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Gardens of Auto Parts:
Kingsolver’s Merger of American Western Myth and Native American Myth in The Bean Trees

by Catherine Himmelwright

Outside was a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts. Heads of cabbage and lettuce sprouted out of old tires. An entire rusted out Thunderbird, minus the wheels, had nasturtiums blooming out the windows like Mama’s hen-and-chicks pot on the front porch at home. A kind of teepee frame made of CB antennas was all overgrown with cherry-tomato vines. (Kingsolver 45)

Junkyards and gardens: how could two such diametrically opposed worlds flourish together? Seemingly, one would preclude the possibility of the other. Abandoned wrecks would jeopardize new tomatoes, while spilled oil would poison the fertile ground, debilitating the delicate burgeoning of a squash blossom. How can anyone tend a garden in the midst of rusted auto parts? How can growth occur in the midst of abandonment?

In the mythology that surrounds the American West, one of the primary expressions of the western experience has been the male’s desire to move. Whether by horse, wagon, raft, or even later by car, action typifies the male western hero, who feels a powerful desire to hit the open road. Action and adventure are tied tightly with the need to be mobile. Adventures do not happen at home; you have to go find them. In contrast, women have been connected rather loosely to the male western archetype.
Despite their presence on the frontier. Rather than a symbol of movement, the female experience has been firmly rooted in the image of the garden. Annette Kolodny has perhaps furthered this construction the most by exploring women’s idealization of the garden on the frontier. She states in *The Land Before Her* that women gained access to the U.S. West by connecting themselves both literally and figuratively with the garden. Embodying both the characteristics of the natural and procreative, gardens evolved into symbols of the home. Cultivating a garden in the West provided women a claim or admittance into a masculine world, if only to a portion of the experience. As a garden must have constant attention, movement is difficult for those who garden. Women, therefore, gained access to the frontier, yet were excluded from the adventure that men sought.

Despite the obvious oppositions, Barbara Kingsolver finds a way to unite the possibilities of a garden with the opportunities of adventure in *The Bean Trees*, her novel about a woman’s migration from the American South to the American West. Merging these characteristics: the desire for movement and the desire to tend a home, Kingsolver is able to express a female voice that has heretofore been lost or subsumed by the white male experience. In many ways, Kingsolver creates a character who becomes that individual Kolodny speaks of at the end of *The Land Before Her*, for Kingsolver’s main character becomes both “adventurer and domesticator” (Kolodny 240). By combining these two figures, Kingsolver fashions a new American mythology that unites both male and female imaginative constructions. The attempt is not an easy one, as access to the West has almost always been achieved, whether the individual is male or female, through performing white masculine constructions. In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins points out the difficulty women have had in gaining admittance to this masculine world, especially access to the role of the hero. Her findings reveal female desire for this access through women’s own attempts to “imagine” themselves within the western landscape and culture. Tompkins notes that some women found imagining inclusion impossible, but for those who could, awkward manipulations would take place in order to create a place for the female within this world:

One friend said she loved “Bonanza” so much that she had to invent a female character so that she could participate as a woman . . . Another friend told me she could identify with male heroes but only the nonwhite, non-WASP ones, Tonto and Zorro. (16)
Clearly, the struggle to find inclusion in this myth of adventure is difficult; still the passage proves the desire of women to claim in some “real” sense the ideology represented in our imaginative constructions of the American West. Yet how do you write about a female’s experience in the West? The West has become so “masculinized” in connotation that the very word evokes images of the male. Thus, finding negotiated space from which to express the female experience in the West is difficult. Although attempts have been made which include the female presence, traditionally these representations privilege a male voice.

Historically, a woman’s presence in the “frontier experience” occurs hysterically, as she is seen bemoaning the fact that her husband or father has forced her to leave everyone and everything she loves to “go west.” Rarely is she seen as a willing participant in her removal to the wide-open spaces. Lillian Schlissel states in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* that “The overland journey wrenched women from the domestic circle that had encased much of their lives in stable communities” (28). Schlissel provides many examples that emphasize this devastating separation. Often the separation from a domestic community proved to be one of the most difficult challenges. As Melody Graulich states, “Adventure, independence, and freedom belong to male characters, while women ‘endure,’ as does the long-suffering pioneer helpmate who tries to re-create ‘home’ in the West, memorialized as the Madonna of the plains” (187). Janis Stout in *Through the Window, Out the Door* writes that “narrative conventions and assumptions (of journeys and departures) are so deeply rooted in masculine paradigms that reshaping them to serve a woman’s own desire is an enormous challenge” (4). As for some of the women described by Tompkins, active participation seems difficult to imagine within the historical accounts of western experience.1

Rejecting the limited representations of women on the frontier that are given by history and literature, many contemporary writers have tried their hand at the “anti-Western.” Michael Johnson in *New Westers* defines the “anti-Western” as “going against the grain in pretty direct fashion.” The anti-Western emerges as a vehicle to manipulate the literary construction or archetype that has been fashioned within the American imagination. Johnson says that “They portrayed the underside and . . . suggested that the idealist assumptions of the traditional Western formula were naïve and masked the racism, violence, and greed of the historical conquest of the West” (215). Most who have chosen to write the anti-Western have remained within the parameters of a masculine world. In writing about the
female experience, they have simply written about a woman who, when faced with the challenges that normally face male protagonists, reacts in a similar way. Such narratives still privilege the masculine experience and undermine how the female experience might be separate from this archetype. In essence, the female figure simply becomes a man, or at least a more androgynous figure who can adopt masculine characteristics in order to experience the West.

Kingsolver does adopt the approach of the anti-Western; however, she brings a new twist to her approach. Envisioning a new western archetype, she is able to leave behind the standard forms of male adventure by finding access to an alternate mythology. Like Tompkins’ friends who find access through the alter-hero, “the nonwhite, non-WASP ones, Tonto and Zorro,” Kingsolver uses a similarly alternative perspective by evoking a nonwhite mythology which will allow for the participation of the female. By choosing the “ultimate anti-Western,” Kingsolver is able to explore a world which gives voice to the female through the Native American experience. Gaining access to a world and mythology which pre-exists the white male construction of adventure, she is able to navigate a space in which the female story has not yet been defined by the masculine voice.

Kingsolver begins her novel by following the male archetype of western myth, the only difference being that her main character is female. Kingsolver creates a strong-minded, independent woman in search of a better life. Turning away from Kentucky, Missy Greer, at twenty-three, heads west with the hope of finding a life that will provide new opportunities. Popular western heroes such as Daniel Boone, Huck Finn, and Natty Bumppo are all brought to mind in Kingsolver’s initial description of Missy. She is strong and independent, and appears fully capable of clearing her path in order to achieve her own desires, but most importantly she, like them, desires to leave civilization and “light out for the territory” (Twain 283). Similar to Leslie Fiedler’s depictions of westering men in *The Return of the Vanishing American*, Kingsolver creates a protagonist who yearns for escape. Many male literary figures “together constitute the image of the runaway from home and civilization whom we long to be when we are our most authentic selves”; their female counterparts “add up to the image of his dearest enemy, spokesman for the culture and the European inheritance he flees” (118). Men leave their homes in order to flee women; women represent opposition to the fulfillment of their identities. Building on this tradition, Kingsolver inverts the usual pattern in order to explore the female’s search for identity.
Important to note as well is the fact that *The Bean Trees* is a southern novel, or certainly a novel that begins in the South. Taking place initially in Kentucky, it is replete with rural images and the vivid dialogue of the South. However, Missy’s southern origins take up very little of this novel. Giving the reader only a glimpse, Kingsolver shows us the impetus for Missy’s search and an explanation for the western novel that *The Bean Trees* becomes. The nasturtiums might bloom like “Mama’s hen-and-chicks pot on the front porch at home,” but by the end of the novel, Missy is not in Kentucky anymore. And in leaving Kentucky, Missy and *The Bean Trees* leave the South behind in an attempt to head west and craft a western adventure. How can a southern novel be a western novel? Robert Brinkmeyer explores this question in *Remapping Southern Literature*. He notes the proliferation of western novels written by southerners and their interests in exploring notions of southern place and western space. In *The Bean Trees*, Brinkmeyer sees the main character as forming a place in the West, finding some type of regeneration that comes through “reintegration—reintegration into family and community that closes . . . *The Bean Trees*” (101). While the novel might certainly be read in this way, it neglects to consider the lack of community described in this southern locale. Missy Greer may find something typically considered “southern” in Arizona, but the remarkable thing is she doesn’t find this “typically southern” place in Kentucky. For this reason, a “reintegration” does not seem possible; instead she crafts a new place, her own place, out of the space she seeks. Much of what sparks the events of *The Bean Trees* proves a dramatic reaction against the main character’s southern upbringing.

Unlike the societal pressures depicted in traditional western novels, *The Bean Trees* reverses the paradigm in which the demands of society are represented by women. In contrast to the depictions of men seeking freedom away from the demands of women, Kingsolver suggests a world in which women and children feel limited by the demands of the father. Although Kingsolver creates no father figure for Missy (her father leaves long before she is born), she does paint a vivid picture of another family in Pittman County: Newt Harbine’s. Missy sees many likenesses between herself and Newt. “If you were to look at the two of us . . . you could have pegged us for brother and sister” (2). Due to these similarities, Kingsolver suggests that the events that occur in Newt’s family are at least partially responsible for Missy’s flight. Missy relates the story of watching Newt Harbine’s father propelled “over the top of the Standard Oil sign” due to
his inability to fill a tire correctly. Despite the comedy provided for the reader, this experience leaves a lasting impression on Missy. “I had this feeling about what Newt’s whole life was going to amount to, and I felt sorry for him. Before that exact moment I don’t believe I had given much thought to the future” (1). And it is later, after Newt Harbine shoots his wife and kills himself, that Missy saves her money in an attempt to leave Pittman County. Jolene, Newt’s wife, tells Missy that Newt’s father was responsible for everything. She claims that: “he [Newt’s father] beat him up, beat her up, and even . . . hit the baby with a coal scuttle” (9). As similarities have already been drawn between Newt and Missy, it is difficult not to see the feelings of being trapped and lost to all opportunity for Newt as well. Escaping “daddy” is seen as a difficult feat, as in Newt’s eventual demise, as well as Jolene’s challenges of escaping her own father’s abuse. Learning Jolene’s past, Missy feels she may have been lucky: “I told her I didn’t know, because I didn’t have a daddy. That I was lucky that way. She said yeah” (9).

In addition to this pressure, Missy is also desperate to escape the pressures to conform to the woman’s role in Pittman County, Kentucky. Most of the women at Missy’s high school have become pregnant before their senior year: “Believe me in those days the girls were dropping by the wayside like seeds off a poppyseed bun and you learned to look at every day as a prize” (3). Graduating from high school, Missy describes herself as incredibly lucky to have been given a job at the local hospital. In fact, she says that her science teacher who helped her get the job “changed my life, there is no doubt” (3). In an environment where most young girls become pregnant and marry, Missy describes a place where opportunities for a different kind of life are limited or non-existent. Her mother cleans homes for people in town, and before the hospital, Missy’s only options for gaining money are helping her mother with other people’s laundry, babysitting, or picking bugs off farmers’ beans. Missy prizes the job at the hospital, as it contrasts dramatically with the dead end jobs she has had before. She states: “But this was a real job at the Pittman County Hospital, which was one of the most important and cleanest places for about a hundred miles” (4). Missy pursues a life that deviates from the ones around her: “Mama always said barefoot and pregnant was not my style. She knew” (3). Escaping pregnancy, Missy feels she has the opportunity to flee Pittman County and the dim future it represents for her.

Perhaps more telling than the lack of opportunity is the lack of community in Pittman County, Kentucky. Nowhere does Kingsolver describe
this southern community in a positive way. Unlike other southern novels rife with the close, sometimes smothering bonds of family and community, Kingsolver describes no close friends or caring extended family in Missy’s life. The only positive forces are her mother, who always acted as if her daughter “hung [the moon] up in the sky and plugged in all the stars,” and her teacher who is “from out of state, from some city college up north” (3). They are the only ones described who are able to envision a life larger than Pittman County. Telling, too, is the fact that Missy’s teacher is not even from the South. He seems easily able to imagine a larger, more expansive world, due to his outsider’s perspective. That a southern community might be found stifling is not necessarily surprising or strange; southern literature abounds with such descriptions. What is considerably more notable is that this small southern county is completely devoid of any representation of community. Perhaps Missy is denied admittance; yet she never mentions a positive view of community for anyone, including her mother or her school friends. Certainly if she were able to accept life in Pittman County on its own terms, she might find herself with a larger body of friends; however, even those who seem to acquiesce seem devoid of any support. Regardless of this larger absence found within Pittman County, the focus remains on Missy’s lack of community. Take out Missy’s mother and her northern teacher, and she has no one. Within this environment, Missy Greer is well-fostered to become a self-sufficient and independent individual. She has no real choice. Missy’s society prescribes a role that she does not desire and denies her a sense of community. For these reasons, the dream of freedom that has always loomed large for the westering man is now sought by the woman in her equally powerful desire to escape. Southern society threatens her vision of personal identity. Flight is essential.

Missy will be like the fish she finds in the “old mud-bottomed ponds” of Kentucky—“The ones nobody was ever going to hook, slipping away under the water like dark-brown dreams” (3). She will not be the “hooked bass” that remains. After working at the hospital for more than five years, she makes enough money to buy a modern-day horse, a “55 Volkswagen bug with no windows to speak of, and no back seat and no starter” (10). She leaves Kentucky unaided and relying on her own abilities: “I would drive west until my car stopped running, and there I would stay” (12).

Soon after she leaves, Missy decides she will change her name. “I wasn’t crazy about anything I had been called up to this point in life, and this seemed like the time to make a clean break. I didn’t have any spe-
cial name in mind, but just wanted a change” (11). The name change certainly marks Missy’s desire to “re-create” herself, or at least her attempts toward that re-creation, but it also marks Missy’s recognition of her own success at leaving Pittman County, and, similar to other western figures, her ability to claim her own autonomy due to her escape. R. W. B. Lewis notes in *The American Adam* this pivotal moment in Cooper’s *Deerslayer*.

Once “the trial is successfully passed—the trial of honor, courage and self-reliance—Deerslayer earns his symbolic reward of a new name” (104). Missy’s name change is equally pivotal. She decides to name herself for the nearest town in which her car runs out of gas. Although she claims to desire leaving this decision to the fates, she proves she has control over what her destiny will be. “I came pretty close to being named after Homer, Illinois, but kept pushing it. I kept my fingers crossed through Sidney, Sadorus, Cerro Gordo, Decatur, and Blue Mound, and coasted into Taylorsville on the fumes” (12). She chooses the name Taylor. She has fashioned her own name, which denotes not only western movement but also someone empowered and able to adapt or create. This change further marks Taylor as a creative participant in her new identity.

Taylor’s adventure west continues to follow this male pattern at the beginning of the novel. Just as she leaves the South behind and begins to create her own identity, she crosses the path of the Native American. As Fiedler states: “The heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape . . . but the encounter with the Indian” (21). Much has been written concerning the white male’s relationship with the Indian. Smith writes in *Virgin Land*: “As the literary Western hero moves beyond the Mississippi he is becoming more and more fully assimilated into the mores of the Indian. At the same time, he is conceived as more and more completely autonomous, isolated, and self-contained” (91). Regardless of the result, which has often been dramatic, the exchange between whites and Native Americans usually has taken place between men.

Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* places equal importance on this confrontation, but its approach differs dramatically from earlier literary representations. Just as Taylor begins to feel she has left Pittman County behind, she is surprised by a Cherokee woman who emerges out of the night to leave a small child with her as she is leaving a diner. Taylor is confused and muddled about what she should do. A child is not part of her plan, and she quickly feels the promise of her new life threatened: “If I wanted a baby I would have stayed in Kentucky . . . I could have had babies coming out of my ears by now” (18). Yet Taylor does not leave the child, and
she continues on her journey with baby in tow. Once she realizes that the child has been abused, Taylor becomes more convinced that she really has no choice: “I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl” (23). Finding “bruises and worse” on the child’s body, Taylor confronts the dark shadows of abuse which have tormented the child’s young life.

Important to note, as well, is the fact that Kingsolver has chosen that the Native American child should be Cherokee. Through this choice, Kingsolver evokes the forced removal of Native Americans from the southeastern part of the United States, including Cherokee, along the Trail of Tears (1813–1855). Allusions to this historical event intensify Kingsolver’s questioning of an American mythology of conquest and control. Arriving in Oklahoma, Taylor states, “It was not a place you’d ever go to live without some kind of lethal weapon aimed at your hind end. It was clear to me that the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here was to get them to lie down and die without a fight” (13). Sympathizing with the Native American plight, Taylor is perhaps further moved due to her own belief that she is one-eighth Cherokee. Raised by her mother, Taylor has been brought up to believe that if times grew tough she could always claim her “head rights.” On arriving in Oklahoma, Taylor realizes that these “rights” promise very little. When she writes home she informs her mother: “No offense, but the Cherokee Nation is crap. Headed west” (15). Kingsolver emphasizes the despair Taylor finds at the Oklahoma reservation. “I sat in the parking lot looking out over that godless stretch of nothing and came the closest I have ever come to cashing in and plowing under” (13). What her mother has imagined as possible freedom, Taylor discovers to be stagnation and ultimate despair. Claiming the child, however, ties Taylor to this heritage, regardless of her rejection of reservation life.

The acquisition of the child is pivotal in Kingsolver’s novel, for at this point Kingsolver breaks from the archetypal male construction. Although the confrontation with the Native American is comparable in importance, Taylor’s experience no longer mirrors that of the masculine. Choosing to adapt a Cherokee creation myth, Kingsolver severs her previous connection to a white masculine perspective and investigates the female experience through Cherokee mythology. Traditionally in American literature, the white male experience has been closely defined through his relation to the Native American. Much of the white male interaction has relied
heavily on the physical component of that relationship. The white male gains from his experience with the Native American by modeling many of his physical abilities. Learning the ways of the woods, the white male learns how to navigate through the frontier landscape through the guidance and expertise of the Native American. However, although these behaviors are often successfully modeled, males tend to stray from the spiritual nature of their “borrowed” behavior. The inner workings of Native American mythology have no place in the white world and in many ways frighten white males in their search to gain access and control of a mysterious wilderness.

Fiedler comments on the threat of Indian mythology in *The Return of the Vanishing American*:

The really disturbing threat of the Indian, technologically backward and eternally surprised at the white man’s treachery, was never military—nor even, despite the unexpectedness of the pox venereal—but mythological, which is to say, based not on what he did, only on what he was. (39)

Kingsolver explores levels of Native American mythology and Native American spirituality which have been traditionally avoided in white literary representations. Even as her character follows the male pattern of confrontation with the Native American, the encounter, and the ramifications of that encounter, will differ vastly from the male approach. Rather than confronting and adopting the *physical* attributes of a Native American world, Kingsolver creates a character who explores the *spiritual* or mythological ways of Native Americans. Despite the radical differences in the contact, a growing sense of identity still emerges from this experience.

Important to note as well is the fact that the specific myth that Kingsolver incorporates is based on female deities. By looking to the Cherokee world, Kingsolver’s story further gains strength by employing a myth derived from a society in which women are empowered. Historically, Cherokee society was matrilineal. The influence of the woman in Cherokee culture is seen through the power demonstrated by females in the area of kinship. “The only permanent members of a household were women. Husbands were outsiders; that is they were not kinsmen. When a man married, he moved from the household of his mother to that of his wife” (Perdue 43). Empowerment of women in areas of kinship is equally represented in the mythology that surrounds Cherokee thought. Some critics
state that “the existence of an important female deity indicates the acceptance of female rights, privileges, and even power” (Perdue 40). Many of the deities that exist in the Cherokee world reflect the essential role of the woman in Cherokee society. Two examples include the deity of corn and the deity of creation. Commanding a role in the Native American’s main source of food, as well as in the act of creation, exemplifies the unequivocal importance of the female within Cherokee society.

Kingsolver’s choice of myth not only describes the female experience but also glorifies the power of the woman and her ability to create. The central figure of the Cherokee myth of creation is Star Woman; she creates not only gardens but also new worlds. In the ancient Cherokee myth, Star Woman is responsible for the creation of the natural world and for bringing consciousness to those around her:

Many people say it was Star Woman who was the primal cause. One story says she was in her father’s garden, that is in Galunlati, when she heard drumming under a tree and dug a hole to see what was going on. Star Woman fell through the hole and spun toward the earth. At that time the earth was under the primeval flood, and earth creatures lacked the spark of deep consciousness or understanding. They did have feelings, however.

The father watched his daughter fall and called on the winds to get the earth creatures to help her. Turtle suggested that his back become a landing place for her, so the animals dove into the depths to find something soft to place on Turtle’s back.

Now the earth on Turtle’s back grew . . . All was ready for Star Woman, who landed on Turtle’s back and immediately produced corn, beans, other plants, and rivers from her body. Most of all, she brought the spark of consciousness, symbolized by the Cherokee’s sacred fire, which is always kept alive for the ceremonies. (Leeming 47)

Kingsolver’s knowledge of this myth is revealed on a variety of levels due to the emphasis placed on certain themes. The myth details the empowerment of the female, which is central to the human connection to a natural world, as well as the importance of community. In choosing and adapting this myth to her novel, Kingsolver dramatically opposes traditional themes of the western archetypal tradition.

In both the myth and the novel, women leave the world they have previously known for another. Star Woman falls through a hole from her fa-
ther's world, while Taylor leaves a patriarchal southern world that restricts her. After their departure, their journeys are radically changed through their meeting with (the) Turtle. Star Woman is saved from the destructive “primeval flood,” where no land mass exists, through the concerted efforts of the natural world to find a means for her survival. She enters a world in which the human and natural world come together in a communal effort.

In Kingsolver’s novel, Taylor has a similar experience. Soon after receiving the Cherokee child, Taylor names her Turtle due to her powerful grip:

> The most amazing thing was the way that child held on. From the first moment I picked it up out of its nest of wet blanket, it attached itself to me by its little hands like roots sucking on dry dirt. I think it would have been easier to separate me from my hair. . . . You’re like a mud turtle. If a mud turtle bites you, it won’t let go till it thunders. (22)

Difficult to ignore is the similarity that emerges between the relationship between the two pairs (Star Woman and the turtle, and Taylor and Turtle). Both lives are dramatically changed due to the productivity that arises through their meeting.

Although Kingsolver focuses on the relationships that occur in the human world, she describes these relationships in terms that reflect the natural world. By doing so, Kingsolver compares the connections between people with the relationships essential in the plant and animal world, as seen in Taylor's description of Turtle’s holding on. Despite the fact that the dirt is “dry,” there is still the powerfully natural connection between soil and plant and the creative act that occurs between the two. Whether between people and plants or between soil and animals, productivity only occurs through relationship. Unlike mythic adventures of the male, creation is the goal, rather than acquisition or destruction.

In many ways Kingsolver enacts the Indian belief of the Sacred Hoop through her choice of creation myth. The myth and thus the novel function as reminders that the individual belongs to a larger body. As Paula Gunn Allen states in *The Sacred Hoop*:

> At base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being . . . Beauty is wholeness. . . . The circle
of being is not physical, but it is dynamic and alive. It is what lives and moves and knows, and all the life forms we recognize—animals, plants, rocks, winds—partake of this greater life. (241)

Therefore the natural world and the human world often reflect and combine to emphasize the vital interconnectedness of a larger, spiritual world.

Kingsolver continually mixes and merges images of nature with people. Often the very act of nature described is the spark for bringing the characters together. One such powerful instance occurs when the drought in Tucson finally ends. “Around 4 o’clock we heard thunder. Mattie turned over the ‘closed’ sign in the window and said ‘Come on. I want you to smell this’” (160). Hustling everyone to come along, Mattie brings Taylor, Lou Anne, Esperanza and Estevan to witness the Indian New Year. Mattie explains to Taylor that “They celebrated it on whatever day the summer’s first rain fell” (161). Taylor’s small community is again drawn together by nature’s instigation. Knocking on her door late at night, Virgie Mae, her older neighbor, comes to announce the appearance of her night-blooming cereus.6 Gathering up the children, Taylor and Lou Ann walk over to Virgie Mae and Edna’s to witness the amazingly rare natural occurrence. “The petals stood out in starry rays, and in the center of each flower there was a complicated construction of silvery threads shaped like a pair of cupped hands catching moonlight. A fairy boat, ready to be launched into the darkness” (186). Lou Ann states that “it’s a sign . . . [of] something good” (186). Occurring in the midst of personal challenges, the cereus unites community and proves the existence of beauty, even in the darkness.

Taylor’s relationships are strengthened due to their communal participation in nature, but it is also important to realize that the community which exists around her arises through Taylor’s own relationship with Turtle. Just as vegetative productivity is the result of the connection between Star Woman and Turtle, so is communal productivity the result of the connection between Taylor and Turtle. Kingsolver challenges Taylor by confronting her directly with the problems of motherhood as well as her growing comprehension of the difficulties in the world around her. Although these difficulties surround Taylor, she is strengthened by the group that encompasses her due to Turtle’s presence. When Taylor has questions about mothering or needs a babysitter, she soon finds support through the women around her.

On first meeting Mattie at Jesus Is Lord Used Tires, Taylor and Mattie develop a bond when discussing the care of Turtle. Mattie quickly in-
forms Taylor, as she gives more juice to the baby, that “It’s so dry out here kids will dehydrate real fast. . . . You have to watch out for that” (44). Taylor slowly begins to realize the enormous responsibility she has assumed: “I wondered how many other things were lurking around waiting to take a child’s life when you weren’t paying attention. I was useless” (45). Fortunately for Taylor, she is surrounded by a group of strong women. Although Taylor’s mother is also depicted as a strong woman, community is not described as a source of support in Kentucky. In Tucson, Taylor finds a world where women aid and help those around them. Quickly meeting Lou Ann when she moves to Tucson, Taylor shares rent with her in order for the two women to afford raising small children as single parents. Child-care and meals are often shared, and the burden seems lighter due to the bond that grows between these two strangers. Lou Ann and Taylor soon meet others who are invited to share meals and discuss their lives and personal struggles. Estevan tells a story one evening which epitomizes Kingsolver’s growing point concerning the bonds and need of community.

If you go to visit hell, you will see a room like this kitchen. There is a pot of delicious stew on the table, with the most delicate aroma you can imagine. All around, people sit, like us. Only they are dying of starvation . . . They are starving because they only have spoons with very long handles . . . With these ridiculous, terrible spoons, the people in hell can reach into the pot but they cannot put the food in their mouths. Oh, how hungry they are . . . you can visit heaven . . . You see a room just like the first one, the same table, the same pot of stew, the same spoons as long as a sponge mop. But these people are all happy and fat. . . . Why do you think?

He pinched up a chunk of pineapple in his chopsticks, neat as you please, and reached all the way across the table to offer it to Turtle. She took it like a newborn bird. (108)

Struggles still surround, yet the community members are able to make their way with each other’s help. Amid these powerful women is Mattie, the matriarchal leader who runs the used tire shop. Although Mattie runs her own business, she also uses her store as a sanctuary for illegal aliens. Providing food and care for those who need it, Mattie’s home and business thrive as a means of support for those who find themselves hiding from the law. Mattie’s ability to repair and sell tires emerges as a fitting metaphor symbolizing the importance of action. This is seen most clearly
through Mattie’s ability to “control” tires. This power scares Taylor initially, as she is haunted by Newt Harbine’s father’s inability to control them. However, Mattie is able to rid Taylor of her fears, and ultimately teach her the importance and need for the power tires possess, if one only knows how to control them.

Much of the male western myth has been founded on the desire to explore adventure on the edges of a shifting frontier. As men gain and cultivate, the frontier moves outward, while civilization slowly follows. Male characters must travel farther and farther away from civilization in order to confront those explosive areas which exist on the ever-moving frontier. Kingsolver also explores this occurrence; however, she finds a movement which shifts inward as opposed to one that continues outward. The dangers come from areas close to home, those areas which have already been settled and defined as safe. For Taylor, adventures emerge in the challenge to survive within the domestic frontier. Although in Taylor’s “adventure” the landscape no longer presents an overt threat, the landscape does hide would-be molesters who jeopardize the physical as well as the spiritual growth of children. Escaping one danger that occurs within her biological family, Turtle is further abused by an unknown assailant’s attack. While Taylor is at work, Edna, an older blind neighbor, takes Turtle to the park. During their day there, Edna hears that Turtle is being attacked, yet even with her blindness she is able to strike the attacker with her cane and drive him away. Those places which appear to be the safest may hide dark elements of violence and destruction.

Taylor’s adventures multiply as she gains a greater understanding of the challenges of those individuals who live around her. Her naiveté quickly explodes when she learns of the plight of illegal aliens like Estevan, who tells Taylor one evening what happened to him and his wife in Guatemala. After the police killed Estevan’s brother and two of his friends, they looked to Esperanza and Estevan for the names of the remaining members of a teacher’s union to which they belonged. Refusing to release the seventeen names, Estevan and Esperanza’s child was taken from them as a leveraging tool. Without proof of the malevolent treatment which awaits their return to Central America, Estevan and Esperanza become fugitives who must hide from an American government which refuses them aid. Threatened with removal, the illegal aliens depend upon Taylor’s ability to guide them to a sanctuary hidden from the law. Opening her eyes to the world around her, Taylor vents her frustration with those who question the safety of such an expedition: “Just stop it okay? . . . I
can’t see why I shouldn’t do this. If I saw somebody was going to get hit by a truck I’d push them out of the way. Wouldn’t anybody? It’s a sad day for us all if I’m being a hero here” (188). Taylor is confronted with the fact that she must finally grow up and face the real world, which is often dangerous and cruel. There seems no need to look very far for adventure. Dangers and threats circle and impinge on life for the individual and the community, even in the perceived safety of society.

Some critics believe that Kingsolver’s story appears too “politically correct” in its approach. Occasionally the tension or conflict is rather too easily resolved, given a world which is often more messy than neat. Some also argue that her easy incorporation of multi-cultural communities exists primarily to provide images rather than to attempt to confront realistic representations of these integrations. However, to be blinded by these shortcomings would certainly be a loss. For Kingsolver has found a way to give voice to that experience which has yet to be explored. By re-writing the western experience through the female mythology of the Cherokee, Kingsolver has gained access to that part of our American experience which has been lamentably absent in our imaginative constructions of the American West.

Many critics have noted the importance of the Native American in the development of our American identity, yet few have fully explored that legacy. Through The Bean Trees, Kingsolver launches our pursuit of that complete voice by providing the voice of the female as well as the spiritual legacy of the Native American. Despite Taylor’s re-creation of self, her metamorphosis is radically different from the creation of self found in stories of western male adventure. Rather than relying on the power of the individual and the individual’s ability to conquer challenges on his own, Kingsolver creates a female character who is empowered and able to transform herself and others through the act of creation through community. As Allen states in The Sacred Hoop, motherhood brings that power:

A strong attitude integrally connects the power of Original Thinking or Creation Thinking to the power of mothering. That power is not so much the power to give birth, as we have noted, but the power to make, to create, to transform. Ritual, as noted elsewhere, means transforming something from one state or condition to another, and that ability is inherent in the action of mothering . . . And as the cultures that are woman-centered and Mother-ritual based are also cultures that value peacefulness, harmony, coopera-
tion, health, and general prosperity, they are systems of thought and practice that would bear deeper study in our troubled, conflict-ridden time. (29)

And it is through this experience that Taylor is empowered. Facing a role she initially tried so doggedly to avoid, Taylor has been initiated in the role of mother. Through this acceptance of responsibility she has dramatically transformed a small, abused, silent little girl into a growing child who is able to play, sing, and dance. Yet Turtle’s life is not the only life to be transformed; Taylor has also created a new identity for herself by becoming a mother. She has turned her back on an individualistic approach for one of nurturing help and assistance through community. As the traditional male approach depicts the need of males to explore their own individual desires and powers, it also depicts a turning away from social responsibility. Desiring freedom from the demands that such a responsibility entails, men have exemplified an individualistic search. Although Kingsolver describes a similar desire to explore individual pursuits, she does not depict a woman who is able to turn her back on responsibility. Through this acceptance, Taylor gains the powers of motherhood, as well as the essential powers of community.

This delicate natural system is described by Taylor to Turtle when she attempts to define their family. Similar to the Cherokee creation myth, ideas of community and the natural world are again combined. Taylor explains all these connections to Turtle when she questions her about their family:

But this is the most interesting part: wisteria vines, like other legumes, often thrive in poor soil, the book said. Their secret is something called rhizobia. These are microscopic bugs that live underground in little knots on the roots. They suck nitrogen gas right out of the soil and turn it into fertilizer for the plant.

... “It’s like this... There’s a whole invisible system for helping out the plant that you’d never guess is there.” I loved this idea. “It’s just the same as with people. The way Edna has Virgie, and Virgie has Edna, and Sandi has Kid Central Station, and everybody has Mattie. And on and on.” This wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles. (227–228)

Kingsolver ends the novel in much the same way as the ending of the Cherokee myth. Both end with the production that arises through rela-
tionship. Star Woman is surrounded by the “corn, beans, other plants, and rivers from her body,” while Taylor is amazed by the profundity of friends, family, and a larger body of community that surrounds her. Kingsolver formulates the idea of regeneration through communal productivity. As the organic relationship serves to symbolize the power of community in Taylor’s life, it also seems to speak to the larger messages of a changing mythology which exists throughout.

The relation between the wisteria and rhizobia represents Maggie’s garden as described at the beginning of the novel. Wisteria “thrives in poor soil” just as Maggie’s vegetables grow within auto parts. Both plants are surrounded by elements which would seem to impede their growth. However, something “invisible” exists which nourishes and enables their productivity. In much the same way, Kingsolver addresses the American mythology of the West. By turning from the male archetype, Kingsolver claims a new mythology which proves in her novel to be a productive means of experience. On their own, the American myths of the West are weakened by their inability to produce a viable future, yet by adapting Native American myth, the rhizobia, to the American experience, balance is possible.

As Star Woman brings consciousness to the natural world, Kingsolver’s archetype is created with the same hope. In this way, Taylor becomes like Star Woman, bringing the world consciousness, and, perhaps more importantly, balance. And by expressing that hope, Kingsolver has succeeded in creating an archetype that melds the two myths together. By attempting a “new” archetype, she has initiated the process of finding a new mythic model from which to view the American experience. Although Taylor’s initial story seems to be her attempt to escape her southern past, her story grows into a much larger vision. Taylor’s move enlarges her scope and understanding of herself in relation to the world as a whole. Her story is certainly an escape from the South, but Kingsolver uses this regional move to express the need to escape any type of limited vision. A vision of wholeness in relation to America and the world as a whole is needed in order to gain understanding. Through her creation of Taylor, she molds an individual who empowers the American experience by stitching together two mythologies, the male western narrative of individualism and the female-centered Native American myth of connectivity, in order to reveal the need for balance within our American mythology. By doing so, Kingsolver provides a vision of the feminine as well as the masculine. The hero is both adventurer and domesticator. The power
of creation and motherhood, as well as the need for action and adventure, is essential for growth and productivity. The garden no longer symbolizes that space relegated as a safe portion outside the male experience, nor does it symbolize a limited place in which women are empowered to create. Adventures and dangers abound in the communal garden.

Rusted Thunderbirds and CB antennae for tomato vines imply that the movement these auto parts once represented has been dismantled. Motion has subsided in order to provide support. Whether for nasturtiums, cabbage or tomatoes, all come together to aid in the growth of the garden. This image certainly strengthens the image of the garden as a place of power and support, yet it is important to keep in mind that this garden exists directly outside of a car shop. There may be a lot of cars that have been dismantled into parts, yet these parts still provide the potential to go when needed. This garden is prepared for action when the need arises, which is exemplified by Taylor’s departure to help Estevan and Esperanza. When those within the community are in danger, action must be taken. However, action takes place on behalf of the community, as opposed to an individual’s departure in search of adventure. And with that hope, Kingsolver has developed a new western archetype, a hero who is both mother and adventurer.

NOTES

1. There were times when westering women found some liberation through their experience. Sandra Myers and to a lesser degree Lillian Schlissel reveal some examples of women “who greeted the adventure of the western frontier with zeal and independent spirit” (Schlissel 15). However, these occurrences are not the norm.

2. Women certainly experienced meetings with the Indian, yet this introduction rarely resulted in any dramatic change in female behavior. As men are described as becoming more assimilated to Indian behaviors, women’s encounters more often reflect a reaction that reflects their own white femininity. Often they are shown as becoming frightened, or in contrast they become more sympathetic to the Indian. Rarely, however, do they become more like the Indian—unless of course they are captured and forced into assimilation. This lack of self-willed assimilation shows a marked difference in this encounter.

3. Richard Slotkin notes in *Regeneration Through Violence* these behavioral techniques by relating to Colonel Smith’s published account of life with the Native Americans. By offering a description of Indian discipline and tactics, he hopes to enable his countrymen to share the benefits of his experience (329).

4. Slotkin exemplifies the contrasting physical version. In learning the physical prowess of the Indian, the male also learns the ways of the wilderness.
Learning the ways of the Indian, the male then turns his new-found knowledge against the Indian. He claims that this kinship is justified in that it makes the hunter more effective as the destroyer of the Indian, as the exorcist of the wilderness’s darkness. “He comes to know the Indian only in the act of destroying him” (563).

5. In the Cherokee myth of Corn Mother, told by Joseph Bruchac, there is the story of a grandmother who is mysteriously able to provide corn for her family by rubbing her sides. Once her secret is found out, she must leave, but she makes her grandson promise to clear the land and bury her body in the cultivated field, and “wherever a drop of blood fell, a small plant grew up” (97). In this act, she promised to always be with her people. This myth exemplifies the importance of the female in that a female deity provides for her community through her act of giving.

6. Cereus is also known as the “Queen of the Night.” Kingsolver positions this natural occurrence the night before Taylor is to attempt to take Estevan and Esperanza to safer sanctuary, in the midst of their personal and political turmoil. The natural image works well in showing light amid the darkness. The Latin root of cereus is candle. The common name also works well in this scene, evoking the power of women to handle and persevere in difficulties.

7. For example, see Ryan, 77–82.

WORKS CITED


