

For the Love of Farming

Deeply Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness

By Lisa M. Hamilton

Counterpoint, 313pp, \$15.95, 2010

ISBN 978-1582435862

Reviewed by Kelly Donati

There is a familiar zealotry in the overwhelming abundance of recent writing on the place of food and farming in contemporary culture and economy, a religiosity that is too often laden with self-righteousness and good doses of hysteria. This is not to suggest that, when it comes to agribusiness, there is not much about which to be concerned and critical. It is to say only that in the burgeoning popular literature on food and farming, it is sometimes hard to strike the right balance between good writing and good critique. Photographer and writer Lisa M. Hamilton's *Deeply Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness* offers both.

Hamilton is not without her own crusading zeal in her portrayals of three unorthodox farming families. 'They are the faithful,' she begins, 'the ones who believe, despite anything that society shows them, that what they are doing is worth it—that it is vital' (5). The affective and spiritual dimension of farming is indeed familiar and favoured territory for Hamilton. Her first book, *ShumeiNatural Agriculture: Farming to Create Heaven on Earth*, profiles farmers following the teachings of spiritual leader and farming pioneer Mokichi Okada. In this most recent book which traverses three agricultural regions of the United States, she attempts to capture what compels her subjects to pursue their unconventional mode of thinking, working and being, as they resist the dominant economic and political forces of agribusiness which shape how the world is fed. If, as A. Whitney Sanford suggests, '[s]tories help us develop and enact our ethical frameworks that help us think through various courses of action and depict the consequences of those choices' (285), then the value of Hamilton's farming chronicles is that they disrupt industrial agriculture's linear narratives of productivity, efficiency and progress which privilege yield and profitability over vitality, ethics and care. Hers are stories of mindful farming: philosophies, belief systems and ways of life that are imbued with the drama of love, pain and deep connections with the more-than-human world of farming—that is, interactions between people, animals, plants and even microbes. It is agriculture at its liveliest.

Hamilton approaches farming not only as an industry, but as the material expression of an agrarian belief system and an act of survival, one that 'determines whether we as a society will live or die' (4). The stakes are high, yet she handles the subject with a delicate, observant calmness that is rare in much contemporary food writing. Hamilton's challenge to the logic of industrial agriculture is achieved by capturing the art and spirit of farming, producing a moving and inspiring book that is relevant to both academic and non-academic readers with an interest in agrarian literature.

Deeply Rooted is divided into three sections, each dedicated to a different type of food production. Hamilton's exploration of her farming subjects' diverse backgrounds personalises and particularises the racial politics and cultural histories of agribusiness in the US, weaving threads from the past into the present to tell stories that are personal, political and well-informed. She begins with a pair of fourth generation dairy farmers, the loquacious Harry West and his more reserved son Wynton who hail from a corner of east Texas settled by their descendants as freed slaves. Their herd of 42 cows earns the Wests just enough to make a living, though the tiny farm is increasingly rare. A good many have been consolidated into larger farms as part of a national strategy of economic rationalisation in which 'efficiency was the new gospel' (56). As Hamilton describes sitting through an annual meeting of the organic dairy cooperative of which the Wests are members, the emerging debates and diverse opinions of organic milk production highlight the challenges of maintaining family-sized farms and the conflicting perspectives and vested interests at stake in defining what it means to be 'organic'. Even amongst the cooperative's longhaired CEO and barefoot employees, Harry's own understanding of organic dairying is somewhat unconventional—it is 'pasture as a principle and a code, which guides farmers toward doing what is deep-down right' (87). By bringing attention to how ethics and pasture are inextricably bound up together for Harry, Hamilton opens up the space to the possibilities offered by thinking about organic food production as a spiritual practice rather than a certification system.

The second section of the book introduces the reader to tenth generation rancher Virgil Trujillo from Abiquiu, New Mexico, the Ranchlands Manager of Ghost Ranch, a 21,000 acre property of rangeland which he maintains and on which he grazes his own cattle. The ranch, once belonging to his great-grandfather, forms the backdrop for the tensions inherent not only in Virgil's personal and professional life but also in the history of his people. His dream is to rehabilitate the land and bring agriculture back to his community. It is not about food *per se* but about 'the deeper rewards the land offers. Independence. Purpose. Continuity' (161-162). A bureaucratic injustice and deception against Virgil's ancestors two centuries ago remains unfinished business, representing

a loss of cultural and economic independence that perpetuates his own and his community's alienation from the land. In the world of agribusiness, this is an all too familiar story, and Hamilton draws these painful parallels of alienation eloquently throughout the book.

Virgil is embroiled in an ongoing battle with environmental activists who object to ranchers on public land and want to see the ranch returned to its 'natural' state. Hamilton doesn't explicitly weigh in on either side of the debate but pauses long enough to question the value of enclosing nature from humanity in this way. It is clear that, like Virgil, she believes the health of the land and those who live off it are inextricably entwined in ways that are often poorly understood or appreciated, even within the environmental movement. Virgil's story illustrates how land, livelihood and identity are entangled like roots in the soil in ways that will always exceed the economic and political calculations of agribusiness. Hamilton presents a narrative of farming as a practice of care, responsiveness and renewal that sits in stark contrast to the extractive forms of industrial agriculture which surround her subjects. At the same time, she problematises attempts to protect and preserve the 'wild' from human intervention in the name of environmental conservation and explores both the practical and philosophical difficulties of positioning nature and culture in radical opposition to one another.

The book concludes with the Podoll family: two brothers, Dan and David, along with Dan's wife, the very busy Theresa who is also a gardener, cook, farming activist and farmers market coordinator. Theresa presents a clear challenge to the stereotype of the farmer's wife as playing a secondary or supportive role. Though Hamilton takes note of David's comment that 'we took a bad turn in our culture when we took food production away from women and gave it to the men' it is a point that she might have allowed more space to explore (235).

As organic producers of millet, triticale and buckwheat, the Podolls go against the grain of their small community in North Dakota, regarded with suspicion by neighbours who farm in what David describes despairingly as a 'biological desert' of conventional agriculture (229). Of the three families profiled in *Deeply Rooted*, the Podolls are the only ones for whom the pleasures of eating and questions of taste sit at the heart of their everyday lives and their farming philosophy. The Podolls' emotional and spiritual attachment to food production is expressed through their kitchen garden which David humbly credits with providing him vital lessons in sensual awareness and teaching him everything he needs to know about being a good farmer:

You crawl around on your hands and knees, picking weeds, and you see things, ... you smell things. All your senses are used. Being a careful

observer like that gives you a better sense of where to plant what, how to rotate things. With that level of awareness you have an infinite ability to finesse the production of your food. (245)

Like the other farmers in the book, David has a profoundly spiritual interpretation of what it means to be a farmer and seed saver, describing the garden as the 'world's salvation' (245). This religiosity might be grating for some. But Hamilton's subjects are so moving and articulate in their understanding of farming as the righteous path to ecological and personal deliverance (and David is not the only one) that there are many moments in the book when it is tempting for even the most detached of readers to give oneself over to the occasional 'amen'.

Hamilton has written elsewhere that to understand the rhythms of agriculture and to gain an appreciation of what farming *means* rather than what farmers *do*, a writer must bear witness to the tedious and repetitive: 'To write about farmers, one must instead slow down to that rhythm of repetition. ... Being witness means a willingness to pass the same barn or tree or fencepost two dozen times and continually try to learn something new about it' ('From the Author'). Lengthy silences, frustrating tasks and time wasted are used by Hamilton as opportunities to see things differently. Long drives through the endlessly repetitious landscape of corn, soybeans and wheat in North Dakota reveal how the 'same act has been done over and over, the same decision made so many times it has almost ceased to be a choice' (215).

There is a moment in the book when—sitting in a dairy covered in sweat and surrounded by cow excrement, flies and the muddy mess of the milking barn—Hamilton is offered a cup of milk which she drinks after some hesitation, surprised by its tantalising, buttery richness. What marks the difference between this and ordinary milk is Harry's artfulness as a food producer. *Deeply Rooted* is a little like Harry's styrofoam cup of cold milk—refreshing, clean and well-crafted. The clear, evocative and palatable prose artfully navigates the reader through vastly contrasting vistas, from the putrid, treeless landscape of industrial-scale dairies in New Mexico to the chaotic beauty of the Podoll's experimental tomato patch. Moving from one story to another, Hamilton's writing evokes a sense of sadness in leaving behind the powerful narratives and poignant reflections that each farmer offers.

Though Hamilton at times proselytises on topics ranging from how genetically modified agriculture threatens the practice of seed-saving to the lifeless, inhuman nature of industrial farming, it is always relevant to the story at hand. Nor does it get in the way of her primary objective of unearthing narratives that illustrate the nuanced sensuality of an ancient vocation grounded in a deep love of the land. As anthropologist Laura Delind points out, 'few of us retain

the language or the arguments sufficient to explain the spirit or address the substance of how we come to be local,' calling on 'food advocates and activists ... to see, record, and argue for the value of the emotive, the cultural, the spiritual (127). While Hamilton's project is not specifically to valorise the local as many writers have done before her, her contribution to the field of agrarian writing and her skill as a storyteller is the subtlety with which she captures the values of hope, artfulness, creativity, taste, beauty and generosity which inspire and motivate her farming subjects. Hamilton's agenda is not about bringing farmers to the table, but one that is even more basic: to bring farmers back to the farm and to suggest an emotional and spiritual currency by which agriculture might be valued and accounted for. More than documenting the practices of unconventional farmers, hers are love stories. *Deeply Rooted* is a worthy undertaking in the spiritual accounting of farming on a human scale.

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