would have less opportunity to pursue same-sex connections.

mentality of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. As environmental historian William Cronon explains,¹¹ the wilderness mythos imagines nature as a rugged but pure frontier existing outside of settler civilization, a place where European settlers could "rediscover" and "reinfuse[] themselves with a vigor, an independence... and national character. Seen in this way, wild country became a place... of national renewal" (7). This narrative frames "wild" non-human communities as inanimate resources to be mined for colonial inspiration, places to visit only for the state's benefit; the settler leaves "civilization" for a while, rediscovers the "natural" self, and returns inspired to further the goals of the colonial state. In Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson words, wilderness spaces are assumed to "develop moral and physical fitness"—though *morality* and *fitness* are both defined by the colonial state and framed for colonial benefit (20).

Judith's experience, however, does not serve the state. This forest community is not a static resource to support colonial society or individual enlightenment. Judith can be queer in the forest, but she does not find inspiration to improve coloniality through this queerness. Instead, she grapples with her desire through metaphor and slippery images. She muses over Lind's eyes, her hands, and how Lind opened "a secret lock in her being" (68). If anything, this passage demonstrates the inadequacy of Judith's frame of reference. The forest embraces Judith's longing and her erotic body, but the colonial-agricultural-patriarchal apparatus that have structured and storied her life thus far are too limited to allow Judith to find sustained engagement with herself or this place. When Judith returns to the farm and again is interpolated into the agricultural system, her life is unchanged, as if she has forgotten the space "beyond Sven" (68).

Judith's limitations are inseparable from her position as a settler and the impacts of colonial policy in the area. Colonial settlement—whether through the creation of wilderness parks or monocrop farms—displaced Indigenous Peoples, whose knowledge and Nations grew alongside the land and its non-heteropatriarchal orders. These Peoples held frameworks for relationality and familial organization far beyond the settlers' understanding of heteropatriarchy. Although Indigenous familial orders and customs are diverse and varied, there is substantial evidence to show that many did not rely on the gender binary or heterosexuality; queer identities were (and in some cases still are) celebrated

11. Cronon's work is based in the United States, and there are nation-specific policies that would not be applicable to Canada. However, the general assumptions about wilderness that I am pointing to here are shared across borders. Like the United States, Canadian governments also established wilderness parks during this period, and Boyce explains that Canadian Prairie fiction has often been read by conceptualizing settler relationships to the "inchoate frontier" (1).

and tasked with community-specific roles inseparable from Nations' sociopolitical arrangements, including their engagement with more-than-human communities (Tatonetti x).¹² Colonial policy made these non-heteronormative social arrangements illegal, and through policies of displacement, forced labour, and the coding of land as owned and accessible only to patriarchal families, the colonial government tried to erase Indigenous Peoples' non-colonial social arrangements (Schneider 18, Boyce 4).

Unfortunately, the novel leaves Indigenous Nations and imaginations in the margins, and thus is complicit in this erasure. In its silence, it cannot offer a more thorough interrogation into the intrusion of European heteropatriarchy into Indigenous human and more-than-human societies. Judith lacks the knowledge and vocabulary that Indigenous Nations developed to engage with the land's orders, and she is bound up in heteronormative and settler-agricultural frameworks that limit engagement with non-colonial communities. But these communities *do* exist, and they are actively present, even as the colonial logics fail to understand them, and even as European agriculture threatens to overtake them.

Complicity is complexity

So, if agriculture is implicated in the political orders of colonialism and tied up in the heteropatriarchy that builds itself by erasing other sociopolitical orders, then are the crops responsible for settlement? Are the growing habits of flax guilty of colonization? Boyce is quick to exonerate the crops by asserting that they merely accept benefits of human systems (4). It's true that the political orders of the farm crops are tied up in human affairs, and equally necessary to consider the choices that are open to the flax. Nevertheless, I am wary of simply writing of the flax's potential complicity. To excuse the flax as merely reaping the benefits from colonial-patriarchy's systems of governance seems to re-centre the human and rob flax of self-awareness, turning it into a by-product of human governance instead of an active agent making political decisions.

To be clear: I am not ready to blame flax. Rather, I am unconvinced that plants should be assimilated into the conceptions of blame or guilt as they operate in individual-obsessed human societies, and equally unconvinced that humans

12. This is a complex topic that far exceeds this essay and my own knowledge. The introduction to Volume 16 of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* offers a concise, helpful, and accessible starting point for a discussion on queerness, Indigeneity, and colonial intrusion.

should place themselves as the arbitrators of plant morality. Perhaps the intersections between plant orders need to be thought more collectively and more specifically, beyond labelled individuals and the generalized taxonomy of independent species. Bodies have multiple capacities that can be employed differently; just as the novel's human characters engage in various interactions with plant orders, plants too can interact differently with each other.¹³ Flax is not "good" or a "bad"; different flax plants and flax collectives participate in different, intersecting political orders and are complicit in different ways. Many blue flax plants have found ways to enter Turtle Island's societies on mutually agreeable terms, offering nourishment to local birds, deer, and other beings (Ogle et al 2). Scientists do not consider blue flax an invasive species (Ogle et al 2). However, the assessment of species invasiveness is a general assessment across space and time, and it cannot encompass the specific relations unfolding in every instance of flax. That is, to say that flax plants are not invasive to Turtle Island *generally* does not mean flax plants can never act as invaders, nor does it mean that flax cannot support the invasive tendencies of others. Every flax plant exists in a particular place that holds a unique blend of societies that impact the plant's decisions. Every flax collective exists within its own particularities.

In the novel, the flax field is a specific monoculture entwined with Caleb and a particular plot of soil at a moment in time; Caleb's flax is different from his neighbours', and this season's flax is different from the last. These plants and fields are connected within continuous systems, but these systems do not exhaust the plants' capacity for life or entirely strip them of agential power. In fact, there's evidence in the text that the novel's final generation of flax conspired with the various societies outside of the borders of the Gare farm to eliminate Caleb Gare, a shift in alliance that reverberates across *Wild Geese's* intertwining plots.

Flax's final act

To maximize his harvest, Caleb forgoes carving a spatial boundary between the flax field and the forest, meaning that, while colonial land deeds undoubtedly define the farm's boundaries, on the ground there is no clear demarcation between field and forest (346). Instead, the boundaries of the flax field run against and into the forest; the plants meet and intermingle; eco-societies form new

13. While a comprehensive interrogation between Ostenso's novel and affect theory is well beyond the scope of this essay, my focus on particularity and bodies resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's engagement with Spinoza and the question: "What can a body do?" (256).

relationships as they share common ground on the field's edges. This space of solidarity allows for material exchanges and alliances, for new eco-social organizations that provide a physical pathway between the field and forest that the non-human orders use to undermine the agriculture's ever-expanding ambitions.

When Caleb sees the flames approaching the farm, he is enraptured by the show, "conscious only" of the flax's beauty, and so intent on saving the field that he is unable to comprehend the danger to his own body. The flames are propelled forward by the wind, providing a sense of urgency and "taunting" Caleb, mocking him and drawing him closer to the danger as they approach the alluring flax, moving across the material bridge formed by the co-mingling of field and forest along the farm's boundaries (350). The reeds also join in the scene, as they "tangle themselves about Caleb's legs" and slow him down (351); they work with intention to thwart Caleb and collaborate with the fire. Eventually, his quest to save his harvest thwarted, Caleb is caught in the muskeg, where the mud sucks him into the earth and buries him (351).

Caleb's death has been labeled "too convenient" by scholars, as a tragedy that simply happened to cleanly tie up the novel's plot (Keith). However, when attending to the novel's more-than-human orders, Caleb's death emerges as a carefully arranged event brought into fruition through the cooperation of many more-than-human forces, perhaps even a "multispecies network of performativity" (Gibson and Sandilands 2). Non-human agents harmonize their life-ways, working within their pre-existing orders and repurposing their life customs to ensure the fields burn and Caleb dies. But while led by the non-human, the death of Caleb is a more-than-human political affair. Not only does Caleb's death mark human vulnerability to non-human powers, following his demise, the farm's human bodies or energy will never be arranged in precisely the same way. In Boyce's words, the "simultaneous demise [of Caleb and the flax field] is part of a broader assemblage of effects that includes the reorganization of the Gare family" (3). The need for reorganization does not mean that sociopolitical systems end, but the fire's survivors must re-adjust, and new or altered forms of collective living will emerge. The tension that structured the Gares' lives dissipates, and the anxiety permeating the family members slackens as they are finally released from Caleb's cruelty. But this release does not emerge from their own ingenuity or conniving, nor does it come from the final revelation of Amelia Gare's secret son; the human secret remains a secret. Caleb Gare's death is tied up in human affairs—he is alone in the fields in part because of his children's trip to the harvest jubilee—but the story's climax is driven by the interactions of more-than-human orders that overlap with the various plots that ground and structure their world. Inhuman forces propel human re-arrangement because human arrangement was never strictly human to begin with, and human plots—literary or otherwise—were likewise never single-species stories.

In the aftermath of the fire, colonial legislation re-adjusts its order as well, plotting its own trajectory as the state tries to re-organize the land into private property by considering who remains available to implement its structures. To prevent the land from returning to the governments of the indigenous plant-orders, the role of state-sanctioned property-owning patriarch is shifted through the law of primogeniture to Martin. But even as the colonial state reproduces its orders, it cannot do so in precisely the same way: Martin is not Caleb, and the farm and the Gare family will not be the same with Martin acting as patriarch. The continuation of colonialism and heteropatriarchy can be read as a sign of the state's resilience and adaptability, but it is also an indication of an ongoing struggle. Even as patriarchy is reproduced, more-than-human orders will continue to use, infiltrate, support, and attack each other and settler organizations. Colonial societies are not idly inheriting the Earth and have not comprehensively conquered the land; they suffer defeats from which they must re-emerge. They are constantly being challenged, forced to re-adjust.

Wild Geese's relevance to Canadian literature isn't its development of a generalized Canadian mythos, but rather its denial of a singular Canada. *Wild Geese* grapples with colonial settlement as many materializing projects overlapping with pre-existing societies that are not finished, inevitable, or strictly human. Political orders beyond colonialism become visible, and even if the novel struggles to grapple with its own invocation of the otherwise, it refuses evocations of an empty, non-political land ripe for colonial appropriation. Instead, attention is directed towards the agencies and orders that are already supporting, arranging, and plotting the places and spaces of more-than-human livelihoods. *Wild Geese's* non-human communities are powerful and contingent, dependent and destructive, entwined with the human and yet differing in their responses to those colonial customs that are constituting the state. Colonial orders cannot be simply erased, but they can be rearranged—they are *already being rearranged*—as they contend and ally with other societies and forces. Perhaps *Wild Geese* asks "us" to read "our" literature again: whose plots are these? In what plots do we find ourselves, not as masters or owners, but as agents and allies?

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