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Precluded Dwelling

The Dollmaker and *Under the Feet of Jesus* as Georgics of Displacement

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In this article, I explore displacement as a force that precludes dwelling. I do so in the context of the georgic mode, a literary tradition defined by dwelling and by the kind of agricultural endeavoring that Heidegger relates to "building." As he explains in "Building Dwelling Thinking," to build is not only to make or to construct, but also "to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine" (147).[1] Thus, in addition to creation outright, Heidegger's "building" involves husbandry. His expansive definition multiplies the kinds of human activity described by *building*. When humans cultivate plants, they create a situation and environment wherein the crop can flourish. The generative force is nonhuman; growth comes from the plant itself. We cannot build a vineyard as we can a structure. In addition to placing humans in a caretaking role, the three terms in Heidegger's title further indicate that the husbandman's "building" requires his continual attention to his place and to his work. Building, in the agricultural sense of the word, requires prolonged physical presence and much thought. Heidegger's choice of a vineyard underscores the importance of time to dwelling: as a perennial plant that requires years of investment before bearing fruit, the vineyard functions as a site where planning and labor, observation and care unfold across the seasons and over a period of years. The full scope of Heidegger's dwelling, then, involves prolonged (if not permanent) and productive agricultural thinking and laboring. My fundamental premise is that Heideggerian dwelling reaches a confluence with the georgic mode.

The georgic mode takes its name and its themes from Virgil's *Georgics*—a poem comprised of four books that ostensibly function as agricultural treatises on horticulture (especially the cultivation of grain), arboriculture (including orchards, vineyards, and olive groves), animal husbandry, and beekeeping, respectively. Though scholars debate the

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relevance of Virgil's agricultural didacticism,[2] they agree that *The Georgics* marks a sharp shift in tone from his previous work, the pastoral *Eclogues*. While both texts involve agriculture, the shepherds in *The Eclogues* devote more attention to their lute playing and their songs than to their flocks. The shepherds' leisure differentiates them from the farmers in *The Georgics*, who are kept busy with the seasonal tasks that repeat themselves in an annual cycle: "The farmer's toil returns, moving in a circle, as the year rolls back upon itself over its own footsteps."[3] Anthony Low explains that *The Georgics* "is preeminently about the value of hard and incessant labor," and he uses this feature to distinguish between the pastoral and georgic modes: "pastoral celebrates play and leisure, georgic celebrates work."[4] Finally, Virgil's title translates to "earth worker" and thus indicates the poem's central theme.[5]

Along with announcing a preference for bodily *labor* over cerebral *otium*, *The Georgics* and the resulting georgic literary tradition emphasize the importance of rootedness and dwelling. This ideal takes two related forms. First, at the level of the individual, georgics celebrate the local knowledge a farmer gains from years spent observing the characteristics of his land. Only through constant, attentive labor can one "learn the winds and the wavering moods of the sky, the wonted tillage and nature of the ground, what each clime yields and what each disowns."[6] Virgil's imperative to scrutinize one's environment and to live within local limits has recently prompted a renaissance of georgic scholarship that holds up the mode as an important consideration for environmentalists.[7] However, along with this proto-ecological understanding of a particular place, georgics often also validate larger projects of settlement undertaken by a nation-state and, as a result, have tended to support imperialism. Because georgics regard farming as the ideal form of land use, the mode applauds the work of the pioneer who converts the "empty wasteland" into productive agricultural lands. As Low explains, the "georgic…is preeminently the mode suited to the establishment of civilization and the founding of nations."[8] A scene from Book I of *The Georgics* is instructive here. When Virgil notes the desolation brought on by war—"so many wars overrun the world…. respect for the plough is gone; *our lands, robbed of the tillers, lie waste*, and curved pruning hooks are forged into straight blades"—he codes the depopulated countryside as an aberration.[9] In the absence of the tillers, the potentially productive land is wasted. Clearly the staid, rooted farmers belong on their land. Their absence is only permissible, one assumes, because their soldiering will either protect the georgic way of life against attack or will open up additional lands for agricultural settlement. Karen O'Brien refers to this latter, expansionist characteristic of the mode when she suggests that georgics express the "elation of empire."[10] Along with serving as an individual ethos, then, settlement has also operated in georgics texts at the level of the entire nation-state; settlement functions as both personal and familial goal as well as national project.[11]

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) exemplifies both scales of georgic settlement. The novel celebrates settlement at the smallest level when Jim Burden marvels at Ántonia's fruitfulness: the near-dozen children she has birthed and is raising, her well-stocked cellar, the berry hedges and orchard trees she nursed in the arid landscape, and her varied livestock. Ántonia's local emplacement coalesces with settlement at the scale of the nation-state when Jim describes her as "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."[12] Thus, *My Ántonia* completes a narrative arc that makes it easy to identify as a georgic: hard work and diligent care applied over a period of years leads to some degree of mastery over the landscape, which, made fully productive, can root a vigorous family capable of growing into an entire people. In this way the novel implicitly condones the work of colonizing the Great Plains encouraged by the 1862 Homestead Act and pays comparatively little attention to the displacement of native peoples, flora, and fauna brought about by agricultural settlement. As a result of its content and an epigraph taken from Virgil's *Georgics*, critics have recognized the novel's place in the georgic literary tradition.[13]

However, I argue that this kind of agricultural success story represents only one version of georgic. Another form involves the failure of the same vision: narratives that chronicle lives of agricultural labor and that hold up dwelling and permanence as ideals that are never achieved are georgics as well. For example, in Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), the Hooven family has the same goal as the Shimerdas, but no Hooven child achieves Ántonia's agrarian success. In fact, many of them meet with grisly ends: Mr. Hooven dies in the gunfight that pitches ranchers against the railroad's representatives and, after his death, the family relocates to San Francisco where the oldest daughter turns to prostitution, Mrs. Hooven starves to death, and a wealthy woman takes charge of the remaining daughter. The displacement and disintegration of the Hooven family are particularly lamentable given the way Norris holds Mr. Hooven up as one who has adopted a new "Vaterland." Asked if he dreams of returning home to Germany, Mr. Hooven explains that "'Vhair der wife is, und der kinder—der leedle girl Hilda [his daughter]—*dere is der Vaterland*. Eh? Emerica, dat's my gountry now, und dere,' he pointed behind him to the house under the mammoth oak tree on the Lower Road, 'dat's my home. Dat's goot enough Vaterland for me'" (emphasis original).[14] Mr. Hooven, then, stands out as one who has cultivated a home. However, his hold upon that home is tenuous: the industrialization of agriculture and the railroad's imperialism dislocate his family from their homeplace and, without a place to dwell, the Hoovens' georgic dream fails utterly.

Such narratives of failed dreams belong to the category of "disenchanted" georgics described by Margaret Ronda as thoroughly pessimistic works that focus not on peace, fecundity, and production, but instead upon degeneracy, loss, and the human labor perennially required to

redress lapses of order.[15] The way things come apart in *The Octopus* suggests that Norris, too, was skeptical about georgic mythology: in his estimation the power of the railroads and the caprice of nature made a stable agricultural empire in the San Joaquin Valley unlikely at best. However, in registering his doubts—in expressing some degree of "disenchantment" with georgic mythology—his novel validates that very mythology. Though all dreams of empire and settlement are dashed, Norris does not cast the dreams themselves as invalid—he must invoke the dream of georgic settlement in order to undermine it. *The Octopus* idealizes dwelling that is never achieved, and thus provides another example of the disenchantment Ronda describes.

The two main sections of this article situate two twentieth-century novels—Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954) and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995)—alongside one another and reframe them as marginal georgics that name displacement as the source of their disenchantment.[16] I argue that the novels chronicle agriculturalists whose lives aspire toward Heidegger's sense of dwelling as tilling and cultivation, and mirror the traditional georgic earth worker but for one quality: though the novels validate dwelling as a worthy goal, they also make clear that displacement renders such permanence impossible.

Recognizing these texts as georgics produces two results. First, situating this pair of novels within the georgic tradition bridges the literary taxonomies organized by ethnicity, geography, and history. Indeed, relying on each of those categories would highlight only the differences between the two novels' characters and settings. Arnow's Appalachian protagonist sharecrops land in rural Kentucky during the early years of World War II; Viramontes's novel follows a Chicano family of migrant workers in California's Central Valley near the dawn of the twenty-first century. Conversely, looking beyond ethnicity, region, and period as identifiers of each novel allows one to recognize their common theme: namely, the persistent marginalization and displacement of the agricultural working class—"white ethnics" and people of color alike—and their consequent struggle against discrimination.[17] In both novels, women aspire to dwell. They wish to inhabit one locale—to raise their children in a place their own work has made familiar and fecund. However, both women are systematically denied the permanent home for which they dream and labor. For each protagonist, dwelling can only be imagined—in these novels it is a fiction, a ruse, and a myth. Thus, one of my arguments is that the georgic literary tradition juxtaposes texts often isolated as either regional or ethnic literature.

Second, exploring each novel's relationship to the georgic mode broadens that very category. Because existing scholarship on the georgic mode emphasizes dwelling as a prerequisite, literary critics have focused on texts featuring a rooted earth worker whose labor has led to land ownership

or at least a strong sense of place. Though this template certainly describes work at the center of the georgic mode, it has led critics to overlook texts situated along its edges. I argue that Arnow's and Viramontes's novels should be understood as such marginal georgics—texts in which the standard, idealized pattern of dwelling is pursued but never achieved. Further, because each author invokes and undermines the narrative at the heart of the georgic literary tradition, the failures of their protagonists expose the mythology of the georgic mode. As texts that challenge the agrarian version of the American "success story," *The Dollmaker* and *Under the Feet of Jesus* illuminate a vein of subversive georgic literature.

"The chaos of yearly moving": Sharecropping & Patriarchy in *The Dollmaker*

The great tragedy of Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* is that immediately after the protagonist, Gertie Nevels, has arranged to purchase the farm she has spent fifteen years working and saving for, she submits to patriarchal pressures (embodied by her own mother), gives up the farm, and follows her husband, Clovis, to Detroit. Beginning with chapter ten, the novel catalogues the suffering of the Nevels family as they travel to the city and take up residence there. Suddenly out of place and perennially disoriented, Gertie in an urban environment presents a sharp contrast to the same character in the first nine chapters of the novel. Though her life as a renter and sharecropper made displacement a regular feature of her time in Ballew, Kentucky, that portion of the novel nevertheless operates as an encomium for homemaking that situates Gertie alongside other figures from the georgic literary tradition. The contours of her life—her skilled labor, natural knowledge, and attention to local details—make clear that Gertie is a dweller, an earth worker fully emplacing her growing family on their own land.

The early chapters of the novel take place in the depopulated community of Deer Lick, a setting that resembles the land described by Virgil as "robbed of its tillers." With the men absent due to the war effort, Gertie's strength and skill make her an asset to those who remain, and she determines to fill the void as best she can: "I recken I'll have to be th man in this settlement."[18] Clearly well suited for the role, Gertie's feats of strength attract audiences. The other women gathered at the post office envy Gertie's ability to effortlessly handle a one-hundred-pound sack of feed. And her own children watch in awe as Gertie splits a "great pile of knotty dead chestnut chunks" that her husband deemed unsplittable: "The children . . . gathered round to watch. Now and then they gave cries of encouragement, and always shouts of joy as each chunk came apart."[19] Her task completed, Gertie enjoys the fatigue and satisfaction that comes from a job well done—

rewards that are in keeping with georgic tradition and with the economic realities of rural Appalachia.[20]

Along with scenes of bodily power, Arnow emphasizes Gertie's comfort in and with the nonhuman world by frequently putting her at work carving, whittling, and making tool handles—labor that "reinforces her connection to the community" while also connecting people to the flora and fauna of their place in a variety of ways.[21] First, Gertie is a dollmaker (as Arnow's title stresses) who uses trees and scrap lumber for her carving. Though she refers to these activities as "a little whittlen foolishness" to "make th time pass," Gertie's avocation makes clear her importance as one who resides where "nature" and human culture overlap.[22] Further, as a maker of tool handles, she lives at the junction where tilling and cultivation take place, and her labor equips humans for Heidegger's "building." The axe handles she shapes, for example, provide the literal connections between human culture and the nonhuman world. She creates the possibility for *homemaking* in the most literal sense of the word.

Gertie's own tool use indicates that for her, the true earth worker acts as neither conqueror nor despot—her homemaking models a georgic ethic built around values we would refer to today as environmentalist. As Haeja K. Chung emphasizes, "Gertie is in complete harmony with nature" and feels a strong "affinity for nature and the land."[23] This affection manifests itself in an ethic of care: whenever Gertie uses a natural resource, Arnow goes to great lengths to show the thoughtfulness and caution that influence the decision. When selecting a sapling tree to carve into a doll, she "searched until she found a smooth-barked little hickory sprout, so crooked it could never grow into a proper tree."[24] A long passage detailing Gertie's selection of a tree for saw handles and a maul demonstrates a similarly careful selection:

> Among the brush and second-growth timber were several young hickories and an old one scarred by lightning. She paused, ax uplifted by the old one, but the ax came slowly back to her shoulder, and she smiled at the old hickory, 'You'd be good an tough,' she said, 'an yer heart wood's dead, but I'll leave you fer seed an hicker nuts fer th squirrels an my youngens.'
>
> She considered some of the less thrifty of the small hickories, but always instead of cutting she only slashed away the nearby hornbeam or other useless brush, whispering to the little hickory as she did so. 'It won't be many years 'fore you'll be big enough fer the saw mill, er mebbe I'll be needen you in that new barn I'm aimen tu build.'
>
> It was with a little sigh and a fleeting look of sorrow that at last she chose her tree. There was more than enough tough straight trunk for the big maul and the handles, but some winter weight of snow,

> some accident with man or animal or weather, had crooked the top so that it could never grow into a fine upstanding tree.[25]

In this way Gertie embodies Heidegger's description of dwelling not as mastery, subjugation, or spoliation, but as a "saving the earth" that sets "something free into its own presencing" or essence.[26] She also approximates the kind of conservationist Aldo Leopold described in his landmark work of environmental writing, *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold argues that the best definition of a conservationist is "written not with a pen, but with an axe."[27] He goes on to explain that a conservationist spends time and thought "deciding what to chop," ever aware that "with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land." Except for Leopold's use of masculine pronouns, his writing aptly describes Gertie's ethic of land use: she peers into the future and considers what impact her action will have in the years to come, and looks for ways to shape the land so that it can yield goods and services for humans and nonhumans alike; the hickory she spares will produce nuts for squirrels and for Gertie's children, and the continued presence of the trees will protect the steep slope from eroding. Gertie's approach to her environment, then, is not the "hands off" approach dictated by wilderness preservation. Instead, she searches for a way to use resources without using them up.

Although Gertie embodies Heidegger's understanding of dwelling and Leopold's land ethic, her conception of the human place in nature is also anticipated by a text written centuries earlier. Virgil's *Georgics* repeatedly emphasizes mindfulness as a necessary characteristic of the successful *agricola*. For example, Virgil notes that when good farmers transplant trees for an orchard, they "print on the bark of the trees the quarter of the sky each faced, so as to restore the position in which they stood, the same side bearing the southern heat and the same back turned to the north pole."[28] Careful farmers note such seemingly negligible details because they want to protect the plants during their "tender years." Gertie mirrors this amount of care when she selects "three good-sized white pines and two little dogwoods" to move to the homeplace she has arranged to purchase.[29] She selects unwanted trees, digs them carefully, wraps their tender roots with moist moss, and will reset them with their roots spread out so that "not even a witch…can pull em up."[30] Gertie's goal for her transplanted trees—rootedness and lifelong permanence—signals the georgic aspirations she has for her family. After fifteen years of "sweaten fer…tu make corn grow in land that ud be better left in scrub pine an saw briers, and then not keepen all you raise," she has finally saved enough cash to buy the Tipton Place—a vacated farm that Gertie calls "a little piece of heaven right here on earth."[31]

The Tipton Place shares much in common with the "farmhouse in the Black Forest" described by Heidegger. To emphasize the kind of indigenous, *thoughtful* architecture he has in mind, Heidegger describes a house positioned "on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the

meadows close to the spring." The design, too, creates a "*simple oneness*": "the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chamber against the storms of long winter nights."[32] Gertie notes many of the same features when she studies the Tipton Place. It, too, sits "on the sheltered southern hillside" in the proximity of a spring, and Gertie emphasizes that its placement will keep it "warm in th winter an cool in th summer"; "the hard north wind'ull never tetch it."[33] Gertie even notices the excellent design of the windows: "deeply recessed in the thick long walls," they are "hidden from the hot sun of summer afternoons, but set to catch most of its warmth on the short winter days."[34] The Tipton Place, then, represents Heidegger's Black Forest farmhouse transported to Appalachia.

Overjoyed by her vision of dwelling on this site, Gertie ponders the "peace" that land ownership provides.[35] Her purchase of the farm will finally put an end to "the chaos of yearly moving" the Nevels have suffered.[36] She further realizes, "Never, never would she have to move again; never see again that weary, sullen look on Reuben's [her oldest son's] face that came when they worked together in a field not their own, and he knew that half his sweat went to another man."[37] Now Gertie and her family will own their labor, and can form plans that require years to execute—Gertie even imagines a modest vineyard. Her ability to purchase land obviously marks a watershed moment in her life—one that takes on biblical proportions when she refers to the Tipton Place as "the Promised Land" and reiterates that "her foundation was not God but what God had promised Moses—land."[38] However, with the allusion to Moses, Arnow foreshadows Gertie's eventual disappointment: just as God prohibited Moses from entering the Land of Canaan, Gertie never manages to legally purchase or inhabit the place she desires.[39] Instead, her mother pressures the land's owner to back out of the sale, and demands that Gertie use her savings to carry the family to Detroit to rejoin Clovis. Gertie's georgic dreams are girdled before they can begin to take root.

In *The Dollmaker*, Arnow indicates the forces responsible for Gertie's displacement. First, the military-industrial complex is actively siphoning away the population of Appalachia. When asked to identify the main crop grown by the farmers in her area, Gertie answers, "Youngens…Youngens fer th wars an them factories."[40] And the "good job" and "big money" that Clovis temporarily finds in Detroit are a direct result of the wartime economy that created short-lived and largely illusory prosperity. In her essay on *The Dollmaker*, Barbara Hill Rigney identifies patriarchy as another important factor in Gertie's dislocation. Rigney notes that Gertie's mother is "always a voice for patriarchal religion," and points to the passage in which she "hysterically admonishes Gertie" with Bible verses directing women to "Leave all else and cleave to thy husband" and to "be in subjection unto your husbands, as to the Lord."[41] Novelist Joyce Carol Oates agrees that

Gertie's mother "is responsible for the tragedy of the novel," as do most other Arnow critics.[42]

Through a character with strong attachments to place and a dream of a settled, agrarian life, Arnow calls into question the national narrative of progress and opportunity. Though several members of Gertie's own community and family give voice to the idea that pursuing the American dream requires mobility, her relocation to Detroit is more accurately described as displacement.[43] Patriarchy and the military-industrial complex fracture her georgic dreams and uproot her family. Her teenage son Reuben, too, prefers the life they would have lived on the Tipton Place: "'twould ha been our own—all our own."[44] And among the Nevels, Reuben alone finds contentment. Thoroughly unhappy in Detroit, he flees the city and returns to his grandfather's farm in Kentucky, whereas the remaining members of the family are ground down and destroyed by life in an urban place where Heideggerean dwelling is impossible. In Detroit, Gertie cannot manage to "build" even a modest flower bed. Arnow suggests, then, that patriarchy, industrialization, and urbanization cause a chronic state of displacement that precludes dwelling.

"Maybe we can stay in one place": Migrant Labor and Agribusiness in *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Beginning with its very first line, Helena María Viramontes's novel emphasizes the disorientation that results from displacement. As thirteen-year-old Estrella and her family travel through an unfamiliar landscape, a dilapidated barn comes into view and she wonders, "Had they been heading for the barn all along?"[45] That she "didn't know" establishes a major theme in the novel: as migrant laborers, uncertainty operates as the only permanent feature of her family's experience. And as Cecelia Lawless points out in her essay on the novel, this uncertainty extends to each character's very identity: "Identity is related to place, so that when people are denied a place to live, their identity is undermined."[46] Driven from one place to another, following the crops and the seasons, many of the characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* long for a home, either remembered or imagined, that remains out of reach. Though their labor aligns them with the georgic literary tradition, Estrella's family's inability to build a life of dwelling suggests the collapse of georgic mythology in twentieth-century America and, more specifically, the violence of agribusiness in California's Central Valley.

One among many significant images in Viramontes's novel, the barn simultaneously conjures and rejects the pastoral literary tradition. Though it still smells of "dung and damp hay," the structure is a relic—out of place in a landscape that has left behind animal husbandry and pastoral agriculture.[47] The dilapidated barn now occupies an agroecosystem[48] comprised not of sheep and pastures, but of "orange and avocado and peach trees which

rolled and tumbled as far back as the etched horizon of the mountain range."[49] That Estrella and her stepfather plan to dismantle the barn provides an additional indication that this place is not Arcadia.[50] Even the novel's figurative language dispels the pastoral leisure associated with wooly sheep: by describing the clouds above the barn as "ready to burst like cotton plants," Viramontes suggests that here, clothing must be derived from a notoriously labor-intensive plant. Permanently banished from Eden, humans must clothe themselves by the sweat of the brow—work that Estrella and her family know well given their recollections of picking cotton.[51] Thus, like georgics before it, the novel establishes labor as the predominant relation between humans and nature.

Indeed, as the narrative advances, we see Estrella and her family performing a variety of agricultural tasks that exhaust their senses and their bodies. Estrella picks tomatoes until their fragrance "lingered on her fingers, her hair, her pillow, into the next morning and throughout the day, until it became a thick smell that no longer simply lingered but stuck in her nose like paste."[52] With similarly descriptive prose, Viramontes emphasizes that the work of harvesting grapes does not relate at all to the imagery on packaging and advertisements:

> Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the basket of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on the top of the newsprint paper. She did not remove the frame, straighten her creaking knees, the bend of her back, set down another sheet of newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun.[53]

The endlessness of the labor—which Viramontes's mirrors with sentences that pile up clause after clause—and the laborer's utter exhaustion indicate a key difference between *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Dollmaker*: while Gertie takes pride in being equal to her labor, Estrella and her family are simply worn out by their work—it is destroying their bodies in the short and long term.

While the sheer volume and intensity of their work is difficult enough to endure, Viramontes makes clear that even occupancy of this landscape presents serious health hazards. As Dora Ramírez-Dhoore emphasizes in her essay on the topic, this place is thoroughly toxic. Estrella knows that the

"Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch," but still finds the water "irresistible," and also remembers "rubbing off the white coating of insect spray" and biting into green tomatoes.[54] Further, the sickness that develops after Alejo is dowsed by a biplane's poisonous payload provides the force that drives the novel's plot.[55] Struggling to survive in places made untenable by agricultural chemicals, several characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* express their desires for a stable, safe homeplace.[56] For Perfecto, the oldest character in the novel, this longing takes the form of homesickness; he remembers a home and wants to return. Now 73, a "real home" from his past occupies the forefront of his mind.[57] In describing his "desire to return home" as "a tumor lodged under the muscle of Perfecto's heart" that grows "larger with every passing day," Viramontes emphasizes that sickness is physical and psychological: Alejo's dysentery and Perfecto's homesickness both result from the patterns of a migrant agricultural life.[58]

With flashbacks to labor camps and apartments, the novel emphasizes that movement and transience have characterized Estrella's and her siblings' lives; though they have no memories of a home comparable to Perfecto's, they nevertheless express a desire for stability and permanence. When young Ricky hears that tearing down the barn will earn the family money, he hopes the income will translate into stasis: "Maybe we can stay in one place."[59] Estrella, though old enough to understand the necessity of travel, nevertheless sees the absence of oil and gasoline as a good thing: "Good. We'd stay put then."[60] Estrella's mother, Petra, experiences a kind of home envy while watching a well-dressed man pump gas into a clean car. Petra imagines the contours of his life as radically different from hers: "She thought him a man who knew his neighbors well, who returned to the same bed, who could tell where the schools and where the stores were, and where the Nescafé coffee jars in the stores were located, and payday always came at the end of the week."[61] Finally, the novel concludes with Estrella standing on the roof of the dilapidated barn feeling "powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed."[62] In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, then, Viramontes clearly holds up dwelling as the ideal that Estrella and her family desire, but the novel catalogues their failure to achieve their dreams. Though they work with skill and diligence, they remain unable to make a home.[63]

Their ritual preparations of the house they occupy for most of the novel suggest that under different circumstances, Estrella and her family could "build" a permanent home. When they arrive at the "shabby wood frame bungalow" near the derelict barn, the family works to make it livable.[64] Perfecto removes a dead bird from one room and plugs a mouse hole in another.[65] Estrella uses a stick to scratch an oval in the dirt around the bungalow in order to ward off scorpions, and Petra later retraces the line.[66] Finally, just as Heidegger's peasants "did not forget the altar corner," one of Perfecto's first actions is to locate "a good place to set up Petra's altar with Jesucristo, La Virgen María y José."[67] Their preparations underscore their

transience (that the family goes about this work with little discussion communicates its familiarity). However, to invest such care in a temporary abode also indicates their desire to dwell in a home of their own.

While Arnow signals patriarchy and the military-industrial complex as the obvious sources of displacement in *The Dollmaker*, Viramontes seems less interested in providing an easy answer. Further, though they work within a civilization constructed and policed by patriarchy, that force is nearly negligible within Estrella's family: Petra appears to be the head of the household given the absence of Estrella's father and Perfecto's own feelings of powerlessness. Instead of any simple explanation, Viramontes's novel emphasizes a suite of forces—ethnic prejudice, racism, ineffective or nonexistent labor laws, religion, and simple human error—that combine to keep Estrella and her family on the move. Among this web of factors I turn now to the characteristics of agribusiness that contribute to Estrella's family's displacement. I do so not to claim it as the most important or primary factor, but because situating this novel within the georgic literary tradition (as this article seeks to do) underscores the problems of twentieth-century agriculture in the novel.

Compared to the idealized farmstead of georgic mythology, the fields and vineyards in *Under the Feet of Jesus* appear out of scale and oversimplified. In Virgil's *Georgics*, the agricultural worker remains rooted in place on a diverse agricultural landscape; the movement of the seasons and the needs of different crops and animals prompt him to turn to new tasks. A single short section in the *Fourth Georgic* mentions an incredible assortment of plant life: roses, endive, celery, cucumber, narcissus, acanthus, ivy, myrtle, corn, cabbages, lilies, vervain, poppies, apples, hyacinths, limes, laurestines, elms, pears, and blackthorns.[68] Coupled with the other fruits, grains, and animals mentioned in earlier books, this catalogue makes clear that the *agricola*'s labor takes a variety of forms and *requires a great deal of knowledge*. By comparison, the work of the Latino *piscadore* in California's Central Valley appears monotonous and dulling: "[Perfecto] sat under the vines for relief . . . He staked the soil between his workshoes with his knife again and again. *The soil dulled the sharpness of his blade as it did his own life*" (my emphasis).[69] Thus, even the third term in Heidegger's title proves impossible for Estrella's family. The monotony of the labor requires little thought; agricultural at this scale "instrumentalizes" the human earth workers.[70] Viramontes underscores the history of this practice by dedicating the novel to the memory of César Chávez. Further, monoculture requires the use of pesticides that, as discussed above, render the landscape poisonous. In short, embracing an industrial logic of efficiency and production yields monocultures that threaten the health of the land and of those who work it.

"American" Earth Workers and a Global, Evolving Georgic Literary Tradition

In her essay on *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Dora Ramírez-Dhoore points out that the transience and wandering of Estrella and her family—their displacement, that is—makes the novel and its critique broadly applicable: because the precise "locality [of the novel] is undetermined," Ramírez-Dhoore argues that the story "can thus be placed in any rural U.S. location."[71] Ready support for Ramírez-Dhoore's claim exists in the remarkable degree to which Gertie's situation parallels Petra's: both women work the land to support their five children and struggle to maintain or build a sense of community—all without dependable help from their husbands.[72] Ramírez-Dhoore's comment and the similar struggles of Petra and Gertie illuminate a surprising amount of common ground shared between Viramontes and Arnow. Despite their differences, each author's observations of rural life prompted critique. Arnow criticizes industrialization and "upward mobility" for undermining the importance of place and self-sufficiency characteristic of Appalachian culture.[73] Viramontes notes that by applying an industrial mindset to food production, agribusiness instrumentalizes human labor, imposes transience, and places migrant workers in peril.[74] In short, both authors record the way that displacement works against the pursuit of permanence and, in the process, they describe dwelling as an aspiration that transcends race, history, and geography. In fact, when viewed together their messages magnify one another: *The Dollmaker* demonstrates the historical roots of the problems described by Viramontes, and *Under the Feet of Jesus* establishes the continuing relevance of Arnow's novel. Thus, the bond between these novels forms something of a mobius strip in which the displacement of marginalized peoples echoes across the last seventy years of rural life in America. Arnow and Viramontes magnify one another's depiction of dwelling as a hollow promise. And, given that *georgic* names a global literary tradition, these authors and novels participate in a conversation that transcends American literature and the United States.

The georgic mode, then, provides a means of collecting and connecting the experiences of working-class agriculturalists. A flexible understanding of the georgic literary tradition recognizes not only its deployment as a conservative form that sanctioned agricultural settlement, but also its utility as a medium capable of representing the struggles of twentieth-century and contemporary agricultural workers. The georgic mode includes *My Ántonia*, certainly, but there is also room for those authors who describe the failed pursuit of georgic permanence: Arnow and Viramontes as well as a range of writers working in multiple genres.[75] Indeed, American literature in the twenty-first century featuring ostensibly georgic subject matter—farming, food, and agriculture—regularly laments rather than celebrates the contours of agricultural life and also underscores the global realities of agriculture. Without the ability

to couple farming and stability, contemporary novelists pen georgics of displacement that stand at the end of a succession of politically progressive agricultural literature. Future scholarship on this subject should detail the ways that, along with Wendell Berry and Jane Smiley, Arnow and Viramontes carry forward the work of Edwin Markham, Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, Josephine Johnson, and John Steinbeck; together, these authors make up an insurgent stream of georgic literature. And though I have focused on "American" literature, the issues are global—a fact not lost on many of the novelists I include: Norris imagines wheat as a global force; many of the meatpackers in *The Jungle* are recent arrivals to America; Cather's characters are German, Swedish, Russian, and Czechoslovakian by birth; a global conflict (World War II) drives the plot of Arnow's novel; and Estrella and her family have ties to both Mexico and to America. Because dwelling constitutes an intensely local suite of actions, abstractions like "America" are less meaningful than the earth underfoot and the reality of home.

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[1] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 145.

[2] In *Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rural Life in Vergil's* Georgics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), Philip Thibodeau suggests that Virgil is only "playing the farmer." That is, though *The Georgics* owes "debts to the [agricultural] handbook tradition" that "should not be underestimated," Thibodeau argues that the Roman poet only performs an interest in the mundane details of agriculture (p. 12). Similarly, Brooks Otis argues that *The Georgics* is purely a work of art; see *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1995), 146.

[3] I take my text for *The Georgics* from Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgic. Aeneid I-VI*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), II.401-02.

[4] Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 8 & 4.

[5] William Conlogue, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2001), 8.

[6] Virgil, I.51-53.

[7] See Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002), 2 & 11; Conlogue, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture,* 9; Benjamin R. Cohen, *Notes from the Ground: Science Soil and Society in the American Countryside* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 202; and Ethan Mannon, "Georgic Environmentalism in *North of Boston*: An Ethic for Economic Landscapes," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 358.

[8] Low, *The Georgic Revolution,* 12.

[9] Virgil, I.506-08, emphasis added.

[10] Karen O'Brien, "Imperial Georgic, 1660-1789," *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850*, eds. Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 163.

[11] In "Building Dwelling Thinking" Heidegger's treatment of dwelling operates at the level of the individual and the family. I do not suggest that he conflates a person's dwelling with national projects of imperialism; I only wish to note that literary texts classified as georgic often condone such large-scale "settlement."

[12] Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1918, ed. Charles Mignon (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994), 342.

[13] Cather takes her epigraph—"*Optima dies* . . . *prima fugit*"—from Book III.66-67, which H. Rushton Fairclough translates as "Life's fairest days are ever the first to flee for hapless mortals." On the novel's georgic characteristics, see Curtis Dahl, "An American *Georgic*: Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," *Comparative Literature* 7, no. 1 (1955): 43; Mary R. Ryder "'Our' Ántonia: The Classical roots of Willa Cather's American Myth," *Classical and Modern Literature* 12, no. 2 (1992): 111-17; and Joseph W. Meeker, "Willa Cather: The Plow and the Pen," *Cather Studies* 5 (2003): 77-88.

[14] Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California*, ed. Kevin Starr, New York: Penguin, 1986, 178.

[15] Margaret Ronda, "Georgic Disenchantment in American Poetry," *Genre* 46 no. 1 (2013): 61.

[16] "Reframe" is an important word here: throughout the article I rely on existing scholarship that *implicitly* emphasizes the georgic characteristics of each novel and *unconsciously* outlines the relevance of the georgic literary tradition. Thus, I generally agree with those I cite; my contribution has been to make the georgic context of these novels explicit and to explore the nuances of the relationship between texts and mode.

[17] As Dalia Kandiyoti points out, scholars who read across ethnicity face a two-fold challenge. First, it remains difficult to balance a comparative approach that seeks to trace similarities without obscuring differences. Second, dealing in specifics without "Balkanizing" individual communities and cultures is equally difficult. Kandiyoti's way out of this bind is to treat the authors, texts, and traditions in her project as "strange neighbors" that are similar and different, and that influence one another. See *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diasporic Literatures*, (Hanover: Dartmouth College P, 2009), 12-17. As a logical way to cautiously undertake this kind of scholarship, I find her approach useful and have adopted it in this article.

[18] Hariette Louisa Simpson Arnow, *The Dollmaker* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 96.

[19] Ibid., 83-84.

[20] As Thomas L. Altherr explains in an article on the georgic mode, "the farmer must work hard and rejoice in weariness as a worthwhile recompense." See "'The Country We Have Married': Wendell Berry and the Georgic Tradition of Agriculture," *Southern Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 110. Martha Billips Turner provides a thorough and insightful analysis of Arnow's depiction of rural agriculture as capable of generating the necessities of life and intrinsic comforts, but little cash. Turner argues that as "a mid-twentieth-century protagonist who embodies . . . the Jeffersonian ideal of the small yeoman farmer working not for wages but for the produce of the land," Gertie and her failure suggest that Arnow viewed Kentucky's subsistence farms as doomed due to the economics of the nation. See "The Demise of Mountain Life: Harriette Arnow's Analysis," *Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association* 8 (1991): 2. See also Ron Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1982).

[21] Kristina K. Groover, "'Beholden to no man': Artistry and Community in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," *The Kentucky Review* 13, no. 3 (1997): 51.

[22] Arnow, *The Dollmaker*, 34.

[23] Haeja K. Chung, "Harriette Simpson Arnow's Authorial Testimony: Toward a Reading of *The Dollmaker*," *Critique* 36, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 215.

[24] Arnow, *The Dollmaker*, 49.

[25] Ibid., 131.

[26] Ibid., 150.

[27] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 68.

[28] Virgil, II.269-72.

[29] Arnow, 133.

[30] Ibid., 134.

[31] Ibid., 78 & 71.

[32] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* 160.

[33] Arnow, *The Dollmaker*, 50.

[34] Ibid., 125.

[35] For Heidegger, "*Wunian* [*Wohnen*; "Dwelling"] means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace" (149).

[36] Arnow, *The Dollmaker*, 54.

[37] Ibid., 70.

[38] Ibid., 103 &122.

[39] As punishment for disobeying God's command, Moses and Aaron were not allowed to enter the land of Canaan. See Numbers 20: 2-13, where Moses strikes the rock (rather than merely commanding it) to bring forth water, and Numbers 27: 12-14, where Moses views the land promised the Israelites from atop Mount Nebo. See also Deuteronomy 32: 48-52.

[40] Arnow, 19.

[41] Barbara Hill Rigney, "The Christian and the Classic in *The Dollmaker*," in *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, eds. Danny L. Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2005), 68.

[42] Joyce Carol Oates, "On Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," in *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, eds. Danny L. Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2005), 61. In "Agrarian Tragedy: Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," *Appalachian Journal* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 34-42, Steve Mooney goes so far as to label Gertie's mother "one of the most despicable characters in modern American fiction" (39). Haeja K. Chung is a notable exception here: after listing the critics who blame Gertie's mother for the Nevels' Kentucky exodus, she argues that it is Gertie's silence and submission to her mother that precipitate her ruin (216).

[43] Rachel Lee Rubin, "'My Country is Kentucky': Leaving Appalachia in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," in *Women, America, and Movement: Narratives of Relocation* (Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri P, 1998), 177.

[44] Arnow, *The Dollmaker,* 138.

[45] Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 3.

[46] Cecelia Lawless, "Helena María Viramontes's Homing Devices in *Under the Feet of Jesus*," in *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, eds. Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes (New York: Garland, 1996), 377. Lene Johannessen similarly stresses the absence of rootedness in the novel. She writes, "this is the story of the struggle over sites and their meanings in a process where the discourse of physical landscape meets that of mental inscape, where over the beautiful California scenery hover the dark tales of dispossession and dislocation." See "The Meaning of Place in Viramontes'[s] *Under the Feet of Jesus*," in *Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States*, eds. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Heike Raphael-Hernandez (Tubingen: Saffenburg Verlag, 2000), 101-02.

[47] Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus,* 10.

[48] See Donald Worster. "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological History," "Roundtable: Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1093, where Worster defines *agroecosystem* as "an ecological system reorganized for agricultural purposes—a domesticated ecosystem."

[49] Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus,* 3.

[50] The planned destruction of the barn also calls to mind the scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* where the Joads watch as a bulldozer operator razes the buildings on what was recently their farm. Both novels suggest that on appropriately efficient agricultural landscapes, people are superfluous. For further discussion of the links between Steinbeck's and Viramontes's novels, see Christa Grewe-Volpp, "'The oil was made from their bones': Environmental (In)Justice in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 77n.5; Lawless, "Helena María Viramontes's Homing Devices in *Under the Feet of Jesus*," 379 n.3; and Barbara Brinson Curiel, "'Had They Been Heading for the Barn All Along?': Viramontes's Chicana Feminist Revision of Steinbeck's Migrant Family," in *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs (Tucson: The U of Arizona P, 2013), 27-47.

[51] Viramontes, *Under The Feet of Jesus,* 136.

[52] Ibid., 32.

[53] Ibid., 49-50.

[54] Ibid., 32 & 38.

[55] Ibid., 77.

[56] As ecocritic Christa Grewe-Volpp writes, "home is the desired goal for all the protagonists in *Under the Feet of Jesus*" (73).

[57] Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus,* 78.

[58] Ibid., 82-83.

[59] Ibid., 154.

[60] Ibid., 86.

[61] Ibid., 105.

[62] Ibid., 176.

[63] My reading of the novel, then, is more pessimistic than Cecelia Lawless's. Lawless suggests that the "migrant workers in the novel" construct a home from words "since there is no other material at hand" (362). Although she admits that "the site of language as home may seem a paltry solace," Lawless nevertheless views Estrella as a figure of hope—one whose understanding of language enables her to "guide as beacon those around her who need a different kind of home" (363, 378).

[64] Viramontes, *Under The Feet of Jesus,* 6.

[65] Ibid., 8 & 26.

[66] Ibid., 41-42 & 164.

[67] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* 160; Viramontes, *Under The Feet of Jesus,* 8.

[68] Virgil, IV.116-48.

[69] Viramontes, *Under The Feet of Jesus,* 83.

[70] Grewe-Volpp, "'The oil was made from their bones': Environmental (In)Justice in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*," 69. I do not wish to ignore the achievements of such economies of scale: as several writers have pointed out, this form of industrialized agriculture produces food that is more affordable in the short term. See James E. McWilliams, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get it Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009); and Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, *The Locavore's Dilemma: In Praise of the 10,000-Mile Diet*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2012). However, my work with Viramontes's text necessarily requires that I focus on the hidden costs of such "affordable" food.

[71] Dora Ramírez-Dhoore, "Dissecting Environmental Racism: Redirecting the 'Toxic' in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*," in *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth Century Writings*, ed. Adrian Taylor Kane (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 176.

[72] Clovis is mechanically inclined, but earns little real income from his "tinkeren" in Kentucky (79); Perfecto feels pulled to his "real" home, and Petra seems to recognize that he might abandon her (78).

[73] See Phillip J. Obermiller, "Migration," in *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*, eds. Richard A. Straw and H. Tyler Blethen (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2004), 88-100 for a primer on the movements of Appalachian people. He describes the "shuttle migration" of Appalachians who migrated to distant work while also maintaining their homeplaces throughout the twentieth century (90, 94). As he explains, many Appalachians provided the migrant agricultural labor force necessary to harvest corn and wheat on Midwestern farms as well as "the tomato crop in Indiana or onions in Ohio" (90). See also Jack Temple Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," *Journal of Southern History* 49 (1983): 585-600; and Thomas R. Shannon, "The Economy of Appalachia," in *A Handbook to Appalachia: An Introduction to the Region*, eds. Grace Toney Edwards, JoAnn Aust Asbury, and Ricky L. Cox (Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 2006), 74-80.

[74] Existing work in Chicano Studies suggests that along with rural and agricultural lands, people of color also find it difficult to dwell in cities and towns. See Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000). Kandiyoti expands upon Villa's urban focus by examining small towns and border zones (see 121-54).

[75] See e.g., Barry Estabrook, *Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit* (Kansas City, MS: Andrews McMeel, 2011)—an exposé on the problems with Florida tomato cultivation, including the de facto slavery of field workers often lured there from Latin America.