"Nothing of Ourselves": Agriculture and Community in St. John de Crèvecoeur, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Henry Beston

Joshua Dean Sullivan
Iowa State University

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“Nothing of ourselves”: agriculture and community in St. John de Crèvecoeur, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Henry Beston

by

Joshua Sullivan

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Program of Study Committee:
Matthew Wynn Sivils, Major Professor
Pamela Riney-Kehrberg
Mary Swander

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INTRODUCTION

In this study I steer the discussion of environmental writing away from the expected treatment of unaltered or minimally impacted green spaces in order to analyze literary portrayals of agricultural zones of ecological and social overlap. Growing anxieties regarding food sustainability have recently invigorated discussions of the American farm and its place within communal and environmental landscapes; however, intellectual attention to agriculture is not a new literary development. American writers have long addressed the agrarian landscape as a place of environmental and cultural interaction. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Henry Beston crafted nuanced portraits of the overlapping environmental and social terrain of farming communities. They investigate the vulnerability of agrarian societies in their narratives. Developments such as foreign and domestic conflicts and rural industrialism threaten the pursuit of environmental and cultural balance. Those concerned with issues of contemporary food sustainability would do well to look at how American writers of the past have oriented themselves not as simply consumers of conscionable products, or as isolated outcasts, but as active community members that recognize communal vitality as the first step towards facilitating ecological health through sustainable food systems.

Traditional and ecocritical scholarly works often address these writers in terms of preservationist rhetoric towards wild spaces beyond anthropocentric utilization, but this approach disregards cultural spaces occupied and portrayed by the authors. Dana Phillips discusses the shortcomings of nature-writing as a genre, and subsequently the limitations of ecocritical analyses that examine these environmental texts: “Ambiguous spaces –
desert wastes, barren shores, howling wildernesses – are said to inspire revelations, but interpreting revelations requires us to be as circumspect as possible, even if that means retreating behind closed doors so that we can mull things over in deep abstraction” (x). In the ensuing chapters I argue that agricultural writers transcend this rift in environmental writing by analyzing spaces that do not exist at a distance from social manipulation, but those that are utilized by, and subsequently sustain human culture.

Glen Love analyzes the essential connection between humans and the world we inhabit: “Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly short-sighted, incongruous” (16). While “basic ecological principles” and broad environmental literacy are of paramount importance, locally utilized spaces that provide food for humankind certainly merit investigation as well. Agriculture embodies a cultural endeavor that exists within the environment to sustain human communities. Farming is tangible and physical rather than remote and abstract, and it has been developed through and portrayed by the American artistic imagination. Wendell Berry elaborates on the connection between nature and culture in agriculture: “But characters and community – that is, culture in the broadest, richest sense – constitute, just as much as nature, the source of food. Neither nature nor people alone can produce human sustenance, but only the two together, culturally wedded” (9). This concept of mutuality between nature and culture within agricultural systems runs throughout the works of St. John de Crèvecoeur, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Henry Beston. Attention to human and environmental interaction described by these agrarian authors reveals the following ideas: farmers exist and utilize the landscape as extensions of community rather than in
isolation, conscionable social growth emanates outward from environmentally-educated communities, agricultural systems and communities progress in patterns of ecological interconnectedness, agricultural communities have the potential to provide ecologically responsible continuity in the face of industrialization and environmental devastation. The growing demand for sustainable practices in agriculture and in human social networks, vocalized largely by the ever-expanding local food movement, justifies a theoretical exploration of how American writers of the past have navigated and interpreted spaces of environmental and cultural reciprocity.

Each of the three chapters in this study respectively addresses one of the following texts: Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Cooper’s *Rural Hours* (1850), and Beston’s *Northern Farm: A Chronicle of Maine* (1948). While each chapter varies depending on the nature of the primary text, the scholarship relied upon, and the developmental arch of the overall objective, all three address the abovementioned concepts regarding the portrayal of agricultural communities in the Northeast. The chapter on Crèvecoeur analyzes different circumstances from the chapter on Beston, due, of course, to a two hundred year gap between each composition. All three agrarian authors share similar concerns that facilitate an overall cohesiveness; for example, both Crèvecoeur and Beston address social anxieties caused by war, albeit different wars but similar anxieties.

These chapters do not reinvent the wheel regarding theoretical terminology, but it may prove useful to clarify reoccurring phrases. *Agricultural zones* should inspire the reader to imagine, or re-imagine farmlands as ecologically vibrant spaces interwoven among human communities, altered and inhabited by farmers and community members.
This stands in contrast to stagnantly pastoral images of agricultural spaces as something external, or on the periphery. The terms *agricultural consciousness* and *agricultural imagination* are used interchangeably. Both terms reference the intellectual conceptualization of a landscape that does not segregate the environmental and cultural into separate realms. This perspective serves as a manifestation of communal concern for landscapes that these authors, as well as their artistic subjects, inhabited and shared. The terms *independence*, *individualism*, and *isolation* are non-interchangeable. *Independence* is a valued trait that allows farmers to provide much of their own material and financial subsistence, therefore facilitating their supportive roles in a community. *Individualism*, however, proves destructive to communal structures and environmental integrity when any number of factors, both personal and cultural, force community members to withdraw from social order. *Isolation* exists as an extreme absence of community and perpetuates destructive environmental and social ethics.

In the first chapter, “Sermons Behind the Plough: Portrayals of Agricultural Communities in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*,” I establish a framework that seeks to dismiss the American mythos of “rugged individualism” in favor of collective cohesion in the context of eighteenth-century farming communities. Crèvecoeur examines the functions of an individual within an agricultural community, and expresses deep skepticism of those that utilize the environment outside of a socially-constructed land ethics. James E. Bishop provides insightful contextualization, and claims that *Letters* “is reflective of the shift that was occurring during the late eighteenth century, when submissiveness to royal authority and commitment to the larger community were coming to be seen as feminine, while rugged individualism was increasingly becoming the model for American masculinity”
Crèvecoeur, along with Cooper and Beston, maintain this commitment to community even as American social trends alter the world around them. While many scholars, Lawrence Buell included, treat Letters as non-fiction, careful analysis of the narrator exposes a literary text that is largely a work of fiction. Although the author was a farmer and drew from lived experience, he creates a home-grown narrator in order to establish authority with both American and European audiences. Crèvecoeur’s most famous and enlightening passages, such as the caged slave in the forest, the kingbird the bees, and the snake fangs embedded in boots, read as blatantly fictitious.

The second chapter, “‘The Great Husbandry of Providence’: Susan Fenimore Cooper’s Agricultural Consciousness in Rural Hours,” directs the conversation about Rural Hours away from the conventional discussion of the flora and fauna around Cooperstown, New York, to the agricultural landscape that Cooper envisioned as intertwined with ecological and cultural spaces. Cooper expresses great pride in her agricultural community and heritage, although she also conveys regret regarding deforestation and exploitation of the landscape. While her narrative is not always entirely consistent, an environmental ethic does develop that embraces farming as a way to resist increasing industrialization, which she considers permanently devastating to the environment. Agriculture also serves as a method that utilizes the landscape in a light-handed manner and simultaneously facilitates native species and ecological diversity. In Cooper’s description of burying-grounds, she conceptualizes communities as mirroring agricultural spaces through organic mimicry, and she portrays the same reciprocal, ecological relationships that function in the natural world as influencing cultural growth as well.
The last chapter, “‘The Starry Plough’: Twentieth-Century Environmental and Communal Discontinuity in Henry Beston’s *Northern Farm,*” celebrates an increasingly elusive rural lifestyle that Beston considers morally superior in light of the increasing mechanization and social neurosis that he associates with urban America. Beston conceptualizes agricultural communities as places where environmentally harmonious living insulates community members against debilitating effects of the industrialized world. Beston also portrays farm communities as resembling agrarian landscapes in their organic perpetuation of subsequent generations, and in the ability of farmers to reinhabit a landscape that they continually interact with. Published in 1948, *Northern Farm* facilitates the analysis of more contemporary concerns in agricultural writing. Beston expresses anxieties of modernity in regards to issues such as increasing agricultural mechanization, the impact of World War II on farm communities, and the financial and social consequences of tourism on rural areas of New England. Beston’s writing caters to a nuanced twentieth-century reading into how agrarian principles function in a continually evolving agricultural community.
CHAPTER ONE. SERMONS BEHIND THE PLOUGH: PORTRAYALS OF AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES IN CRÈVECOEUR’S LETTERS

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer (1782) provides insightful observations on both the agricultural and social developments of late 18th-century American farming communities. James E. Bishop discusses the conflicted value system of Crèvecoeur’s narrator, James, as emblematic of larger social developments when he writes, “It is reflective of the shift that was occurring during the late eighteenth century, when submissiveness to royal authority and commitment to the larger community were coming to be seen as feminine, while rugged individualism was increasingly becoming the model for American masculinity” (365). Critical attention to Crèvecoeur (including Bishop and Grantland Rice) continues to refer to the narrator as striving towards complete self-sufficiency, or, at best, maintaining an ambivalent acceptance of an environmentally and socially destructive individualist identity. Upon closer inspection of Crèvecoeur’s agricultural anecdotes and his conceptualization of the successful community vs. the endangered individual, it becomes apparent that James maintains his communal tendencies and serves as an advocate for the preservation of collective cooperation to support agricultural communities. This idea stands in contrast to the preoccupation with the destructive concept of the “rugged individual” that altered American agriculture and now dominates our current discussion of sustainability. While many scholars cling to the supposedly synonymous nature of individualism and Crèvecoeur’s evolving American identity, I argue that through James’s letters Crèvecoeur portrays a successful American farmer whose development hinges entirely on healthy, unified communities, rather than individual determination. He develops a relationship of
reciprocity between society and the soil where stewardship of interconnected communal and agricultural spaces exist in unison, and cannot function in isolation from one another.

Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* has often served for critics as an illustration of Abbé Raynals’s theory regarding the decline of civilization as articulated in *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770). Grantland Rice draws a parallel between Raynal and Crèvecoeur and claims that both survey the American landscape “all the while relegating the ideals of pastoral self-sufficiency, American plentitude, and social equality to an as of yet unrealized hope” (95). Concluding that Crèvecoeur sees “pastoral self-sufficiency” as a distant hope reveals a misreading of the agrarian communities described in *Letters*. As a farmer himself, Crèvecoeur’s agricultural observations serve as the most convincing anecdotes in the narrative. In light of these insights the focus on “self-sufficiency” begins to fail and an emphasis on communal sustainability begins to emerge. Rice reflects on Crèvecoeur when he states, “The American author, in other words, is to be a writer of the local and of the unstudied present tense, a documentarian who records rather than interprets experience” (97). While contemplating the differences between men of varied origins James explicitly records that “men are nothing of themselves” and does not predict that this will change in the New World (61).

Although scholars tend to remember Crèvecoeur as a participant in the cosmopolitan relationship between the New World and the Old, his narrator’s most notable role in *Letters* emerges as that of a farmer and community member. Crèvecoeur’s works pertaining to agriculture and botany attest to his capacity for excelling in the natural sciences. Julia Post Mitchell, a biographer of Crèvecoeur,
recounts an attack on his credibility by the librarian of the British Museum, Samuel Ayscough, a contemporary of Crèvecoeur’s:

By the time Ayscough has finished his pamphlet the unfortunate *Letters* are shown to be a tissue of lies and the author a groveling imposter. Yet the deed of purchase of Crèvecoeur’s farm in Orange County nearly twenty years earlier can be seen today in the office of the county clerk at Goshen….In this very year, too, in which his credit as an author in general and as a farmer in particular was challenged, Crèvecoeur was beginning his series of papers, chiefly agricultural, which came out in American journals over the pseudonym ‘Agricola.’ (161)

As an educated Frenchman working and living in America, Crèvecoeur spoke with authority on subjects such as agriculture and land surveying. However, he could not act as an intimate witness to the development of American communities without a home-grown narrator. He creates James in order to grant himself artistic authority and to endow *Letters* with native communal knowledge. Although there exists little scholarly attention towards James’s fictional heritage, Crèvecoeur gives his narrator a specific and critical personal history that mirrors other community members when he writes, “In all societies there are cast-offs; this impure part serves as our precursors or pioneers; my father himself was one of that class, but he came upon honest principles, and was therefore one of the few who held fast” (43). James’s father homesteads and then converts to the more social endeavor of agriculture to pave the way for James. This process grants him the skill set and access to appropriate resources to operate as a primary community member. Considering that this perpetuation of social integration will continue at the end of *Letters* with James seeking shelter in the Native American
community, the emphasis on the evolution of the independent self begins to dwindle. Yael Ben-Zvi investigates the importance of James’s nationality when he writes, “Perhaps James is British rather than French because while in France geography was a centralized discourse controlled by the government, in England persons of various inclinations and backgrounds engaged in geography both at universities and publicly” (79). James acts as an effective narrator through his ability to interpret the social dynamics of his community, to survey many other agricultural settings, and to recognize that schism in the community has rendered it fallible and no longer sustainable.

Crèvecoeur rarely gives sustained voice to any character other than his narrator, however, in Letter I, James’s wife attempts to dissuade him from writing to Mr. F. B. in England. Her fear is that James’s “scribbling” will alter his social role and potentially lead to alienation from the community. Good standing in a pre-Revolution agrarian community was an essential asset that offered farm families access not only to resources, but a town-wide labor pool in times of need (Russell 195). She says to James, “thee knowest it is not by writing that we shall pay the blacksmith, the minister, the weaver, the tailor, and the English shop” (15). This protest serves as the only example of financial anxiety in her three page lecture, which shows that her primary concern is James’s reputation in a community where his family must rely on his good standing to both solicit goods and services from others, as well as to provide the same. Access to labor and services doubled as financial access during this time; the crops and commodities harvested and processed functioned as legal tender in most agrarian communities (Russell 202). She continues, “travelers as they go along would point to our house, saying, here liveth the scribbling farmer; better hear them as usual observe, here liveth the warm
substantial family, that never begrudgeth a meal of victuals, or a mess of oats, to any one that steps in” (15). Her concern relates to their position in the community as providers; if others begin to view them as outsiders and refuse to seek out their companionship, the potential result is an undermining of their livelihood. Elizabeth Cook writes of James’s wife, “In the context of the politically and economically self-regulating and self-sufficient society she describes, writing, linked to an illusory paper economy, is inherently anomalous and even scandalous” (156). She worries that his writing will estrange their family from the support of the community, therefore placing them in a position that Crèvecoeur describes as fruitless and destructive.

While *Letters* is largely a work of fiction and the New York community in which Crèvecoeur lived was likely far from the utopian ideal described by James, at the very least his writings serve as observations of the underlying principles supporting American agricultural communities from the standpoint of a European emigrant. He assiduously addresses the social contracts that existed in his New York farming community and how these arrangements helped promote proper land management. Here Crèvecoeur describes the development of the recently transplanted Scotsman Andrew and the authority that he must answer to in regards to land use: “The term of the lease shall be thirty years; how do you like it, Andrew . . . . If you are ever dissatisfied with the land, a jury of your own neighborhood shall value all your improvements, and you shall be paid agreeably” (77). “Improvements” may seem questionable from a contemporary ecological standpoint, but the fact remains that Crèvecoeur stresses the importance of communal interest in a given land base. David M. Robinson investigates Crèvecoeur’s portrayal of utopian principles as well as his anxiety over the dissolution of those principles in the face of historical
progress: “Caught between the impulse to affirm autonomy and a felt need for a supportive community, he is driven to present the primal American cultural experience of starting anew as both an individual and a communal act” (23). While Robinson acknowledges Crèvecoeur’s criticism of the “failing of constructive individualism,” he also conceptualizes James’s letters as communicating an “ambivalent presentation of the relation of the individual to the larger community” (22). Letters describes social systems where it is imperative for individuals to become integrated into a community. There is little ambivalence in James’s many reflections and observations. The anecdotal story of Andrew repeatedly stresses the inability of individuals to function successfully and responsibly outside of the support systems and agricultural land ethics found within healthy communities.

Crèvecoeur artfully illustrates the important connection between the individual and the social setting at multiple points. There is the oft-quoted passage regarding James’s son riding on the plow, (likely untrue, but a powerful symbol of literally cultivating the future nonetheless) as well as this anecdote also regarding plowing: “I have composed many a good sermon as I followed my plough. The eyes not being then engaged on any particular object, leaves the mind free for the introduction of any useful ideas” (12). Here James cultivates his own fields while also reflecting on how he would cultivate the minds of his neighbors if he were their local preacher. Crèvecoeur creates a narrator that uses his spare mental energy on a medium intended for social development. James’s multitasking of personal as well as social gain serves as a connection between the well-being of both entities. Robinson elaborates, “Crèvecoeur does not suggest that the individual can exist outside any community but rather that the health of the
community is vital for the health of the individual” (23). I would expand on this to add that the health of the landscape influences the health of both the community and the individual.

Letters frequently employs a metaphor that claims that the personal and social growth of men resembles that of plants. Early in the “What is an American” chapter of the narrative James states:

Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the particular soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment. (40-41)

Recall that “men are nothing of themselves” and Crèvecoeur’s concept of the individual (plant) emerges as one that is always an outgrowth from the community (soil) of which they are apart of. Leo Marx states, “Skeptical of abstract ideas, he [Crèvecoeur] is a kind of homespun Lockian who thinks of the land, or rather the landscape, as an object that penetrates the mind, filling it with irresistible pictures of human possibilities” (110). Soil is more than simply an anecdotal manifestation of community that springs forth the individual; it quite literally influences the attitudes and dreams of aspiring farmers. The health and protection of this resource serve as a way of ensuring the well-being of the people that use this land base. Crèvecoeur also conceptualizes this land as having the possibility to transform not just individuals, but whole emigrant populations.

While generalizing the terrain of Scotland and the condition of the Scottish farmer, James writes, “This society would present an interesting spectacle could they be transported on a richer soil. But perhaps that soil would soon alter everything; for our
opinions, vices, and virtues, are all together local . . .” (73). The condition of the soil directly influences those that seek to establish a community based on agriculture. One of the criteria that mark *Letters* as a text of American exceptionalism states that the soil in America not only condones productive agriculture, but differs so much from that of Europe that it posses the ability to sustainably harbor burgeoning communities. Edward Larkin regards Crèvecoeur’s position in an evolving American society and writes, “Crèvecoeur’s insistent use of country as the descriptor of America strategically compliments his emphasis of the impact of the land on the transplanted individual, as stated directly in the text and implied in the figurative language of cultivation” (68). Settlers “transplanted” from foreign soil thrive in the American environment due to both its rich soil, and its communities’ strong sense of locality and place. Soil also serves as a great equalizer among societies, fostering cohesion among regions that require one cultivation method, and setting others apart. Letter IV, the section regarding Nantucket, adds interesting complications to Crèvecoeur’s discussion of the connection between soil and community.

While the majority of *Letters* pertains to the fertile lands of Pennsylvania and New York, as well as South Carolina, Crèvecoeur uses a portion of the book to address the nearly barren islands off the coast of New England. The society of whalers on Nantucket specifically complicates his contextualization of productive communities as synonymous with productive landscapes. James records, “There are but few gardens and arable fields in the neighborhood of the town, for nothing can be more sterile and sandy than this part of the island; they have, however, with unwearied perseverance, by bringing a variety of manure, and by cow-penning, enriched several spots” (90). While
inland agricultural communities rely on farming not only for sustenance, but for income and barter as well, the agriculture taking place on Nantucket occurs primarily to sustain the island population. James observes farms owned and operated collectively by the people of Nantucket, as opposed to private operations existing within communities on the mainland. He describes the communal fields of the island:

It is divided into seven fields, one of which is planted by that part of the community which are entitled to it. This is called the common plantation, a simple but useful expedient, for was each holder of this tract to fence his own property, it would require a prodigious quantity of posts and rails, which you must remember are to be purchased and fetched from the main….Thus every seven years the whole of the tract is under cultivation, and enriched by manure and ploughing yields afterwards excellent pasture; to which the town cows, amounting to 500, are daily led. (93-94)

This observation highlights the wisdom of a people that saw the value of cooperation in order to cope with an inhospitable landscape and to reduce external reliance.

Whaling served as the primary mode of agriculture for those on Nantucket. While the barren soil of the island required collective management to perpetuate sustainable use, the seemingly endless and uniform fields of ocean produced a different sort of social cohesion. Jennifer Schell discusses Crèvecoeur’s conceptualization of whaling that utilized agricultural terms familiar to him:

Crèvecoeur does not describe the spatial landscape of the ocean as a wild, untamed frontier, but as a settled, working farm. In Crèvecoeur’s formulation, the work of whaling is figuratively akin to the work of farming – the oceans are
transformed into a ‘boundless field,’ which the whalemen have only to ‘cultivate’
by harvesting whales, in his opinion an inexhaustible resource. (586)

Here James extends the concept of soil as a local equalizer to the waters of the sea. He
observes the social order of the whalers mirroring the uniformity of the “soil” that they
harvest from: “They have no wages, each draws a certain established share in partnership
with the proprietor of the vessel; by which economy they are all proportionately
concerned in the success of the enterprise, and all equally alert and vigilant” (116).

Owing to their unique mode of livelihood and their isolation, the families of Nantucket
practice farming systems of a more experimental nature than those of the mainland.

Crèvecoeur identifies different regions not so much by political boundaries as by
the customs and agricultural modes adapted to the geographical setting. James’s second
letter states, “By your accounts, I observe a material difference subsists between your
husbandry, modes, and customs, and ours; everything is local” (17). Crèvecoeur implies
that everything is local in this new American landscape because different regions require
different modes of agriculture, commerce, and land management. He describes this
development as an organic process that evolves as a group adapts to a particular region,
therefore projecting a collective conceptualization of place upon the land. Lawrence
Buell discusses our contemporary contextualization of place as “understanding place-
making as a culturally inflected process in which nature and culture must be seen as a
mutuality rather than separable domains” (67). While our modern disconnect between
social development and landscape requires that we be reminded of these principles, it
comes naturally to Crèvecoeur to describe American communities through the context of
agricultural nuances that represent the social manipulation of the natural. James
articulates these principles clearly in the third letter: “Exclusive of those general characteristics, each province has its own, founded on government, climate, mode of husbandry, customs, and peculiarity of circumstances” (43). Integration with a place requires that the individual learn the local modes of established farmers and replicate observed customs. However, when James travels to Charlestown he witnesses the intensive slave system perpetuated by agrarians that he does not wish to see replicated elsewhere.

If the first three letters provide a positive characterization of James’s New York farming village due to industrious community cooperation, Letter IX, describing Charlestown, portrays grim and unsustainable circumstances caused by local reliance on slave labor. When James discusses farm land in the north he observes manageable agricultural systems, but when describing Charlestown he immediately transitions from a discussion of exceptional land in South Carolina to the subsequent demand for slavery in that region. Expanding on the evils of slavery, James writes:

Even under those mild climates which seem to breathe peace and happiness, the poison of slavery, the fury of despotism, and the rage of superstition, are all combined against man . . . . There the very delirium of tyranny tramples on the best gifts of nature, and sports with the fate, the happiness, the lives of millions: there the extreme fertility of the ground always indicates the extreme misery of the inhabitants! (164-65)

The moral degradation of the South arises not only from its adherence to an exorbitant slave system, but also from the disconnection between the land owners and the landscape itself. James predicts that these flaws will eventually cause the downfall of these
communities. The beauty and abundance of this region act as a trap as Letter IX progresses, as Yael Ben-Zvi describes the infamous caged slave scene:

The space in which this scene is set promises ‘delight’ but the ‘pleasant wood’ is exposed as a misleading, cruel façade which conceals and facilitates fatal suffering. James voluntarily entered the ‘pleasant wood’ – as one would a botanical labyrinth – but found this benevolent scenery transformed into a trap whose caged victim could escape only through prolonged dying. (96-97)

For James, the lush and fertile landscapes of the South become an expedient to the present brutality. Crèvecoeur chose to characterize the Charlestown area as one where environmental comfort and little resistance from the land to large-scale agriculture allow for such extensive and lucrative systems that farmers need no longer farm. Instead they engage in a level of exploitation that disconnects them from their slaves, from their neighbors, and from humane and social notions in general. James predicts a grim fate for this slave-based capitalist community by comparing Charlestown to Rome: “The Roman dominions were tilled by the hands of unfortunate people, who had once been, like their victors, free, rich, and possessed of every kind of benefit society can confer . . .” (161). James predicts the downfall of violently maintained societies in which complete reliance on transactions of capital nullify the need for community cohesion or cooperation.

Although Crèvecoeur criticizes the buying and selling of human lives, he does celebrate the idea of private land ownership under this capitalistic system. James claims, “Let him work, he will have opportunities enough to earn a comfortable support, and even the means of procuring some land; which ought to be the utmost wish of every person who has health and hands to work” (63). To James the logical progression of
productivity involves the engagement of wage labor within a community until one has the capital to procure their own land, in which event they then become a more productive member of that community. He conceptualizes landowners as upholding a specific social contract that paradoxically strengthens the community as a cohesive unit. Christine Holbo discusses prevailing philosophies of the late 18th century regarding the relationship between the self and society: “Human beings…are naturally inclined to live in society. A society is the sum of its customs, and man is always already a member of historical society; speculation about the state of nature or the dissolution of the social contact is both foolish and dangerous” (24). The boundaries of private land serve to limit the manipulation one farmer can inflict on a landscape to his own space, to foster cooperation between land owners, and to inspire concern for the biological productivity of a farmer’s exhaustible land base. One of Crèvecoeur’s many bee anecdotes illustrates this principle:

> If we find anywhere in the woods (no matter on whose land) what is called a bee-tree, we must mark it; in the fall of the year when we propose to cut it down, our duty is to inform the proprietor of the land, who is entitled to half the contents; if this is not complied with we are exposed to an action of trespass, as well as he who should go and cut down a bee-tree which he had neither found nor marked.

(28)

This observation of land ownership restricts the use of resources and allows for a barter-oriented transaction that strengthens neighborly ties. Had it not been for this principle, the forests around farmer James would likely have been home to far fewer bee-trees. While James describes private land limitations as productive community boundaries, he expresses far more hesitation regarding the ownership of human lives.
After James witnesses the gory spectacle of the caged slave suspended in the forest he continues on to the home of his friend and discovers that the slave was executed (and of course tortured) for killing the plantation overseer. He briefly meditates on the environment of danger and self-protection perpetuated by the brutal institution of slavery: “They told me the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary; and supported the doctrine of slavery with arguments generally made use of to justify the practice” (168). Through the perspective of James, Crèvecoeur conceptualizes the extensive slave system as exacerbating a violent social order where community members destroy one another in order to protect their material status and their property. Most of James’s reflections on Charlestown portray a community mired in a perpetual state of war. Jeff Osborne, addressing the darker aspects of liberal theory and social contracts in *Letters*, discusses the same scene: “Slave owners represent, better than any other group, the horrible logical possibilities of the liberal paradigm: from self-preservation to accumulation of property, from protection of property to murder” (536). The impression of Charlestown does not compare to the community portrayed in the first three letters; this letter describes a collection of independent plantations held intact by violence and repression. While James seems to tolerate the more benign level of slavery in New York as opposed to the plantation system of the South, the narration interestingly shifts immediately from the scene of the caged slave to a long and exaggerated description of generational destruction in the North.

Snakes are one of the most prominent animals that appear in *Letters*. Yael Ben-Zvi reflects on James’s dark conceptualization of them: “James demonstrates the persistent, unreasonable, hidden nature of evil through a story about three men who had
been poisoned by fangs, which remained attached to the boots that they wore even after 
the snake in which these fangs had originated had been killed” (97). The blatantly 
unbelievable nature of this anecdote implies that Crèvecoeur fabricated this piece with a 
particular intention. This gothic tale contains multiple elements that symbolically 
comment on slavery: the generational poisoning of father and son through the fangs, the 
inheritance of the venom through property, the passing of that property to another family, 
and the extent of the destruction as limited to the local community. All of these 
references point to an allusion regarding slavery and the inheritance of slaves as property. 
James only attributes one particular symptom to this poisoning: “at night the farmer 
pulled off his boots and went to bed; and was soon after attacked with a strange sickness 
at his stomach; he swelled, and before a physician could be sent for, died” (171). 
Recognizing the swollen belly as a symbol of excess and gluttony endows this otherwise 
respectable farmer with the despicable traits James previously applied to the slave owners 
of Charlestown. Through this isolated and exaggerated example of destruction within the 
community caused by inherited and then purchased property, Crèvecoeur criticizes the 
slave system that exists in his otherwise celebrated Northern colonies. 

Crèvecoeur struggles with the evolving concept of individuality in the American 
colonies throughout Letters. James Bishop writes:

While the nationalist ambitions in Crèvecoeur’s work should not be overlooked, it 
is also important to remember that Crèvecoeur wrote during a time when 
Jeffersonian national identity was in its embryonic stages, before the publication 
of the Declaration of Independence and towards the end of a period when 
submission to authority was not considered antithetical to manliness. (362)
Community cohesion functions as a facet of authority for James. Although Crèvecoeur does celebrate the ability of a man to leave the stale confines of European servitude, he remains weary of frontier isolation that would later come to be celebrated in American folklore. He says of the backwoodsmen in the forests and the isolated families living off the land: “To all these reasons you must add, their lonely situation, and you cannot imagine what an effect on manners the great distances they live from each other has!” (48). He goes on to say, “Thus our bad people are those who are half cultivators and half hunters; and the worst of them have degenerated altogether into the hunting state” (49).
Crèvecoeur conceptualizes this state of dependency on the land as irresponsible and destructive. Timothy Sweet elaborates on the crude agriculture of these independent half-farmers: “One important farming method involved logging in the winter, burning the slash in the spring, planting a grain (almost always corn) for three of four years in succession, meanwhile clearing new land for crops the following years, using old fields for pasturage, and moving on when the land ceased to support a good harvest” (59-60).
Crèvecoeur advocates for paced settlements that develop through organic communal growth. He expresses a cynical estimation of men that homestead independently and of those outside the boundaries of a community deeply invested in robust, socially responsible agriculture. It is also worth noting that at this point in the development of American agricultural communities, these backwoods settlements that lacked social support structures were the only places where devastating poverty flourished (Russell 201). Rather than evaluating individuals with empathy, James indulges stereotypes of European immigrants common in America, thus revealing an often overlooked aspect of racism in *Letters.*
Addressing early American contextualization and definition of the American Dream, Cal Jillson writes of Crèvecoeur:

Crèvecoeur was concerned both to praise the benefits of life in America to potential immigrants and to assure native-born Americans that it was reasonable to continue welcoming strangers to the newly independent nation. Some Americans were concerned that immigrants carried monarchical and aristocratical ideas, attitudes, and habits that might pollute republican America. Crèvecoeur argued that immigrants came not to recreate their past, but to find their future.

(56)

This simplistic interpretation of *Letters* ignores both the racism in James’s epistles as well as the implication that the people under James’s judgment are not monarchical or aristocratical, but fringe settlers that live in isolation. James frequently comments on the supposed predisposition of Europeans that reach American shores. While Germans are “much wiser, in general…than almost all other Europeans” (57), “The Irish do not prosper so well; they love to drink and to quarrel; they are litigious, and soon take to the gun, which is the ruin of everything” (58). James gives varied and vague reasons for the discrepancies between different ethnicities but the common factor among unsuccessful Europeans is the gun. Crèvecoeur uses this as a symbol of isolation, independence, and frontier existence. He elaborates on the frontier precursors to civilized community: “This surrounding hostility immediately puts the gun into their hands….These new manners being grafted on the old stock, produce a strange sort of lawless profligacy, the impressions of which are indelible” (47-48). Factors that threaten community cohesion such as reliance on hunting, fierce independence, reluctance towards farming, and
disobedience of law prove to be social ailments in James’s estimation. Jeff Osborne
addresses James’s concept of certain immigrant groups:

Rather than identifying with the misery arising from the abject poverty of the
Russian boor and Hungarian peasant, James appropriates their “wretched” bodies
with his self-conception of a happy American rural landowner, and, as a
landowner, with that class of white men who could legally call themselves
citizens. (545)

James writes of these European backwoodsmen, “They are a kind of forlorn hope,
preceding by ten or twelve years the most respectable army of veterans which come after
them. In that space, prosperity will polish some, vice and law will drive off the rest”
(43). These migrating individuals and families that clear the woods and bankrupt the soil
cannot be accommodated in the agricultural communities expanding throughout the
northeastern American settlements.

James praises particular immigrant groups that he believes integrate more
thoroughly in to local communities. Germans, in this context, “hire themselves to some
of their wealthy landmen, and in that apprenticeship learn everything that is necessary.
They attentively consider the prosperous industry of others, which imprints in their minds
a strong desire of possessing the same advantages” (57). For Crèvecoeur, this process of
paced social mimicry becomes the only way for an aspiring farmer to possess local land
management knowledge. Howard S. Russell examines the decline of indentured
servitude during this period and claims that farm apprentices were often treated well:
“Such a boy was likely to be well treated, educated much like a son, and at twenty-one
given a good start in life by his employer” (194). A recent immigrant to America,
Andrew, a Scotsman, owns nothing but desires lodging and work with a farmer in order to learn the trade and eventually procure his own land. After sheltering him for a period of time, James finds work for him on other local farms and acts as an advisor to Andrew. Andrew comes to him at a point, and James writes:

After having been twelve months at Mr. P.R.’s, and having received his own and his family’s wages, which amounted to eighty-four dollars; he came to see me on a week-day, and told me, that he was a man of middle age, and would willingly have land of his own . . . . his son, to whom he would give his land, would then maintain him. (74)

Crèvecoeur’s anecdotal success story lays out a formula for aspiring farmers to follow that involves an apprenticeship system comprised of lodging, limited payment, and the ability to eventually invest in land after a period of work in a particular locality. After years of working for local farmers, Andrew’s story ends:

Soon after, further settlements were made on the road, and Andrew, instead of being the last man towards the wilderness, found himself in a few years in the middle of a numerous society. He helped others as generously as others had helped him . . . . The second year he was made overseer of the road, and served on two petty juries, performing as a citizen all the duties required of him. (81)

These last two social responsibilities finalize Andrew’s transcendence from farmer to community member. Interestingly, this narrative from the late 18th-century mirrors a contemporary system of farm apprentice programs designed to affordably support community-oriented farms, as well as to enable up and coming farmers to obtain land. Programs such as WOOFF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) as well as state
farming organizations have grown and promoted apprentice arrangements with organic and sustainable farmers that appear similar to the system Crèvecoeur portrays. These programs are currently growing in popularity due to their theoretical capability to protect farms from development, and to educate and empower another generation of farmers. Unfortunately, at least in Crèvecoeur’s estimation, these communal systems prove fragile in the face of social turmoil.

James’s writing develops a panicked tone in Letter XII, “Distress of a Frontier Man.” At this point in the narrative the social turmoil caused by the impending revolution has come to James’s rural farming community and seemingly torn it in apart. He writes, “what is man when no longer connected with society; or when he finds himself surrounded by a convulsed and half dissolved one?” (192). Not only does James’s neutrality on the issue of rebellion potentially instigate aggression from both sides, but the fact that he cannot fulfill his role as a farmer in the absence of social order causes him severe anxiety. To James, it proves impossible to maintain his identity as a community-oriented farmer, therefore he seeks the closest community safe from the civil divide caused by revolutionary sentiments; an Indian village. He does not embrace the possibility of a homesteader, or “backwoodsmen” lifestyle, but desires social support and stability. James describes his approach towards integrating into the Indian village: “As soon as possible after my arrival, I design to build myself a wigwam, after the same manner and size with the rest, in order to avoid being thought singular, or giving occasion for any ralleries . . .” (215). While Crèvecoeur fled back to Europe at this point, his fictional narrator transplants his family and agricultural practices into another
community, subsequently sacrificing his individuality in order to integrate into another culture (215). Pamela Regis writes:

Like the specimen Andrew the Hebridean, James is an inland freehold farmer.

His grandfather shared the essentials of Andrew’s history – the hard work to clear the land, to build a house and barn, to leave a freehold to his children….The new definition of the term ‘American’ must await the effects of the climate and government in James’s new, aboriginal neighborhood, where he will repeat his grandfather’s history. (130)

This desire to see James as a cyclical American figure proves problematic because the details regarding James’s grandfather are few and vague. Following this logic, if James’s grandfather had played a role similar to Andrew, then James’s father would not have homesteaded, as James records (43). Regis continues, “Thus, Crèvecoeur leaves us with an image of an American fleeing into the un govermed wilderness, into a place that has only natural history, to preserve his American-ness” (131). The American does flee from the civil strife of the impending revolution but he does not flee into the untamed wilderness that he considered degrading to man’s social and agricultural consciousness. James’s American identity is cast as a farmer first and foremost, and Crèvecoeur’s parting reflection is that James’s agrarian lifestyle that embraces productive social and agricultural systems can only evolve amid functional, cooperative communities.

Crèvecoeur leaves behind an account (albeit a sometimes embellished and fictionalized account) of sustainable agricultural growth in America, and James’s identities of farmer and community member serve a synonymous purpose in Letters. James celebrates communities without complicated hierarchical social structures or
divisive allegiances to entities that exist outside the locality. After revealing that he would rather see his children engage in farming over any other occupation, James writes:

> Were they to grow up where I am now situated, even admitting that we were in safety; two of them are verging toward that period in their lives, when they must necessarily take up the musket, and learn, in that new school, all the vices which are so common in the armies. Great God! close my eyes for ever, rather than I should live to see this calamity! May they rather become inhabitants of the woods. (222)

The implication here is unclear regarding whether James would rather see his children live as homesteaders in the backwoods or as the indigenous Americans, but regardless, both alternatives are far superior to military service. James conceptualizes this occupation of armed combatant as horribly disruptive and destructive to the agricultural communities that he considers an exceptional component of American opportunity. James chooses the cultivation of his agricultural methods among Native American villages; communities that will hopefully remain free from counterproductive political loyalties. While it would prove naïve to imply that such utopian models could be replicated to an exact extent in America today, it would serve us to observe what American agricultural systems looked like before self-sufficiency and individualism became masculine goals of achievement, rather than tools with which to strengthen a community.
CHAPTER TWO. “THE GREAT HUSBANDRY OF PROVIDENCE”: SUSAN FENIMORE COOPER’S AGRICULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN RURAL HOURS

Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* (1850) captivated audiences and popularized the agriculturally-inspired seasonal narrative structure that would reappear in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), as well as Henry Beston’s works from the first half of the twentieth-century. Many scholars, such as Rochelle Johnson, Daniel Patterson, and Lucy B. Maddox have discussed the cultural framework of her approach to the land and community that she cherished; however, this connection has seldom been extended beyond the flora and fauna of the region to her discussion of the utilization of field and forest for agricultural purposes. Although readers often project modernized concepts of sustainability and stewardship back upon environmental writers of the past, this desire to locate early environmentalists in the American literary tradition can prove misleading. Cooper certainly was critical of what she perceived as destructive land management practices; however, she proudly navigates an agricultural region that existed solely because of its exploitation of natural spaces. *Rural Hours* proposes that desirable agricultural spaces exist as zones of overlap between native ecology and cultural utilization of the land that can only grow outward in a conscionable manner from socially cohesive and environmentally educated communities. This land ethic, articulated clearly by an educated, observant woman in the “first major work of American literary bioregionalism” (Buell 406), is now reappearing in the rhetoric of progressive agriculturalist circles, and it would prove wise to investigate how these environmental principles permeate the American agricultural imagination.
While much of *Rural Hours* discusses agricultural spaces regarding both the landscape and the families that exist in and around Cooperstown, New York, Cooper herself was hardly a typical Northeastern rural woman. Although Susan was born to a “nouveau riche” family, as Alan Taylor discusses, the fortune provided by the DeLancey’s did not endure and the financial standing of the Coopers fluctuated sporadically during Susan’s youth. Wayne Franklin comments on the family’s dwindling resources at the point when Susan was roughly ten years old: “At one point possessed of immense acreages and several houses, he [James] now, after all, could only afford rented quarters” (364). Susan’s recollections from this period do not seem to indicate that this financial instability affected her, and many of her childhood memories seem rather jovial. Cooper would later write about country strolls with her grandfather, John Peter DeLancey, and their travels through the farms and fields (Franklin 224). Troubled as James’s finances may have been, the family lived in Europe from 1826 to 1833, spending large portions of time in both France and Italy (Cunningham 346). While James’s motivations were partially driven by the financial desire for self-promotion, Susan regardless would spend her later days in Cooperstown as a worldly, well-educated woman without the burden of working for her livelihood. This position of relative privilege enabled her to observe a broad spectrum of local culture by affording her time, resources, and a wealth of environmentally educational publications provided by James. Cooper writes of a day out visiting with a friend, “we set off in the morning, after breakfast, and drove to the village of B – Green, where we arrived about noon” (95). This Tuesday excursion, from which she returned the same day, was outside the realm of possibility for most farm women. Nancy Grey Osterud, in her study of nineteenth-
century New York farm women, observes that while most women managed their daily activities while visiting with neighbors, “The temporal rhythms of social life corresponded with their spatial patterns. Daily visiting was quite local, unless guests stayed overnight” (234). The fact that Cooper lacked the daily responsibilities of most other rural women proves fortunate for readers of *Rural Hours*, without which her detailed observations of regional farming families would not exist.

Although Cooper addresses the native ecology of the landscape, she proudly visualizes her region as an agricultural one first and foremost, and defines it in terms of cultural and environmental overlap: “The whole country . . . partakes of the same general character; mountain ridges, half tilled, half wood, screening cultivated valleys, sprinkled with farms and hamlets” (138-39). She continues using the language of intertwined landscapes: “The whole surface of the country is arable. . . . This general fertility, this blending of the fields of man and his tillage with the woods, the great husbandry of Providence, gives a fine character to the country” (139). Cooper’s writing communicates a conflicted agricultural consciousness in regards to the current state of the land because while she considers farming a sacred and admirable endeavor, she decries the level of deforestation often involved in the process. Throughout most of *Rural Hours* she criticizes those who would quickly bankrupt the land rather than apply it to the prolonged good of community and wildlife. She writes:

> It is not surprising, perhaps, that a man whose chief object in life is to make money, should turn his timber into bank-notes with all possible speed. . . . Mature trees, young saplings, and last year’s seedlings, are all destroyed at one blow of
the axe or by fire; the spot where they have stood is left, perhaps, for a lifetime without any attempt at cultivation, or any endeavor to foster new wood. (132)

Cooper considers the exploitation of woodlots far more palatable when the land continues to facilitate agriculture, wildlife habitat, or a combination of both.

This concept of farmland as conducive to both anthropocentric and ecological demands pervades Rural Hours. Cooper laments the decline of quail:

This is not according to their usual habits, for generally they are found to prefer the farm lands to the forest, feeding on different kinds of grains, building about fences, and rarely resorting to the woods. . . . Instead of fearing the advance of civilization, they would delight in it, were it not for the sportsman’s gun. (6)

The theory of agriculture as productive due to its communal functions, and hunting and other forms of exploitation as destructive individualism, is an idea that I will return to. She articulates these same principles in other passages in which she discusses the use of forest land for agricultural purposes such as grazing space for livestock: “The cattle, both cows and horses, seem partial to the grass beneath the locusts; it is amusing to watch them make their way in and out among a grove of young locust armed with thorns” (20).

Cooper envisions this overlap of agricultural utilization with forest and habitat preservation as environmentally ethical, as well as advantageous to social demands.

Cooperstown and Otsego County serve as appropriate settings to observe these social relationships to agriculture due to a cultural consistency with other Northeastern farming regions. While circumstances exist (the aristocratic Cooper family itself, heirs of the town founder William Cooper) that complicate the image of Cooperstown alongside other largely egalitarian Northeastern farming communities, the agriculturally-oriented
The cultural and economic foundation of Cooperstown persisted into the late 1840’s when Susan Cooper composed *Rural Hours*. Taylor discusses the evolution of farming in Otsego County and postulates, “Although new workshops and textile manufactories had proliferated during the 1810’s on the upper Susquehanna and its Oaks Creek Tributaries (in the towns of Otsego, Hartwick, and Middlefield), the county remained overwhelmingly rural and agricultural” (386). This agricultural framework enabled Cooperstown to perpetuate itself by maintaining internal momentum through cycles of farm ownership. Hal Barron comments on the communal incentive to uphold agricultural economics and culture when he writes that although data appears somewhat sparse, “those studies that do exist, especially the recent work of Donald L. Winters, indicate that the agricultural ladder toward farm ownership was a more well-traveled reality for northern rural workers than the occupational ladder was for laborers in nineteenth-century cities” (9). Although farming communities, Cooperstown included, suffered from periods of fluctuation between prosperity and depression, the farming economy and broader agricultural ethos proved to be self-perpetuating. Taylor comments on The Cooper family’s return from Europe to Cooperstown in 1833, and James’s subsequent disappointment in the rural population’s rejection of elitist leadership: “Indeed, during his seven-year absence in Europe, America had grown more insistently devoted to egalitarian rhetoric, utilitarian ethics, possessive individualism, and social and geographic mobility” (425). James’s disappointment acts as an indicator that Cooperstown did in fact remain more closely tied to the culture of surrounding New York farm communities, rather than to Cooper’s Eurocentric ideals. However, some interesting discrepancies do arise between Susan’s observations of women’s absence in the fields, and journals from the
period that chronicle women’s contributions in all farm labors (Osterud 140-41).

Regardless of social nuances in Cooperstown, the village appears to closely resemble other farming communities in the Northeast where expansion and population growth reached a relatively stabilized condition in the middle of the nineteenth-century, as opposed to the agricultural population boom that occurred further into the Mid-West (Barron 12-15).

Cooper’s location of a productive community falls between drastically different worlds that represent polemical ideals and social structures. Rochelle Johnson comments in her introduction to *Rural Hours* that the text “presents what ultimately emerges as Cooper’s argument for a sustainable balance between human culture and its natural surroundings. Her ideal society is a rural one, carefully poised between the receding wilderness and a looming industrialization” (ix). This sustainable society exists solely because of an agricultural foundation that draws resources, income, and sense of place from the land, while (ideally) keeping environmental degradation to a minimum, and even contributing to biodiversity. Cooper discusses agricultural growth in the region while pondering a census report:

The growth of the inland region, to which our valley belongs, will prove, in most respects, a good example of the state of the country generally. . . . Neither do we possess a railroad or canal within our limits. We have not even a navigable river within our bounds; steamboats and ships are as great strangers as the locomotive.

(318)

The census report included in the text clearly shows that local income was derived largely from livestock and grain crops, potatoes, orchard fruits, maple syrup, as well as from a
handful of trades necessary to any settled population and to agricultural manufacturing and processing (319-20). She claims that the train brings industrialization and a consumer-oriented disconnection from the land, therefore implying that Otsego County has escaped this tragic fate. This distrust of industrial harbingers is typical of nineteenth-century writers concerned with the environment. Leo Marx describes the image of the train as “a power that does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city. It is a centrifugal force that threatens to break down, once and for all, the conventional contrast between these two styles of life” (32). While Cooper embraces this resistance to industrialization, she does not define landscapes through the traditional binaries of urban and pastoral, “symbolic landscapes” (Marx 9). She artistically utilizes the symbolic qualities of the landscape, but the region remains quite real. She brings it to life through the detailed and educated observations of plants and wildlife, as well as by describing the families that utilized the land not for pastoral or whimsical purposes, but to sustain their families and make a living.

Cooper’s language regarding regional growth appears vague at times; however, considering the environmental concerns throughout *Rural Hours* and the lament of “unnatural” speculation, the entirety of the narrative endorses a more “natural” paced agricultural growth that maintains environmental integrity. She claims, “The advance of this county has always been steady and healthful; things have never been pushed forward with the unnatural and exhausting impetus of speculation, to be followed by reaction” (318). Her rhetoric regarding the negative impact of speculation did not exist in a vacuum at the time; her concerns echoed sentiments expressed by others writers involved in rural and agricultural social development: “The quest for greater and easier profits
bothered New England agriculturalists, and beginning in the 1840’s, editorials in regional farm periodicals began decrying the speculative urge” (Barron 32). Johnson suggests, in “Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* and the ‘Natural’ Refinement of American Culture,” “Cooper’s careful attention to her surroundings also leads her to assert her preservationist ethic and to chastise her society for the lack of moral progress that she associates with their consumption mentality” (60). Although taking agricultural manipulation of the landscape into account complicates “preservationist” rhetoric on Cooper’s part, her nuanced vision of compatibility between environmental considerations and agricultural market demands creates a rich portrait that defies the boundaries of conventionally canonized works from this period.

In contrast to the mythologized image of homesteaders and self-sufficient farmers of past centuries, farmers in rural nineteenth-century New York, and the Northeast in general, maintained properties that remained small compared to farmers further west. These farms provided many necessities for a family, while also existing as an extension of a community and as a consumer of and contributor to American and Atlantic markets. William Cronon, while discussing the vast differences between seventeenth-century New England farm towns and their nineteenth-century capitalist successors, locates the distinct point of evolution in the Colonial agricultural perspective when farmers began to see their output as marketable product: “Even if a colonist never sold an improved a piece of property, the increase in hypothetical value at market was an important aspect in the accumulation of wealth” (77). This capital-oriented approach to farming was not a social one way street. Farmers relied on local crafts people for an assortment of products, from rifles to spoons. Barron observes, “As long as the agricultural economy did not decline,
there was a fixed demand for millers, teamsters, and blacksmiths. Consequently, the numbers of these tradesmen who provided services for area farmers did not fall off until the 1890’s” (73). Consequently, community members responded adamantly whenever an obstacle to the culture and the economy of agriculture presented itself.

In the mid nineteenth-century many Northeastern states felt threatened by the westward migration of farming families. Many communities and state organizations developed an oral and written tradition of agriculturalist ethos that sought to promote healthy maintenance of farm land, financial incentive to stay in the Northeast, and a collective “producer ethic.” Barron comments on the heated rhetoric that was triggered by the land speculation occurring further into the west: “In addition to pointing out the moral, if not always the financial, failings of those who left, New England agriculturalists tried to stem the tide of exodus by improving the economic position of local agriculture through agricultural reforms” (32-33). This sense of communal investment regarding the security of agricultural economies is present throughout Rural Hours. Cooper utilizes the language of reform that addresses poor land use techniques, and also proposes environmentally and agriculturally sustainable practices (Barron 43).

Timothy Sweet discusses globalism in Rural Hours and draws a parallel between Cooper’s work and that of her grandfather, William Cooper, and writes of the elder, “He recognized, moreover, that the self-sufficiency of the yeoman farmer depended first on trans-local market relations, claiming (though not always enacting) a laissez-faire approach” (542). This desire to imagine the Otsego region as one comprised of yeoman farmers that contribute and respond to market demands influences Susan Cooper’s work. This rhetoric resembles a type of rural propaganda and reinforces the idea that local
farmers produce necessary commodities and profit by their labors, but that they also largely provide for themselves and subsequently exist in an ideal rural setting. She writes:

Probably there is no part of the earth, within the limits of a temperate climate, which has taken the aspect of an old country so soon as our native land; very much is due, in this respect, to the advanced state of civilization in the present age, much to the active, intelligent character of the people, and something, also, to the natural features of the country itself. (89)

While Cooper’s concept of the land as native to Anglo-Americans proves problematic to say the least, and subsequently ignores the fact that many agricultural regions were not only inhabited, but also farmed, by Native communities (Cronon 56). I acknowledge the troublesome use of the term “native” in this context, but I’ll not explore it further here. This agrarian philosophy resembles other writings from the mid nineteenth-century that promote pride in both place and profession in response to out-migration. Barron writes, “The virtues of competence and independence and the scorn for speculation expressed in the New England agricultural press embodied a kind of producer’s ethic, which also held little truck with those who moved to the city” (33). *Rural Hours* communicates a similar “producer’s ethic” when Cooper discusses local farmers in context with the community as a whole, as well when she evaluates environmental and agricultural competence. She repeatedly reinforces a sense of accomplishment regarding locals that perpetuate the knowledge and skills necessary to utilize the environment for personal and social gain. Gardens, to Cooper, not only provide sustenance, but a local sense of industry and aesthetic productivity as well. These gardens resemble a more suburban form of
agriculture: “The good people of the village are many of them busy now with their
gardens, and pleasant, cheerful work it is. From the time of Adam down, it has always
looked well to see man, or woman either, working in a garden” (28). ********

Johnson analyzes Cooper’s sense of natural history in Passions for Nature when
she claims, “Readers recognize that natural phenomena do not exist in isolation but rather
in a historical continuum of organic processes and representations of language” (32).
Cooper extends this ecologically-oriented sense of progression to human social networks
as well. As in the above state passage from Rural Hours, she considers industrial growth,
heralded by penetrating machinery that carves and pollutes the landscape, “unnatural.”
Industrialization and land speculation fracture, rather than build communities in search of
capital gain. She develops the idea of organic communal growth during her five page
long discussion of graveyards. She writes:

Small family burying-grounds, about the fields, are very common; sometimes it is
a retired spot, neatly enclosed, or it may be only a row of graves in one corner of
the meadow, or orchard. . . .The custom of burying on the farm has its origin, no
doubt, in the peculiar circumstances of the early population, thinly scattered over
a wide country. (179)

Burying-grounds bind coalescing communities to the landscape by serving as physical
representations of past generations. It is not coincidental that Cooper renders these
passages in agricultural language. These markers, as part of a culturally-utilized
environmental space, accumulate according to social growth and literally serve as a root
system for a population that, ideally to Cooper, heeds communal and environmental
bonds to place. She continues, commenting again on the “unnatural” aspect of industrial expansion that disturbs this social root system by proposing grave relocation:

We hear from time to time plans for changes which include the breaking up of those church-yards in the towns. We are told that those old graves are unsightly objects; that a new square on the spot would be more agreeable to the neighborhood; that a street at this particular point would be a convenient thoroughfare, and would make A, B, or C richer men by some thousands... Man is the natural guardian of the grave. (180)

Cooper considers this desecration of sacred ground and the trust of past community members to signal the beginning of a reproachable disconnection between society and landscape, as well as a step toward an entirely materialistic culture.

Cooper claims that the preservation of burying grounds creates beacons of cultural importance to community members that serve no purpose to outsiders: “The tombs themselves have all a natural interest for the people of the place, but there are none to attract the attention of a stranger” (182). This organic construction of place-based identity mirrors natural processes where death creates ecological opportunities. Johnson, in “The ‘Natural’ Refinement,” analyzes Cooper’s concept of death as a recognized step in constructive ecological processes:

By focusing on the natural renewal process in forests – explaining that decaying trees help support other life forms in the forest and that young trees often grow in the shadows and by the moldering trunks of dead ones – Cooper works to educate readers about the ways in which forests replenish themselves when they are left alone to do so. (61)
After a longer passage regarding graves in a place of “wild condition, upon the border of the forest” (181), Cooper chronicles the process of community members dying and their burial, and the subsequent necessity of a church to commemorate the place and to create a new space for social networks (182). To Cooper, this process of death within the forests takes place within human networks as well. She writes, “The spot soon lost its forest character, however, for the older trees were all felled; possibly some of them may have been used as timber in building the little church” (182). In this observation, both ecologically regrettable but fascinating, Cooper takes solace from the fact that the timber did not entirely contribute to capital gain, but that it contributed to the creation of a communal space that pays credence to the old while sustaining the new.

The conceptualization of social space in Rural Hours often stands in contrast to the discussions of individuality (different from the relative independence of many farming families) and isolation regarding both cultural and natural circumstances. Rochelle Johnson, in “Placing Rural Hours,” warns of metaphoric readings of the text: “Rarely are Cooper’s descriptions symbolically encoded, based in allegory or analogy, or offered in support of a concept” (68). While many of Cooper’s anecdotes and observations may not function as metaphor, the consistent descriptive language of human, animal, and human/animal overlapping interaction illuminates a value system that reinforces communal structure, and remains suspicious of isolation. She expresses an appreciation for many animal species throughout the text, most notably in her many pages devoted to birds interacting with one another and with humans, but she saves a particular revulsion for a few species that exist in a state of relative solitude. She writes of spiders:
Few people like spiders. . . . The spider, on the contrary, lives by snares and plots; he is at the same time very designing and very suspicious, both cowardly and fierce; he always moves stealthily, as though among enemies, retreating before the last appearance of danger, solitary and morose, holding no communion with his fellows. (62)

Qualities that Cooper deems discordant pertain less to the spider’s innate functions, and more to the manner in which the spider orients itself among other species in its environment. Her spider is unlikeable because it exists in a solitary space, (mistakenly) appearing to not contribute to any larger ecological framework. While at times her work does not function through metaphor, the narrative often simply does not need to because Cooper herself draws direct connections for the reader. She explains how the environment directly influences certain species of spiders, and makes the subsequent connection to human social environments:

Upon one of these violets we found a handsome spider, one of the kind that live on flowers and take their color from them . . . in their gayest attire, these creatures are repulsive. It gives one the chilling idea of the gloomy solitude of a prison, when we remember that spiders have actually been petted by men shut out from better companionship. (61)

This passage intertwines the human and the animal; both exist in an individualistic sphere and do not contribute to social or natural ecosystems. Similarly, Cooper casts suspicion on people that exist outside of social boundaries.

Cooper expresses a critical attitude toward facets of her communal environment that represent older, individualistic, and socially disconnected homesteading practices.
Commenting on the progression of local architecture, she writes, “First in the order of time ranks, of course, the log-cabin, such as are still seen to-day in the hills, or on the skirts of the woods” (237). She analyzes the log cabin, found a few miles outside of Cooperstown, as a symbol of the early settler that existed in relative isolation. Social relics in these sparsely populated spaces were never entirely absorbed into village life, and therefore represent unincorporated human presence in the environment. The cabin may at times appear as a pleasant living space. She recalls an example of a cabin whose tenant was never discovered, but where a bible lays on the table and acts as a symbol of connection to social culture (238). Often, however, because cabin tenants exist at a distance from communal circumstances, “all log-cabins have not such tenants; where the inmates are idle and shiftless, they are wretched holes, full of disorder and filth” (238). The subsequent explanation of architectural styles, which evolved as the area developed, never again utilizes such toxic language regarding human living spaces. Cooper uses cabins as obvious markers of early settler lifestyles, and subsequently does the same with hunting.

Cooper recounts a lengthy anecdotal story about social interaction with disappearing mega fauna, and the disconnection imposed by the presence of the hunter. After theorizing the loss of deer in the area, she writes, “A pretty little fawn had been brought in very young from the woods, and nursed and petted by a lady of the village until it had become as tame as possible” (149). A benevolent retired hunter and his dogs intrude on the scene and disrupt this sentimentality. The fact that the man retired the trade is significant; his mere presence destroys the harmony of the fawn’s integration: “The dog, as it approached the spot where the fawn lay, suddenly stopped; the little
animal saw him, and started to its feet. It had lived more than half its life among the dogs of the village, and had apparently lost all fear of them; but it seemed now to know instinctively that an enemy was at hand” (149-50). The ensuing drama asks the readers to suspend their belief far more than other anecdotal tales throughout the text in a manner that mirrors the exaggerated or fabricated interactions between human and animal realms in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*. Cooper’s second-hand story describes a scene of chaos with the fawn in the lead, and the dogs, the hunter, and the concerned lovers of the fawn in pursuit. Also in keeping with Crèvecoeur, the reliability of this tale is less important than the fact that she considered it significant in terms of interactions between her social and physical environment. This moment in the text serves as an example of the mutual demands of the social and ecological: “Her domestic-influenced nature writing, in fact, indicates an important sub-genre, which I call sentimental ecology, whereby the demands of the community and domestic life are intertwined, much like models of ecosystems, with demands of the natural environment” (Magee 28). This tale of a fawn adopted by the community does not end harmoniously. Another hunter, this time an individual practicing his craft in the forest, deals a blow to both the environment and the community. After recounting how the fawn escapes into the forest, potentially safe, she writes:

Before many hours had passed a hunter presented himself to the lady whose pet the little creature had been, and showing a collar with her name on it, said that he had been out in the woods, and saw a fawn at a distance; the little animal, instead of bounding away as he had expected, moved toward him; he took aim, fired, and
shot it to the heart. . . . The bay crossed by the frightened creature has been called ‘Fawn’s Bay.’ (151)

Interestingly, she informs the reader that the scene of this spectacle came to bear a name that references both an ecological and social loss. Although the fawn bore a collar, a socially recognized symbol of property or ownership, the hunters do not observe the implied social expectations until after the damage has been done.

Cooper discusses the concept of private property and echoes Crèvecoeur in her insistence on the importance of educated land owners and the benefits of an agricultural consciousness. After she explains that children and adults at times will thoughtlessly take fruit from the yard of a grower in the neighborhoods, she remarks, “It is the same case with flowers. Many people seem to consider them as public property, although cultivated at private expense” (80). She develops this idea further and articulates a specific distinction between growers and those outside that social network:

No one who had a flower border of his own would be likely to offend in this way; he would not do so unwittingly, at least; and if guilty of such an act, it would be premeditated pilfering. When people take pains to cultivate fruits and flowers for themselves, they have some idea of their value, which can only be justified by the owner’s regard for them. (80-81)

Cooper hypothesizes that the act of growing any product, even on a garden scale, serves as an educational venture that endows an individual with a sense of value for what the soil can produce, and sense of respect for property boundaries. This respect for the fruits of the land and the fruits of labor turn individuals into good neighbors. Gardeners also make generous neighbors, as she explains, “another common instance of the good effect
of gardening may be mentioned: - it naturally inclines one to be open-handed” (81).

After many examples of charity and generosity benefiting the poor and disadvantaged, she writes, “he bestows on some friendly rival a portion of his rarest seed, a shoot from his most precious root!” (81). In Cooper’s estimation, not only do gardeners make productive community members, but they also educate others and inspire both environmental and social awareness.

She extends the idea of anthropocentric and socially-constructed environmental valuation beyond the village gardens to the wilder landscape. Richard Magee comments, “The narrative of community, which crucially informs the sentimental ecology of Cooper’s work, culminates in an environmental awareness that transcends aesthetic appreciation to become a conservationist ethos” (33). Cooper develops this idea of communal principles facilitating natural preservation at certain points in *Rural Hours.*

She writes of the trust placed in the owner of an old pine grove:

The preservation of those old pines must depend entirely upon the will of their owner; they are private property; we have no right to ask that they may be spared, but it is impossible to behold their hoary trunks and crested heads without a feeling of hope that they may long continue unscathed, to look down upon the village which has sprung up at their feet. (119)

Cooper observes that the benevolence or the wisdom of the land owner has caused the preservation of this pine grove. Her language implies that the owner’s responsibility is not simply to a singular unit, but the trees themselves, therefore extending a communal framework to a landscape with multiple ecological components. The decision of this individual subsequently benefits the village as a whole by maintaining the old pines that
do not function solely as aesthetic satisfaction, but also as a reminder of the loss incurred by thoughtless destruction of old-growth forest land.

Throughout *Rural Hours* Cooper advocates for the preservation of environmental spaces that serve multiple purposes. Agricultural is her primary concern, but she expresses interest in maintaining nuanced landscapes that contribute to agricultural markets while also preserving some degree of ecological diversity and subsistence for both people and wildlife. When she discusses meadows, half-wild hayfields in which many species of plant life proliferate, she describes ecological and aesthetic benefits that do not appear in her discussions of grain fields. When Cooper observes the uniformity of grain fields she utilizes the language of commodification, and disregards any attribute other than a deceitful aesthetic: “It is like a piece of shaded silk which the salesman throws off a little, that you may better appreciate the effect” (76). However, a meadow “is a delicate embroidery in colors, which you must examine closely to understand all its merits” (76). She then indulges a long list of native and non-native species of grasses and other plants: “the red strawberry in June. . . . The timothy is also an imported grass; so is the meadow-grass considered as the best of all for pasture…and the canary grass, which yields a seed for birds” (76). While the presence of invasive vs. native plant species is complicated, and addressed by many critics, Cooper does not make ethical distinctions when discussing the utility of different species in an agricultural framework. The meadows and grazing lands serve as diverse ecological and agricultural zones, regrettably deforested, but reclaimed by the demands of both the anthropocentric and ecological. Lucy Maddox comments that the rhetoric of rural advocates at this time “was on the maintenance of what has been called the middle landscape, the settled and cultivated rural
areas that provided a site of social, aesthetic, demographic, and moral balance between the extremes of wilderness and city” (85). The beauty of Cooper’s writing is her ability to condense this discussion of balanced landscapes down to ecological observations that serve both the above-mentioned anthropocentric needs, as well as environmental concerns.

Many scholars and critics have praised the thoroughness of *Rural Hours* and Cooper’s ability to animate simple observations of seemingly insignificant facets of her environment. The strawberry, in one passage, becomes an example of how one small environmental constituent can serve multiple agricultural purposes. She writes, “Happily for us, the wild strawberries rather increase than diminish in cultivated lands; they are even more common among the foreign grasses of the meadow than within the woods” (88). Although meadows discourage certain native species by facilitating foreign ones, this space allows a versatile staple such as the strawberry to proliferate. She continues discussing the multi-purpose strawberry: “This wild harvest of fruit, a blessing to all, is an especial advantage to the poor; from the first strawberries in June, there is a constant succession until the middle of September. . . . Strawberries sell in the village at a shilling a quart” (88). Here she observes that this treat for the locally disenfranchised flourishes in the meadows. The meadow provides a socially acceptable space for the poor to find sustenance, and also to harvest and draw income. Danger is only imminent in this landscape when the desire for increased income from the land dictates that the ground be broken first by the plough, and then potentially by the industrial tools of mining. Cooper writes of the danger posed to these landscapes:
This spot has long been cleared of wood, and used as a wild pasture; but the soil has never yet been broken by the plough, and we have often paused here to note the singular sharpness on the lines. Quite recently they have begun to dig here for sand; and if they continue the work, the character of the place must necessarily be changed. (92)

Cooper’s systematic valuation of agricultural lands portrays a high regard for these meadows that not only serve multiple ecological and social functions, but that also preserve the natural contours, and subsequently the natural record of the landscape. Plowing the land for more commodity-oriented agricultural gains is regrettable but still socially acceptable. To Cooper, ventures such as mining, which serve only capital interests and bankrupt any environmental and social benefits of a landscape, prove morally fatal.

The recent attention to *Rural Hours* has contributed much to the study of American environmental literature, and it may one day allow this valuable narrative to receive attention that rivals Thoreau and other canonized mid-nineteenth-century writers. Such an elevation of the text would not be vain. Cooper has much to offer contemporary readers regarding nineteenth-century rural rhetoric of the environment and agriculture. While most consider Cooper an environmental writer, and bioregional writer as Buell claims, her region was predominantly an agricultural one that lay interconnected with the natural landscape. Reimagining Cooper as a writer of the agricultural, rather than a writer solely of the environmental or social, would facilitate a more thorough understanding of an author who’s interconnected environmental and agricultural concerns mirror those held by many today.
CHAPTER THREE. “THE STARRY PLOUGH”: TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNAL DISCONTINUITY IN HENRY BESTON’S NORTHERN FARM

Henry Beston (1888-1968) is predominantly known as the writer of The Outermost House (1928), the account of a year spent on Eastham beach on Cape Cod, and his only work to receive serious scholarly attention. Although most often associated with this regional Massachusetts narrative, Beston produced the majority of his non-fiction works, fairy tale collections, and articles during the later decades of his life spent in Nobleboro, Maine. Two decades after the publication of The Outermost House, he embarked on a similar project to capture the environmental and social nuances of one year in an agricultural community near the Maine coast. Northern Farm: A Chronicle of Maine (1948) consists of excerpts from Beston’s farm diary compiled alongside prose passages that investigate the minutiae of environmental, agricultural, and social dynamics. This book celebrates an increasingly elusive and place-based lifestyle that resists the discontinuity of urbanized and mechanized social momentum. He skillfully balances these environmental and social observations with dramatic meditations that express a sometimes nightmarish anxiety about the destructive capacities of the industrialized West. Northern Farm is populated by community members that interact with each other and with the landscape through patterns that encourage responsible utilization of the environment, thereby dislodging the community from dissociative, industrialized social spaces. Many contemporary writers echo this willingness to work within the mysteries of the natural world, as Wendell Berry comments on the modern agriculturalist’s fear of natural processes, and obsessive futurism: “When supposed future needs are used to justify misbehavior in the present, as is the tendency with us, then we
are both perverting the present and diminishing the future” (58). Beston conceptualizes communities anchored in small-scale farming as social spaces that strengthen bonds between the population and the land, and as models that provide permanency and stability in the face of an increasingly problematic industrial future. He also portrays a social system that directly mirrors the organicism of farming in its perpetuation of subsequent generations rooted within the ecological interconnectedness of land and community. Although scholars have largely ignored the agricultural framework of nature writers such as Beston, activists for food and ecological sustainability now seek to re-establish or emulate the communal structures that he participated in and artistically portrayed.

Henry Beston’s anxiety regarding the fight for resources in the industrialized West was not simply a topic of intellectual or academic interest, but a lived experience. He grew up in a bilingual English and French speaking Massachusetts home and had access to an enviable education at the private Adams Academy, and then at Harvard University where he earned a bachelors and a masters degree in English. He then taught English at the University of Lyons in France. Daniel Payne asserts that Beston, like other young Americans, developed an affinity for France and England that would lead them to contribute to the Allied effort in WWI (66). From 1914 to 1916 Beston served as an ambulance driver on the western front in France. The death and destruction that he witnessed permanently impacted his future writing career; he never ceased to decry the industrialization, mechanization, and greed that he considered to be the impetus of the war. Unlike many writers of the “Lost Generation,” Payne postulates, “Beston did not seek refuge in alcohol or sink into nihilistic despair. Instead, he found new sources of inspiration and renewal – nature and writing for children” (66). *The Outermost House*
emerges as his first major work outside of children’s literature after the war, and is
considered by Payne and other scholars to be a novel of healing, as well as the
solidification of Beston’s spiritual and artistic connection to natural landscapes. In 1931
Beston and his wife, Elizabeth Coatsworth, a nature and children’s fiction writer herself,
bought “Chimney Farm” in Nobleboro, Maine. It was here that they would summer and
move to permanently in 1944, and the place where he would draw inspiration for his
future works. Before moving to Chimney Farm, he and Elizabeth cultivated herb gardens
in the summer that inspired him to write Herbs and the Earth (1935), a narrative that
investigates human relationships to the land. Payne writes that in Herbs and the Earth
Beston embraced agriculture as a mode of living that allowed for connection to the land
and cyclical renewal: “Working in a garden or other agricultural pursuit is at once a
tangible act of creation and a symbolic one that signifies the human connection to the
earth’s continuing act of creation” (69). Living on this land year-round lead him to write
Northern Farm, “Beston’s final, quietly emphatic statement on what ails modern
civilization and what course is needed as a remedy” (Payne 70).

Examining the schism between observed environmental phenomena and
subsequent artistic rendition, Dana Phillips discusses what he considers the downfall of
most nature writing: “The bad faith of American nature writing is most evident in its
treatment of its own subject matter, the natural world, which it represents as alien, and
therefore as something impossible to address, much less capture in words” (219). He
uses a quotation from Northern Farm to illustrate the regrettably self-imposed inability of
nature writers to attain an organic relationship with their environmental subject matter.
Phillips quotes from a passage where Beston observes the falling snow: ““the sound
which snow makes against glass – that curious, fleecy pat and delicate whisper of touch which language cannot convey or scarce suggest’” (219). In the context of *Northern Farm* as a whole, this “self-admonishing passage” is merely an isolated instance where Beston attempts to render nature literally through a glass, darkly, so to speak. Throughout much of the narrative he transcends the problem that Phillips addresses by portraying an agricultural world where no artifice comes between anthropocentric and environmental relations.

When Beston describes workers in the fields, or any other instance than connects the human and environmental through agriculture, he writes in terms that convey certainty through experienced interrelation. He writes, “The scene thus set is vigorous and alive, and there is a classical rightness to it. It is far removed from the idiot world of vitamin pills. The field and the workers are one; they form an earthly unity, and share together the weight of the sun and the brushing of the wind” (141). Not only does he portray the land and workers as an emblematic unit, but the “scene” itself, the artistic boundary between the experience and the artistic interpretation, is active and alive. Berry examines the privileged relationship between the ecological circumstances of a farm, and those that stake their livelihood on direct interaction with the landscape, claiming that the healthy farm will resemble the healthy person or family, and that “It will belong where it is; the form of it will be a considerate response to the nature of its place; it will not have the look of an abstract idea of a farm imposed upon an area somewhere or other” (181). Beston’s agricultural writing transcends the disconnection between the author and the subject by weaving together the human and the ecological, as well as the dual modes of creation: art and farming.
His attention to solidarity between people and the earth also extends to communal relationships between social groups. Elaborating on “the need of men for a community to live in and live with”, he writes:

I suspect that if this open wound is to heal, it will have to heal like all wounds from the bottom, and that we shall have to begin at the beginning with the family and its obligations, with the village and its responsibilities, and with our universal and neglected duty to the earth. (134-35)

The entirety of *Northern Farm* pays credence to the farming community around Nobleboro, making it a far more social narrative than *The Outermost House*. Melanie Simo describes Nobleboro as Beston and Coatsworth found it. She states that the region was still rural and agricultural, and that even though certain traditions had fallen by the wayside, the communities still came together (178). She writes, “Some families were self-sufficient, but mowing, haying, harvesting, canning, ‘housing up’ for winter, and reopening the summer kitchen in spring might require help from a neighbor or two” (179). This rustic but social environment offered Beston ample inspiration to speculate not only about the many ways in which communities impact the land, but also how these social spaces mirror agriculture in their perpetuation of future generations. After meditating on government and “the quality of the human being produced by the political order and by the way of life occasioned by that order”, he writes, “There you are. Is that human being a conscious member of a community and willing to do his best by it” (65-66). Echoing the rhetoric of Susan Fenimore Cooper, he treats communities and agricultural spaces as inherently similar; social interactions are as diverse as those in the soil. Beston questions if this organic continuation is capable of perpetuating healthy
social principles. Dona Brown, investigating the multiple “back to the land” movements throughout American history and discussing the most recent food movement in Back to the Land, writes, “There is a new twist here. The focus on local eating has made self-sufficiency as much a communal goal as an individual one” (233). While this observation speaks to the modern, suburban food movements, agricultural writers such as Beston have long paid attention to the need for cohesion and perpetuation to sustain communities.

Beston utilizes agriculturally-oriented settings for most portrayals of social interaction throughout Northern Farm. He observes, after a Grange meeting, “Our Grange, moreover, accomplishes something whose importance is often overlooked in America; it mingles together in a social goodtime the elderly, the middle-aged, and the young of a community” (105). If the Nobleboro Grange no longer fulfills its historical function that was directly related to farming, it still acts a social space that unites familial generations in a rural community. Nobleboro served as an ideal rural setting for him to contemplate interaction within a community, and between that community and the landscape. An agrarian community at heart, the town no longer drew income solely from agriculture, and was not so far removed into the backwoods that it functioned in isolation from broader social trends. Simo explains that although Beston wrote much about the agricultural and rural character of the town, “he wrote about all these places without forgetting about the city, the nearest highway (U.S. Route 1), and developments in science, technology, and foreign affairs” (179).

While Nobleboro afforded him a glimpse into older modes of life that perpetuate intimate and stabilizing social structures, other New England farming communities that
did not have the privilege of tourism or a diversified economy would have appeared less idyllic. In isolated rural townships across New England, social cohesion suffered over the decades as the farm economy deteriorated, and farmers and their families labored seven days a week simply to sustain themselves. Kenneth MacLeish and Kimball Young composed a 1942 study for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in which they analyzed the small community of Landaff in the hills of western New Hampshire. They depict the town as almost entirely reliant on dairy farming, and isolated from White Mountains tourism or industrial economies. They observe many farm families, claiming, “Careful living and almost complete confinement to the place make possible a scant but fairly secure livelihood. However, these people require money and every such operator has other sources of cash, be they from garden produce, work on the roads, or other labor” (44). By the 1940’s it was almost impossible to make a reasonable living by agriculture alone in New England without access to markets or populations with disposable income. In contrast to this, Beston describes neighbors that have ample time to assist one another in a variety of tasks, showing that they had broken free, to an extent, of monotonously market-driven commodity farming.

Nobleboro resembled other rural but accessible New England towns that began to benefit from a growing tourism industry in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. These regions marketed their agricultural character and attracted summer vacationers that often paid to indulge in rural nostalgia, and to acquire locally produced goods (Russell 518). Many of the summer passages in Northern Farm address neighboring Damariscotta and its streets filled with farmers, tourism-savvy locals, fishermen, and tourists, among others. Beston writes, “More and more the town next
door takes on the summer look, and becomes a bewilderment of out-of-state cars, crowded stores, trailers parked on side streets, and visitors in gaudy and carefree summer cloths; with ‘ye olde’ something or other on Route 1” (178). While at times he denounces the tourist industry for its crowding of the region, he also comprehends the wisdom of local people that acquire seasonal income by selling local goods or lodging arrangements to travelers. He writes, “People who are connected with the ‘tourist trade’ are now busy everywhere, giving final touches to their cabins and rooms, and putting up road signs brightened with fresh paint” (116). This trend was certainly not isolated to coastal Maine.

In *Inventing New England*, Dona Brown discusses the economic transition to tourism in farming communities that either did not wish to engage in large-scale agriculture, or in the case of much of rural Maine, could not because of the terrain: “Objections to the state’s [Vermont] promotion of farm tourism came not from conservative advocates of old-fashioned subsistence farming, but from advocates of a more stream-lined, factorylike agriculture” (144). This phenomenon of rural residents and small farmers exploiting tourism as a way to resist industrialization is present in Beston’s passages regarding interaction between tourists and locals. Brown writes that in many agricultural areas in New England, Nobleboro included, farm tourism became an integral component of diversified farm systems (144). Beston’s permanent move to Maine serves as an example of how tourism can bolster and stabilize a community. He and his wife summered in Nobleboro and lived in a houseboat on Damariscotta Lake for a period of time before buying Chimney Farm (Simo 181). After becoming full-time residents, Beston and Coatsworth, hardly the picture of financially struggling farmers,
served as stewards to a piece of farm land, and served as a source of income for local farmers, artisans, and tradesmen that helped them maintain their property.

*Northern Farm* is full of anecdotal stories concerning not only community gatherings, but also many instances of Beston and Coatsworth visiting farmers, as well as farmers and neighbors contributing at Chimney Farm. He writes, “Our friend Louis French the plumber having come to help us. . . . Elizabeth and our neighbor Barbara Oliver were hunting the winter out of his last hiding places” (113). Farmer and neighbor Irving Oliver brings his horses for the ground tillage at Chimney Farm. Different apprentices live and work on the farm periodically over the years. Varied accounts of social interaction in the fields and homes of Nobleboro portray a community that cooperated to cultivate vegetables, hay, poultry, bee hives, and meat for sustenance and markets. A community with varied land-use techniques is better suited to provide for social necessities, and there exists little incentive to bankrupt the landscape of ecological vigor. Beston recognizes this principle and warns against its demise: “When farming becomes utilitarian, something perishes. Sometimes it is the earth life which dies under this ‘stand and deliver’ policy; sometimes it is the human beings who practice this economy” (45). Through the descriptions of Nobleboro and his neighbors, he serves as an advocate for diversified farming ventures and economies that help farmers avoid reliance on a continually labor-intensive activity such as dairy farming that perpetuates social isolation. Landaff, New Hampshire, the depressed community studied by MacLeish and Young, had access to dairy markets almost solely and was subsequently bound to a labor-intensive economy that degraded social cohesion. If Beston does romanticize the culture of farming and omit circumstances of rural poverty, he at least
resists the rhetoric of the “self-sufficient” farmer and acknowledges that both communal cooperation and reliance on diverse markets secure agrarian continuity. While these ecological and social principles help to sustain rural townships, they do not render a community immune to broader, national circumstances.

Although World War II rages far from New England, the local ramifications result in a decreased work force that subsequently inhibits the community’s ability to produce food and surplus for market. Like Crèvecoeur nearly two centuries earlier, Beston conceptualizes war as destabilizing. He records in his farm journal:

During the war years some of the hay could not be cut for lack of labor, and people burned over acreage in the spring. Last night, under a splendor of Northern Lights, a soldier-farmer who has taken a place on a hilltop burnt over a big field, and strange it was to see all that earthly and rosy glow of fire and rolling smoke. (82)

This image creates an artistic merger of the conflict zone and agricultural spaces. Obligation to the war effort forces this farmer-turned-soldier to destroy his personal, social, and ecological space. War exploits these agrarian populations for labor that otherwise helps to perpetuate social and spiritual security by fostering cohesion and feeding communities. Dona Brown, examining the contemporary food movement, analyzes propaganda that promotes food security: “From the beginning to the end of a long working day, the poster declares, the farmer guards our true ‘homeland security’ … with the old safeguard of food self-sufficiency” (232). *Northern Farm* certainly articulates this idea in the years after WWII, and claims that small, sustainable communities enable peace, rather than conflict:
A population of planters and farmers, moreover, can not leave its crops to shift for themselves and gather themselves together into the barns. The machine, on the contrary, can be left to shift for itself. It does not improve it, but it can be deserted on its concrete floor. Above all, the machine world is barren of that sense of responsibility which is the distinguishing spiritual mark and heritage of the long ownership of the land. I think history would agree that though spears may be beaten into pruning hooks, pruning hooks are less frequently beaten into spears. (179)

He emphasizes that agrarian communities cultivate peaceful modes of living, and that expanding industrialization not only perpetuates armed conflict, but that it also maintains an inherent capacity to corrupt the peaceful existence of societies that gain nothing from foreign wars.

Beston’s most pressing anxiety concerns industrialization and the resulting disconnection of individuals from communities and the earth. The narrative opens with the author leaving the city (likely Boston) on a train bound for his home in Maine. His meditations reflect a fear of American modernity and urbanization:

What had gone out of American life as one sees it in the city and the suburb? Essentially, thought I, musing by the window, a sense of direction. To use a metaphor, we were all of us passengers on a great ocean liner. . . . The ocean, however, is unknown, and no one, not a single soul, knows whither the ship is bound. Home. Going Home. (4)

Beston conceptualizes his home as a place where his actions have direct consequences on both the land and community. However, modernized spaces serve as realms in which
people live spiritually isolated from one another, and as non-landscapes that lack the capacity to produce an environmental or communal ethic. After getting back to Chimney Farm, he elaborates, “The consequence is that life and time and history become unnaturally a part of some endless and unnatural present, and violence becomes for some the only remedy. Here in the country, it all moves ahead again. Spring is not only a landmark, but it looks ahead to autumn, and winter forever looks forward to spring” (7). Beston’s rural framework of time consists of cyclical patterns that force inhabitants to consider the present as well as a predictable future; therefore, neither social nor environmental constituents ever appear alien or ungrounded. Everything always moves ahead “again” because the organic processes that led to the present are observable and repetitive. Agricultural inhabitants work and reside in ecological spaces that literally embody the past that they helped shape. These spaces also predict a future with which community members share a mutual, organic relationship.

Contemporary agricultural writers address modernity and industrialization, both of which have altered the agrarian world by provoking obsessive mechanization and disregard for people and landscapes alike. Wendell Berry examines the relationship between industrialization and agriculture, and claims, “farming has been harder to industrialize than manufacturing, and when industrialization has come, it has not brought shorter hours or greater ease or less worry” (59). Beston addresses these same concerns, albeit in more abstract terms, when he discusses the perils of increasing mechanization: “Yet what we must ask today is whether or not the mechanist strain has increased out of all bounds, and taken over an undue proportion of the way of life. It is well to use the wheel, but it is fatal to be bound to it” (170). He recognizes that industrialization offers
farmers technological efficiency, but that these innovations create agricultural systems that are paradoxically fragile. Mechanization also creates a barrier of artifice between farmers and not only the earth, but their local community as well.

The terrain of northern New England discourages mechanized monocultures and facilitates relatively small farms by virtue of its rugged character. MacLeish and Young discuss the continued use of horses for land tillage in Landaff, and record, “It is evident, then, that any extensive mechanization is extremely uncommon on these farms” (38). This landscape is continually utilized for resources, but never so heavily as to bankrupt the soil; therefore the ability to sustain a healthy agricultural system endures: “Landaff’s resource base – that is, the fields, pasture, and forest – is practically as productive as ever” (28). While farmers in Nobleboro enjoy more economic opportunity than those in Landaff, the same horse-powered farming helps support a robust landscape. In his praise of anthropocentric and organic relationships alike, Beston examines the reciprocal continuity that functions through interactions of human, animal, and soil, which the horse represents and the tractor disrupts: “The great creatures ploughed with animal goodwill, with a kind of honest and confident assurance that all was well in their equine world; one could see that they were as much at ease with Irving as Irving was with them. He has always taken pride in their handsome appearance” (121). In contrast with increasing industrial alteration of the landscape, reliance on animal labor helps to limit heavy cultivation of the land, adds fertility to the soil, and more importantly for Beston, provides a living, spiritual link to the landscape.

The rugged terrain of New England demands reciprocity in order to maintain soil fertility. Brian Donahue examines farmland restoration in Massachusetts and agricultural
traditions of New England, and claims, “Farmers in this district were never blessed with the kind of soil that could have endured such neglect. The evidence shows that they tilled the same fields year after year for generations, which indicates they manured it faithfully. Behind that manure stood the hay meadows” (121). Beston describes the meadows and hayfields as spaces where the maintenance of a healthy landscape caters to productive ecosystems:

The animal life of the hayfields is again coming into being. Going down to the pump at the pond, small leopard-frogs now scrambling out from beneath my feet here and there along the path. / Our first show of wild flowers has begun, and the familiar carpets of bluets or ‘Quaker Ladies’ are in bloom on the damp hillsides and in the old, wet grasslands still open in the woods. (121-22)

His attention to detail in the hay meadows reveals that the imagination can conceptualize an environmental space as one conducive to both agricultural and ecological demand, and that the combination of both can satisfy the human desire to occupy space in a conscionable manner. He also echoes Susan Fenimore Cooper when he discusses the benefits of allowing native species to thrive in the meadows: “Wild strawberries very plentiful on the hay slopes, and being patiently gathered and patiently hulled by the households” (159). These multifaceted spaces provide feed for livestock, stable ecological habitats that discourage erosion, and wild edibles for public consumption.

Although many of Beston’s anecdotes describe the cultivation of vegetable gardens, work in the cornfields, and other farm chores, much of the narrative focuses on meadows and hayfields. These spaces sustain the farm livestock, the sustainable health of the land, and subsequently the farm families. He often uses these particular
agricultural zones to observe not only environmental interconnections, but familial and communal cohesion as well:

The field is darkening under the darkening sky, the light upon it streaming level from the west. The neighbors too, are apprehensive, for such an incoming of fog can mean a rainy day to follow. But help is at hand, for across our own field I can see the tanned figures of Carroll and his sons-in-law, Freddy and Rupert, filling the big truck: indeed, I think I see both Willa and Elaine pitching up great forkfuls beside their men. (154-55)

He often portrays the farmers and neighbors around him as literally immersed in the landscape, physically altered by the sun and the work, and always reading the environment that they exist within. These families and community members continually come together to work the hayfields. This image of a family or group, rather than a lone farmer, immersed in and working the land is typical of *Northern Farm*. These portrayals also mirror the artistic impulse to depict the idea of “reinhabitation” examined by Lawrence Buell. He describes reinhabitation as social concern for protecting, and living within, a landscape in a sustainable manner “that involves both ecological literacy and involvement in a place-based community” (146). Meditations on the meadows and hayfields allow Beston the opportunity to explore the ways in which farmers exist as constituents of the landscape. Scholar and farmer Gene Logsdon proposes that the use of meadows by modern agrarians serves as a path to satisfy both the ecologically-oriented need for sustainable land use, and the anthropocentric desire to connect with the land through aesthetic manipulation: “New pasture farmers favor meadows on their farms, not just because it’s cheaper to produce milk and meat with that kind of farming than with
modern technology, but because a meadow can be just as much a work of art as a painting or a photograph of it” (13). Beston himself was a firm believer that artistic connection was synonymous with embracing the mysterious elements of living among natural phenomena, and that subjugation of the mysteries in life would leave humankind spiritually bankrupt.

Beston often utilizes astronomical observations in order to emphasize the relationship between the seemingly intangible elements of the natural world, and the human desire to occupy these mysterious spaces:

As the full orb cleared the earth I could see outlined upon its face, as if arranged there by some old-fashioned, romantic artist, the silhouetted height of a great ragged pine which crowns the ridge. It seemed to me as I stood there that some vibration or wave of night and life accompanied the overflowing and revelation of the moon, for soon I heard an owl cry in my woods and far away a dog barked from a farm on the other side. (206)

He conceptualizes seasonal change as anchored in inspirationally curious phenomena, and writes of the late winter emergence of animal life: “the mystery is upon us at the farm” (47). He occupies his environmental setting as an inspired artist, rather than an anxious skeptic, and he laments the growing desire to turn the artistically harmonious endeavor of farming into a disconnected science. Beston recounts how the Great Dipper was once called The Plough by older cultures, until, he claims, humankind “gathered it thus into a household and utilitarian shape” (42). If the dipper is household and utilitarian, then the plow represents a tool needed to work with the more abstract components of the world. He intentionally embraces this older tradition and recounts the
impact that farming once had on the human imagination: “It was as I came from the barn that I saw agriculture standing like a good omen in the fields. The starry plough had vanished from the imagination and common language of man” (43). Wendell Berry comments on the contemporary desire to banish mystery, and subsequently the essential lifeblood, from agriculture: “Confronted with the living substance of farming – the complexity, even mysteriously interrelated lives on which it depends, from microorganisms in the soil to human consumers – the agriculture specialist can think only of subjugating it to total control, of turning it into a machine” (70). This rejection of working within the natural and mysterious elements of earthly existence alienates human culture from the environment. Discussing inexplicable elements of the natural world, Beston writes, “Religion, poetry, and all the arts have their sources in the upwelling of wonder and surprise. Let us thank God that so much will forever remain out of reach, safe from our inquiry, inviolate forever from our touch” (129). This sentiment likely rings nostalgic to many; nevertheless, there exists no reason why contemporary farmers and agriculturalists cannot work in conjunction with ecological complexities of the natural world, rather than against them.

Beston leaves contemporary audiences not with a disconnected, anthropological study of an ancient or indigenous farming community, but with a chronicle of a socially disillusioned man and his attempt to flee the ill effects of modernity, and integrate into a rural community that exists at a distance from his anathema. His eye for detail both social and ecological helps craft a nuanced portrait of communal and environmental principles that many wish to restore today. Considering the enormous impact of centuries of environmental manipulation in America, and the need to accommodate growing
populations, it appears that wisdom resides in texts that do not necessarily celebrate
nature as something disconnected from anthropocentric needs, but in those that
investigate healthy and sustainable utilization of environmental spaces. Beston leaves us
with one of the most artistic and complex accounts of these relationships, as well as one
of the most understudied.
CONCLUSION

Although the authors studied in this project lived in different regions of the Northeast, led dramatically different lives, and wrote during different centuries, an analysis of all three in conjunction begins to illustrate common foundational principles in American agricultural writing. While they all enjoyed some level of privilege, they utilized this social agency to artistically portray the interacting environments and communities that they existed within and cared for deeply. I embarked on this project to satisfy my own interest in sustainability and agricultural communities, and to explore the intellectual and artistic treatment of agrarianism in American literature and scholarship. Many of the subsequent conclusions have been expected, although some I have found surprising. Most importantly, analyses of agricultural literature reveal that these narratives approach the natural world through neither an entirely anthropocentric nor ecocentric perspective, but through a nuanced and refreshing viewpoint of environmental and communal interaction and reciprocity. These issues have the ability to not only facilitate interest in understudied and enlightening texts, but to further illuminate the complex topics explored in contemporary ecocriticism. They also provide artistic continuity in regard to evolving agricultural traditions and increasing agrarian activism connected to the modern food movement.

Crèvecoeur, Cooper, and Beston, through their observations of communities and landscapes, and through their meditative theorizing of their agricultural spaces, break down the artificial distinction between nature and culture that ecocritics seek to explore through literary analysis. Although nearly two centuries lie between Crèvecoeur’s Letters and Beston’s Northern Farm, both narratives illustrate this principle in similar
manners. They connect the physical labors of farming with the intellectual labors of interpretation and art. Beston often writes as though he is out in the fields with pen and paper, and as an artist literally within his subject he observes farmers and often meditates on the intimate interconnection of a farmer reinhabiting the space of his fields. Crèvecoeur likewise creates parables about simultaneously cultivating the land and the futurity of his community. He crafts vivid images of human generational and cultural growth as interrelated with the landscape, such as in his metaphoric writings about his son riding the plough while he brainstorms sermons for his congregation. Cooper portrays culturally and environmentally overlapped landscapes where domestic spaces ramble and intertwine among farm fields. In these cultural spaces food production and fruit growing take place throughout the entirely of the village. This utilization of natural and communal spaces for food production happens within, rather than outside communities.

The connection between agriculture and community leads to multiple environmentally and socially constructive ideas generated by these authors. Besides the overlapped physicality of agricultural and social landscapes, these writers often discuss the ecological intricacies of cultivating both the land in a healthy way for the future, and future familial generations. All three writers emphasize the importance of families, children, and the perpetuation of productive lifestyles. Crèvecoeur creates a metaphor that compares men to plants, and spends time discussing soil and the communal condition of human development. Cooper and Beston incorporate similar elements into their narrative, and Beston specifically spends much time discussing people as community members and the upbringing of children. This communal stability and futurity is vital to
sustainability and the perpetuation of healthy environmental principles. A thread that runs through this whole project focuses on passages where these authors investigate sustainable practices, and the ways in which these practices are perpetuated. The continuity of educated communities most often facilitates the perpetuation of favorable practices, rather than individual determination. Cooper examines how environmentally conscious communities can perpetuate healthy land management, and unenlightened or greedy individuals can effect ecological destruction. This focus on community also leads to interesting intersections between issues of property and individualism.

All three authors contextualize the individual as merely a constituent of a larger whole. Their discussions of individuality all adopted similar points of interest. In the introduction I discuss the difference between the independence of farmers, and individuality, which proves socially destructive. Interestingly, while all three authors reinforce this concept of individuality as destructive to agricultural communities, they also value private property. With few exceptions, one being Crèvecoeur’s examination of agriculture on the islands off of Cape Cod, private property is seen as a respected and useful social arrangement. The respect of boundaries often facilitates the respect of resources. For example, Crèvecoeur’s narrator James observes property boundaries when looking for honey bee trees in order to not overuse that resource, and to facilitate neighborly networks for barter. Cooper also respects property limitations, and when discussing deforestation, praises enlightened landowners that protect old-growth forest land. These are just some of the threads of continuity between all three of these diverse writers.
The study of American agricultural writing as a genre independent of broad environmental writing would prove beneficial to both ecocriticism and American literary scholarship in general. One of the prominent differences between these farm narratives and other works of American environmental prose is the level of immersion experienced by these authors. In the third chapter I address Dana Phillips’s concern (shared by other ecocritics and literary scholars) that environmental writers alienate the landscape and never truly inhabit spaces in a way that erases boundaries. Analyses of agricultural narratives show that these authors transcend such concerns by existing within and portraying environments not as visitors or interlopers, but as genuine constituents of complex human and natural ecologies. Farm narratives, all the way back to Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*, address modern concerns about human utilization and orientation within nature in a manner that will not be found in most environmental texts. Comprehension of the American environmental imagination and how it influences our place within threatened ecosystems is incomplete without attention to the American agricultural imagination and the manner in which communities sustain themselves through exploitation.

An invigorated study of agricultural writers from the past would not only prove beneficial to academics, but to those involved in the contemporary food movement as well. While many agrarian writers address the overlap of culture and ecosystems in agricultural landscapes (Wendell Berry, Fred Kirschemann, Dona Brown, Wes Jackson, Brian Donahue), much of the work that emanates from the food movement mirrors the endless self-help books that clutter the shelves of American homes and bookstores. Endless homesteading and farming books repeat the model of M. G. Kains’s *Five Acres and Independence* (1935), and Eliot Coleman continues to publish works that borrow
from older knowledge to increasingly make agriculture more efficient. However, few writers ask their readers to interrogate how they orient themselves within an environment and community, or to resist the American fascination with social withdrawal and individuality. This project has shown that the ecologically negligent pursuit of capital gain, as well as armed conflicts and increased industrialization, threaten agricultural communities and the goal of sustainability. Scholars, students, and activists concerned with food sustainability and environmentalism would do well to look at how the American agricultural imagination has conceptualized productive individuals not as simply consumers, or as isolated outcasts, but as social participants that recognize communal health as the first step towards facilitating ecological health through sustainable food systems.
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