

Utopian Foodways:
Critical Essays

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Societies evolve towards the questions they ask. The ALIMENTOPIA project was built upon a set of questions that call for both a critical approach to societies and the imagination of the way these may evolve, from the point of view of food. The *Série ALIMENTOPIA*, published by U.Porto Press as part of *Coleção Transversal*, aims to contribute to the creation of a history of literature and culture focused on how societies produce, distribute and prepare food, taking into account, for the critical reflection on the present and the future, indicators of inclusion, development, and sustainability, at different levels.

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“What we need is here”: Food, Sustainability, and American Myths and Projects

Maria Teresa Castilho & Sofia de Melo Araújo

I

In his introduction to Berry's *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food*, Michael Pollan, one of the most active proponents of food reform in the United States, stresses the great relevance of Wendell Berry, who, in spite of not being directly committed to a particular food movement, is indeed someone who has undoubtedly encouraged the rise of the Food and Slow Food Movements in the United States. Actually, Berry is known to many as a great inspiring reference to sustainable food movements in the United States, having thus greatly contributed to the food studies programmes in American higher-education institutions which started to crop up in the period around the 1990s.

Looking at the future through the lens of a New Agrarian Movement in the United States, Wendell Berry, a Southern writer poet, essayist and New Agrarian cultural critic, is a strong defender of an agrarian revolution for a better and sustainable world and society. In his view, there is an important connection between food and the land, and while arguing that “eating is an agricultural act” (1988), Berry has observed that the industrial and economic practices are largely responsible both for the current dystopian “epidemic” of chronic diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes and even for his own homeland insecurity. For almost six decades, Wendell Berry, dialoguing with a quintessential American pastoral tradition, has spoken out in defence of caring for the land and nature, which is visibly upheld in both his writing and his own alternative lifestyle on a small farm near Port Royal, Kentucky. Echoing some of the voices of his literary and intellectual Agrarian ancestors, like John Crowe Ransom or Robert Penn Warren in *I'll Take My Stand*, and offering enlightened contributions to the debate on relations between environment and sustainability while longing for the reconnecting of people and place, Berry ends up raising questions about food, food production and about what we eat.

While seeking to emphasise Wendell Berry's more human conceptions of the American land and nature, which indubitably contributed to making some consider him a Thoreau of today, and taking into consideration the publication of “The Pleasures of Eating” in 1989, we also maintain

that it is evident that this Southern academic and man of letters became, in the very end of the 1980s, the soul of an agrarian revolution towards a sustainable food world of an “honorable peace with nature” (Ransom et al 1977: 7). Thus, the American spirit was able to save – or rather, to recover – its belief in a bountiful, generous, man-intended and God-given Nature. The early myths (and expectations) of abundance – condensed into colonial and post-colonial tales such as “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” – can live on, transformed into a mature, rational hope of industrious sustainability. Challenging Americans to reflect on

the kind or quality of the food [they eat], or where it came from, or how it was produced and prepared, or what ingredients, additives, and residues it contains — unless, that is, [Americans undertake] a close and constant study of the food industry, in which case he or she might as well wake up and play an active and responsible part in the economy of food (Berry 1998)

and recovering some values and perspectives inherited from the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s, Wendell Berry certainly strongly contributed to promoting an American food movement.

I'll Take My Stand embodied the indignation of the region at the changes imposed by the process of Americanization and its high capitalist economy, materialism and industrialism in the first decades of the 20th century. The Agrarians sought to confront the widespread and rapidly increasing effects of modernity, urbanism, industrialism and a new money economy in the country and, above all, in the culture and traditions of the South. Indeed, these intellectuals did not believe in their contemporaries' dominant optimistic notion of continual progress based on industrialism. In John Crowe Ransom's words, the twelve Southern Agrarians warned that “what is called progress is often destruction” (Ransom 1934: 310). As a matter of fact, their dilemma seems to foreshadow some of the features of today's global societies, marked by uncontrolled dehumanising mechanisation, technology and economy. Ultimately, these intellectuals, affiliated with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, expressed dissatisfaction with the increasing loss of Southern identity in favour of the Northern model of progress, modernity and industrialism. The confrontation found its first outlet in the Agrarians' Manifesto of the 1930s.

In 2001 a kind of a new Agrarian Manifesto was published: *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture and the Community of Life* represents, indeed, a kind of multiregional “rebirth” of the *I'll Take My Stand* manifesto. The editor, Eric Freyfogle, opens the book with a compelling introductory essay entitled “A Durable Scale”, in which he states, “collectively, the [Agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand*] expressed alarm over the effects of industrialism and materialism on the mannerly, leisurely, humanistic culture they viewed as the South's greatest treasure” (Freyfogle 2001: xxxviii). These old Nashville Agrarians were, in fact, involved in a process of rejection of the integration of their region into the modern social and economic dominant American model, which, in those days, promoted the view of a never-ending progress brought by post-First World War technology and industry. Nevertheless, if the Agrarians of the Thirties advocated a rural South devoted to farms, crops, and animals, against the modern Yankee North with its high capitalist finance and

industrialization, the New Agrarians of today also believe, as Wendell Berry assumes quoting Allen Tate, that

there is another way to live and think: it's called agrarianism. It is not so much a philosophy as a practice, an attitude, a loyalty and a passion – all based on close connection with the land. It results in a sound local economy in which producers and consumers are neighbours and in which nature herself becomes the standard for work and production” (in Kimbrell 2002: 39).

Undoubtedly agrarianism is inherently conservative, and in the past one of the problems with this Southern movement was that it upheld a Southern way of life, which was a core part of the American cultural mechanism responsible for both racism and cultural and social elitism in the South. However, the current understanding of the Nashville Agrarians' manifesto of political, cultural and economic conceptions indicates that their main goal was to articulate a philosophy rooted in love and respect for the land, with the enormous changes the traditional rural South was undergoing. Indeed, they were trying to reformulate a regionalist impulse and at the same time to promote the distinctive traditional Southern values along with a healthy, agrarian way of life. They affirmed their convictions and values as a decisive alternative to urban life and industrialism, which the Yankees, forgetting the founding American pastoral ideal, were blindly advocating, unaware that such progress, as the Agrarians stressed, would sooner or later become dystopia itself. As noted by Eric Freyfogle, who quotes John Crowe Ransom in *I'll Take My Stand*, “industrialism ‘was the latest form of pioneering and the worst’, its driving energy the ‘principle of boundless aggression against nature’”. “Although”, Freyfogle also notes, “[Ransom] admitted that the industrial mind displayed ‘almost miraculous cunning’, it was, he urged, ‘rightly a menial’: ‘It needs to be strongly governed or it will destroy the economy of household’” (xxxix). Yet, the 1940s saw the end of the Agrarians' project and in 1945 John Crowe Ransom acknowledged that their principles would not succeed in making America go back to the simpler agrarian values that characterised her past. However, it should be noted that some sectors of American society have revealed a certain awareness of the mistakes and dangers caused by an industrial corporate economy.

In 2001, during the Bush administration, Freyfogle also recorded:

[I]t is as unsurprising as it is heartening that agrarian ways and virtues are resurging in American culture, prompted by a wide range of public and private ills. To the diseases and degradations of the modern age, a New Agrarianism is quietly rising to offer remedies and defenses, not just to the noise, vulgarity and congestion that have long affronted urban dwellers but to various assaults on land, family, religious sensibilities and communal life that have tended everywhere to breed alienation and despair (xiv).

On the other hand, in 2002 Wendell Berry himself enthusiastically pointed out in “The Agrarian Standard” that

[I]t is not useless or wrong to suppose that urban people have agricultural responsibilities that they should try to meet. And in fact this [was] happening. The agrarian population [in the United States] is growing, and by no means is it made up merely of some farmers and some country people. It includes urban gardeners, urban consumers who are buying food from local farmers, organizers of local food economies, consumers who have grown doubtful of the healthfulness, the trustworthiness and dependability of the corporate food system – people, in other words, who understand what it means to be landless (Berry 2003: 150).

The New Agrarians of today gathered in *The New Agrarianism*, which was quite curiously published immediately before 9/11, and marked the resurgence of a new agrarian movement claiming for the rebirth of agrarian practices and values, thus harking back to the Jeffersonian homeland founding principles “of America, free from England, as a boundless Utopia of farms taking a thousand generations to fill” (Ransom et al 1977: 69-70). The New Agrarians resemble, in this respect, their spiritual fathers: John Crowe Ransom, who in “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” defended that a happier human destiny should be secured through “an honorable peace with nature” (7); and Robert Penn Warren, who warned against the destructive effects of industrialism and materialism (see “The Briar Patch”). They yearn for a current agrarian revival not only within a particular region, but within a multiregional and multiracial America. They try to articulate, as Gene Logsdon states in “What Comes Around”, “the best of urban life with the best in rural life in a new admirable agrarianism” (Freyfogle 2001: 89). However, while the Agrarians in 1930 aimed at defending and affirming their own region, which they regarded as their homeland in the context of the entire nation, today’s new Agrarians, and especially Wendell Berry, often combine the discussion about land use and the industrial system with the discussion about a growing dissatisfaction with the corporatist *status quo*. Reacting to the 9/11 attacks, Berry states:

We [Americans] now have a clear, inescapable choice that we must make. We can continue to promote a global economic system of unlimited ‘free trade’ among corporations, held together by long and highly vulnerable lines of communication and supply, but now recognizing that such a system will have to be protected by a hugely expensive police force that will be worldwide, whether maintained by one nation or several or all, and that such a police force will be effective precisely to the extent that it over sways the freedom and privacy of the citizens of every nation. Or we can promote a decentralized world economy which would have the aim of assuring to every nation and region a local self-sufficiency in life-supporting goods. This would not eliminate international trade, but it would tend toward a trade in surpluses after local needs had been met (Berry 2005: 4).

By the 1970s, a new community of intellectuals and writers began to gather around Wendell Berry, who established a small farm near Port Royal, Kentucky, and who for five decades has been working his land and writing his texts to preserve and defend, as he states in “The Ecological Crises as a Crises of Character”:

[T]he concept of country, homeland, dwelling place becomes simplified as ‘the environment’ — that is, what surrounds us. Once we see our place, our part of the world as *surrounding* us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves. We have given up the understanding — dropped it out of our language and so out of our thought — that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other. (Berry 1996: 22)

As a matter of fact, reacting against the dangers and signs of possible destruction brought by the enthusiastic heralds of unlimited technological progress and the global economy, Wendell Berry, an untiring advocate of a new Agrarianism and one of the foremost voices in rural America, has spoken in defence of local agriculture and of reducing resource consumption as a way of protecting the land of one’s own. It is his strong conviction that only the healthy and respectful communion between people and the land can ensure a better, healthier and happier life since the land is an integral part of humans just as humans design their own land and life.

Yet, in the 1970s, nobody could predict the future and ironically, especially if we consider the current American administration, Berry went on, revealing an almost prophetic view in his distressed evaluation of the facts, behaviour and decisions in 2001,

Starting with the economies of food and farming, we should promote at home, and encourage abroad, the ideal of local self-sufficiency. We should recognize that this is the surest, the safest, and the cheapest way for the world to live. We should not countenance the loss or destruction of any local capacity to produce necessary goods. (Berry 2005: 8-9)

In fact this writer and poet is undoubtedly one of the greatest and most enthusiastic representatives of the New Agrarians of today, and he has spoken in defence of local agriculture and of reducing resource consumption as the only way to get a desirable and dreamed-of society of sustainable eating.

Since the publication of his book, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, in 1977, this agrarian writer has been a harsh opponent of industrial agriculture while at the same time warning against the destructive action of industrialism and technology. Thus, he has given enlightened contributions both to the debate on sustainable food movements in the United States and to the discussion on the devastating effects on the environment brought about by the industrial economic system that structures Americans’ lives.

At the very beginning of the 21st century, in one of the first paragraphs of “The Agrarian Standard”, Wendell Berry, strongly opposed to industrial agriculture, sounded a warning against the destructive action of industrialism and technology, and once again rose in defence of the preservation of the land:

II

The way of industrialism is the way of the machine. To the industrial mind, a machine is not merely an instrument for doing work or amusing ourselves or making war; it is an explanation of the world and of life. Because industrialism cannot understand living things except as machines, and can grant them no value that is not utilitarian, it conceives of farming and forestry as forms of mining; it cannot use the land without abusing it. Industrialism prescribes an economy that is placeless and displacing. It does not distinguish one place from another. It applies its methods and technologies indiscriminately in the American East and the American West, in the United States and India. It thus continues the economy of colonialism (Berry 2003: 144).

Wendell Berry has indeed spoken about the dangers caused by not caring for the land and nature and, in the face of the United States' vulnerability, as revealed in the 9/11 attacks, he warns that,

[Americans] should reconsider and renew and extend [their] efforts to protect the natural foundations of the human economy: soil, water, and air. [They] should protect every intact ecosystem and watershed that [they] have left, and begin restoration of those that have been damaged (Berry 2005: 9).

Berry's life as an agrarian writer, as he himself stated in 2002 in "The American Standard", has been "an odd experience". However, nothing has prevented him from stressing that, when we work against nature, we are bound to pay the price sooner or later. His life as an agrarian writer and activist, he declared,

has certainly involved [him] in such confusions, but [he has] never doubted for a minute at the importance of the hope [he has] tried to serve: the hope that [Americans] might become a healthy people in a healthy land (in Berry 2003: 143)

In the current political climate, these words certainly resonate as precious advice towards the agreement and the desire of a great number of Americans, wishing that "[their] nation will live up to the dreams and expectations of [their] founding fathers and that [they] duly reinvent [themselves] in the image of a more just, less materialistic, ecologically secure and spiritually enriched culture" (Berry 2005: iii).

Undoubtedly providing pathways of criticism and hope, Wendell Berry offers a precious contribution to a collective reflection and consequent response to the sombre atmosphere prevailing in US politics today, where daily announcements and decisions make many Americans long for a healthier, more inclusive, and sustainable American Homeland.

Food is often at the core of escape utopias, utopias which are structured around mythical solutions provided to – rather than created for – inherent human needs and cravings. These forms of popular utopia, even if they may sometimes have direct rapport with reality, are, by essence, perpetual and constant, beyond realistic human reach, unbound by either time or space, and unafflicted by them. Food is, then, a clear symbol, as it is no longer perishable or subject to climate or geographical coordinates. Escapist utopias also escape the control of established, earthly authority and even alterity itself: reduced to a contented, basic, animal essence, men are not instinctively at odds with each other and immediate competition is no longer necessary. And yet, it is usually achieved in a (pseudo-)natural way. Nature is presented as a miraculous version of itself: boundless and generous. The roots of this idea of a natural essence of Good extend across the frontiers of religion and civilisation. But how did it survive from the classical gods (and worship) of abundance to the Judaeo-Christian matrix on the West? Through balance and trust. It did so by replacing the limitless enjoyment of Bacchus with the idea of God-made Earth created for the sustaining of its respectful children. Thus, agriculture, farming, the managing of the Earth's offerings through labour, can be perceived as a guarantee of rightful existence and due reward. This belief extends to our common identification of "bio products", true to Nature, as being inherently better. The notion of a well-balanced, harmonious, God-intended relationship between Man and Earth is exemplified when confronting the industrialisation of farming, as Wendell Berry and Anne Buchanan did:

Until well into the 19th century Western Europe was still – like the Third World today – a dominantly rural society. Farming was not merely the work of millions of peasants and the craftsmen who backed them up but the way of life of close-knit, small-scale communities. Increasingly, this century, people have been leaving the land [...]. They are being driven off because they don't have the money to compete with the extremely capital-intensive industry which is farming today. They are being replaced by machines [...]. But this flight from the land, this 'forced migration of people greater than any in history' as Wendell Berry puts it, should be questioned. For as it occurs, agricultural skills vital to the survival of humanity are being lost. Today's farmers are older and their children have left for the city. When our present high-energy agriculture is no longer sustainable (left alone in the event of a major war with all its implications) we may need these skills again [...]. Such a migration is also a complete break with both the centuries of our own past and the accumulated wisdom of most other cultures which see the land and the people as inseparable, which see the land as the very foundation of human civilisation (Buchanan 1982: 101-3)

America comes out to European minds as a utopia itself, the very embodiment of a New World. Colonisation goes hand in hand with the expectation of a solution to all the hindrances to happiness in the old continent. Understanding America demands the full awareness of this

myriad of dreams, hopes and projections that were shared, at times authenticated, and mostly frustrated. The American dream was, in fact, converted into the puritan-based belief in self-made, hard-working, self-sacrificing heroes achieving wealth and success. However, the dream of a land of plenty was initially paramount and converted the ideals desired into possibilities dreamt. The hardships endured – both at home and during the settling – justified both the longing for and the obtaining of endless commodities (and even pleasures). In the same fashion as Cockaigne illustrated the needs and desperation of people in medieval times, the tale condensed in the concept of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” was the escapism fitting American life:

The descriptions of such fantastic places allowed people in Medieval Europe to escape the limitations of their everyday lives and enter a perfect dreamland. Escapism to attractive imaginary places belongs to all times and cultures, with each paradise reflecting the ideals of its creators and of the society at large where it originated. (Cunha 2002: 3)

‘Big Rock Candy Mountain’, the American oral tradition, and Cockaigne belong to a trend within escapist utopias. These utopias of desire are the perfect match for needy individuals and a response to societal clashes which chooses a “dream of social equality” (Rammel 1990: 37) rather than a scenario of *mundus inversus*. Jacqueline Dutton, looking at Cockaigne as the matrix of food-oriented utopias, makes a case for the idiosyncrasy of desire in utopia:

Commonly held views of the utopian paradigm as the representation of a perfectly harmonious equilibrium, a society based on reason rather than passion, support the hypothesis that many literary utopias suffer from a deficit of desire. And perhaps for this very reason, the role that desire plays in the projection of an ideal place remains a relatively unexplored aspect of the utopian genre, an aspect which we will attempt to reintegrate into the debate via the fundamental opposition between greed and need with reference to the gastronomy trope. (Dutton 2002: 20)

Gorman Beauchamp is adamant that “there is another utopian tradition – even more venerable, and at least as persistent as that of the moralists and savants” (Beauchamp 1981: 345) – and resorts to Lewis Mumford’s distinction between utopias of escape and utopias of reconstruction. The Freudian principles of desire and reality established in 1911 sustain, in a way, the everlasting nature of this tradition, what A. L. Morton calls “an almost secret tradition under the surface, while the mainstream of utopian thought passed through other channels” (Morton 1952: 171). In Morton’s first chapter, ‘Poor Man’s Heaven’, he connects this secret tradition to the core essence of utopian thinking itself: “In the beginning Utopia is an image of desire” (ibid: 11). Desire, rather than a perfect, rational, reasonable, balanced, and, most importantly, feasible utopia, is what lies at the bottom of escapist utopias like Cockaigne and Big Rock Candy Mountain, “the country’s classic song of flight to a place of bliss”, in John Dean’s words (cf. Dean 1992: 244).

The official story of Big Rock Candy Mountain as an autonomous text is that of a folksong first recorded in 1928 by an itinerant singer called Harry McClintock, who claimed to have created it in 1895 based on his own hobo days, when he was known as ‘Haywire Mac’. The connection to the historical period in the United States is highlighted by authors like Kimon Valaskakis: “In the depth of the Great Depression of the 1930s a popular folk song encapsulated in musical form the frustrations of an affluent society suddenly immobilized” (Valaskakis 1980: 1). Tradition has it, though, that the song may have been created earlier or, at least, be based on earlier popular itinerant songs. Michael Moon explained:

Here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it may be hard to hear much more in the song than some over-familiar strains of ‘old-timey music’, but at the time McClintock recorded the song seventy-five years ago it was just coming to the end of a long career as an anthem of a far-flung ‘hobohemian’ sub-culture that had strong affinities with such varied social movements as anarchism, communalism, and tramping. Although its topography of ‘candyland’ may sound innocuous, the song actually gives us a key back into the heyday of the ideal of roving camaraderie that Walt Whitman saluted in poems such as ‘Song of the Open Road’ and, even farther back, into the protosocialist utopias – social, economic, and sexual – planned by the French theorist Charles Fourier. (Moon 2006: 303)

Apparently, the 1928 version had already been washed of many extreme references (possibly including those to whores), but still included adult pleasures, including streams of whisky and cigarette trees, and the avoidance of adult perils and hobo fears, including police officers and bulldogs. In 1949 Burl Ives recorded a fully sanitized version aimed at child listeners, which will be responsible for much of the myth’s afterlife as a children’s tale, to the point of Hal Rammel, in his study of it, describing it as “a children’s song” (Rammel 1990: 10).

In the tradition of the *tall tales* generated by the perspective of a New World, some direct aspects of Cockaigne on food were shared orally and even used to entice labourers. Thus, in the way of a confrontation with Puritan heritage, the tradition is transitioned into the realm of the cautionary. That became an intrinsic part of the history of the myth, as visible in the dissertation signed by Hal Rammel

Nowhere in America focuses on the liberatory humor implicit in the Big Rock Candy Mountain and its historical antecedents, from carnival and saturnalian reversals to topsy-turvy nonsense, even when that vision lies buried in an otherwise moralistic or reactionary context. (Rammel 1990: 2)

This other side is not entirely new, as sin and pleasure are irremediably associated, and even the medieval Cockaigne depicted in monasteries was already described as having clear “anticlerical intent” (ibid: 14).. Lands of plenty are often read as cautionary tales in which sloth and gluttony are to be resisted and the metaphor comes to be read as such in works as the novel of Wallace

Stegner, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* or expressions like “pie in the sky”, associated to delusion and even to deceit. This tension was always present in the idea of United States America, as is made evident in Benjamin Franklin’s 1782 assertion:

In short, America is the Land of Labour, and by no means that the English call Lubberland, and the French Pays de Cocagne, where the streets are said to be pav’d with half-peck Loaves, the Houses til’d with Pancakes, and where the Fowls fly about ready roasted, crying, Come and eat me!’ (Morgan 2006: 281)

When, in 1943, Wallace Stegner published his autobiographical novel *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, “Stegner’s widely acclaimed classic of the American West” (Robinson 1982: 101) the myth was already a symbol of lost American dreams:

The Big Rock Candy Mountain is in the tradition of the novel depicting the defeat of the American dream, a tradition including Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels, Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Wright’s *Native Son* [...] Stegner shows one fatally misdirected form of the American dream in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (Mason, 1986: 34)

Stegner himself reflected on the way the green light of the American Dream is read in his novel, and how dream and responsibility relate:

I hope change doesn’t wipe out the memory of the time when we were all free on wheels, when we could wheel around the West, any place we wanted to. That’s not going to go on forever, you know. I had a feeling last fall going through southern Utah that it was probably the last trip of that kind that I was going to make. It becomes irresponsible after awhile to waste that much gas just to look at Bryce Canyon or Capitol Reef. So we’ll all have to go by public transportation, find another way. As you know, I’m hooked on history, I am committed to the notion that we can change as the history changes. People like Bo Mason can’t. They grow up without history, and they live without history, without any sense of history. They’re trapped in the present. (Stegner 2010: 49)

Thus, his reading of his leading character:

I never conceived Bo Mason as being either pathetic or funny. He is a strong, dominant kind of man, and in a way a dangerous one... but still deluded, socially deluded, the product of frontiers which now all of a sudden have closed. He was made to be a frontiersman, he’s a frontiersman *manqué*. He would have done very well as a mountain man. Been just as careless, just as reckless, just as wild, just as greedy. Whatever else, the American way was made for him. (ibid: 47)

But the American Way is no longer one that can trust in Nature providing. As the 20th century progresses, the link between consumption and nature is no longer seen as inviting and sustainability becomes a core issue. Etta Madden and Martha L. Finch summarise the troubled relationship between America and Abundance:

contradictory interpretations of America – as both a utopian land of abundant resources and possibilities and, because of that abundance, also a fallen nation of consumers who fret over their diets, health, and apparent cultural poverty – complicate meanings of America-as-utopia. In response, communities have developed distinct food practices to promote their own visions of how life should be lived in America [...]. From early travel narratives that described in vibrant detail the discovery of exotic new foods, to recent accounts that have presented the United States as ‘breadbasket to the world’, food has served as a primary symbol of American abundance [...] not unlike colonial travel narratives that served up as a cornucopia of American fruits, fish, and game to a European readership hungry for the exotic and for profit, it is still primarily food products – now Coca-Cola and McDonald’s restaurants – that serve as the most potent emblems of the inherently conflict-laden myths of American abundance and consumption to the rest of the world. (Madden 2006: 7)

Abundance is never completely abandoned as a goal or even a rightful compensation for dutiful, honourable behaviour. Thus, industrialisation and science are at times directed towards the obtaining of abundance – albeit a utopian sustainable abundance – and Nature is less of a provider and more of a means:

Not only is nature viewed as subservient and to some degree ‘evil’ in the mass-consumption paradigm but – strangely – also as bountiful and endowed with unlimited capacity to satisfy man’s thirst (Valaskakis 1980: 4)

The new polarization of the 1970s and 1980s seems to portend an imminent paradigm shift. The *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, logical sequel of the Industrial Revolution and the mass-consumption society, is now undergoing change. There is room for alternative life styles. The intellectual market for new development priorities is now wide open (ibid: 17)

Nature can now be seen as realm to be manoeuvred and led by science and technology, and the Cockaigne ideals of “plenty and liberation” (Wolford 1991: 92) are felt to be within reach through industrialized science which will allow for resistant crops or labouring robots, and for a renewed possibility of avoiding effort toil and escaping contingency, in a technological twist on escapist utopias:

Second only to the plentitude of food, the absence of authoritarian restraint goes hand-in-hand with personal reward for activities such as sleeping, eating, drinking, or a lowly

position in society. It is the clarity, simplicity, and familiarity of these basic features that make the Land of Cockaigne so adaptable to so many different, often quite contradictory, ends (Rammel 1990: 31)

And yet, it will be the dangers in the combination of the ambition of escapist utopias and the forms of attainability provided by technology that will lead to the current central concern with sustainability which drives the discourse of New Agrarians and thinkers like Wendell Berry. The need and desire are timeless, and one is forced to agree with Hans Hinrichs: “And so it goes. Wherever life is hard, men will dream. If there are poets among them, sooner or later a new Schlaraffenland is bound to be invented as a glorious consolation” (Hinrichs 35). In fact, the reasons that explain how Attic poets and American hobos share dreams are the same ones that support the defence of an agrarian revolution heading towards the reconnecting of land and Men, finding Utopia in Nature, but through balance and responsibility, rather than desire and reliance.

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