

## Review of:

### ***Rooted Resistance: Agrarian Myth in Modern America***

Ross Singer, Stephanie Houston Grey, and Jeff Motter. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2020. Pp. 261, bibliography, index.

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In *Rooted Resistance: Agrarian Myth in Modern America*, Ross Singer, Stephanie Houston Grey, and Jeff Motter provide a riveting historical and rhetorical account of “agrarianism,” a philosophy that hinges upon the inherent virtue of pre-industrial family farming as a way of life, and of the connectedness among people and with the land that it fosters. Agrarianism underpins a powerful social and political discourse, which they call “American agrarian myth.” Linked to a democratic political vision since the era of Thomas Jefferson’s influential writings on the yeoman farmer as the ideal democratic citizen, American agrarian myth not only asserts the exceptional moral, social, and political virtue provided by pre-industrial family farming, but the exceptional character of Americans as a people empowered and shaped by the collective experience of agrarian life. American agrarian myth is deployed most commonly today in the service of legitimating consumer products or political figures, yet it continues to be a contested and ambiguous rhetorical space that retains power and widespread appeal for the American public, both rural and urban. The authors explain that “*Rooted Resistance* examines this reservoir of myth as a source of trusted social truth and persuasive commonplaces” (6). The case studies discussed in this volume reveal how the new agrarianism that functions as an ethic of resistance entwined with this myth can be co-opted by corporate or industrial interests just as easily as it can be deployed to the ends of social justice or environmentalism. Despite this vulnerability to distortion, the richness and ambiguity of American agrarian myth are the basis of its transformative potential to appeal to and unite diverse parties within American culture in the face of multiple imminent and interconnected global crises, including climate change and food insecurity. In their own ambitious words, the authors conclude by considering “the prospect of a new-agrarian identity informed by myth and spreading across the world, capable of dismantling the industrial food system and culture of death at its root” (33).

Setting the tone for the agricultural metaphors that crop up in this work, the authors titled the sections of their book “Part I: Seeds of Resistance” and “Part II: Threatened Harvests,” in which they introduce key figures and movements in the history of modern agrarianism and then illuminate the way those early influences fostered articulations of new agrarianism across various ideologies, respectively. The seven case study chapters spread among Parts I and II feature diverse manifestations of American agrarian mythmaking from World War I to 2013, tracking patterns and revealing “the complex relations between agrarian myth and the discourses of industrialism and consumerism” (15).

Opening Part I near the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chapter 1 focuses upon the way American food propaganda during World War I—under the leadership of U.S. Food Administration head Herbert Hoover, U.S. Committee on Public Information head George Creel, and U.S. National War Garden Commission head Charles Lathrop Pack—

drew upon American agrarian myth to mobilize food production on the home front with enormous success. Chapter 2 profiles the postwar effects of this wartime expansion for American farmers by conducting a close analysis of the use of American agrarian myth in the writings of the American Country Life Association, an organization whose mission was to advocate for rural citizens and farmers as essential to democracy. Chapter 3 explores American agrarian myth in the rhetoric of the Southern Agrarians, another organization advocating for the existential importance of American farming and farmers, this time with a regional twist that simultaneously tried to renew an idealized Southern identity. Despite the internal contradictions of idealizing an agrarian agricultural past that was in fact defined by plantation-based slave labor, the Southern Agrarians made a lasting contribution to American agrarian myth in the form of imagining agrarianism as a form of resistance to industrialized modernity. Chapter 4 profiles the father of organic farming, Jerome I. Rodale, and how his landmark work *Pay Dirt* (1945) evokes and contributes to American agrarian myth through adapting the Biblical genre jeremiad to provide a prophetic vision of contemporary American agrarianism.

Part II brings us into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting with Chapter 5 about the famous case of the South Central Farmers of Los Angeles profiled in the documentary film *The Garden*; the authors argue that the film adapts American agrarian myth to new communities (Latinx farmers) and contexts (urban spaces), opening up new opportunities. Chapter 6 refocuses on how contemporary American agrarian myth has been co-opted by corporate interests, chronicling the rise and dramatic fall of Chipotle's "food with integrity" branding campaign, rhetorically analyzed by way of several widely viewed videos. Chapter 7 presents the Dodge Ram commercial "So God Made a Farmer," aired at the 2013 Super Bowl, as the final case study, examining how the ad expertly draws on and reimagines modern American agrarian myth through words and images that appeal to urban majorities despite internal contradictions.

*Rooted Resistance* presents an ambitious project of knowledge building, critique, and social advocacy by way of painstakingly detailed rhetorical history and incisive analysis, whose ultimate goal is no less than to reveal the revolutionary potential of new agrarianisms to remake and save the world. Written from a decidedly non-folkloristic perspective—by scholars of rhetoric writing at the nexus of communication studies and food studies about discourse they call "myth"—the volume achieves its interdisciplinary goals in offering a great deal of interest and value to folklorists and other humanities scholars who consider public discourse crucial context rather than a primary subject. As a folklorist studying a foodways tradition only tangentially related to farming life, I see incredible resonance between the American agrarian myth as an ethic of resistance, as described in this book, and the individual and collective identities expressed through the fricassee soup I study. I imagine that other folklorists studying food in today's complex moment of accelerating climate change, growing social justice awareness, and seemingly irreversible agricultural industrialization might also find some salient rhetorical context for understanding the social meanings of the traditions they study in *Rooted Resistance*.