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Growing Resistance: Canadian Farmers and the Politics of Genetically Modified Wheat by Emily Eaton

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***Growing Resistance: Canadian Farmers and the Politics of Genetically Modified Wheat* by EMILY EATON**

U of Manitoba P, 2013 \$27.95

Reviewed by **AUBREY STREIT KRUG**

Growing Resistance inquires into the case of transgenic Roundup Ready (RR) wheat on the Canadian prairies. Canadian farmers and an unlikely coalition of organizations announced their opposition to RR wheat in 2001. By 2004, Monsanto had decided to back off its efforts to introduce the crop. The resistance to RR wheat—and the effectiveness of this resistance—was surprising because there had not been the same response to the introduction of genetically modified canola in Canada.

One way to explain the difference could be to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of RR wheat. But Emily Eaton suggests that such an approach would be unsatisfying because of its narrow vision of economics. She sees economics as extending beyond individual humans acting rationally in a free market system. Therefore, her interdisciplinary analysis connects farmers' economic decisions to "the specificities of local history, cultural practices, and the character of wheat as a biological entity" in order to understand how and why they successfully resisted RR wheat.

Eaton also sidesteps pro/con debates about the moral and scientific aspects of genetic modification. Instead, she provides detailed political-economic analysis of a particular case in its wider context. She draws on 43 participant interviews (plus articles in *The Western Producer* and a few public meetings) as primary sources, and reads these within the longer cultural and material history of

wheat production on the prairies and the broader picture of a globalizing national economy. Eaton's approach seems to stem from her subject matter. Like the resistance movement she studies, which is motivated by economic, environmental, and democratic concerns, her project grows from the interconnections of agriculture, capitalism, politics, and social justice.

The preface and first chapter of the book include explanations of methodology, background information on RR wheat, and lucid definitions of theoretical concepts and academic debates. Eaton considers prairie farmers as subjects who have agency but who are also "the product of structural relations of power" within the shifting "discourses and policies" of neoliberalism. In the case of RR wheat, though they purchase chemical inputs and machinery, and rely on a system of governmental policies and transport to take their crops to the global marketplace, farmers can reproduce their wheat from seed rather than having to buy seed each season. RR wheat can thus be understood as a neoliberal mechanism used by a corporation to further appropriate wheat production, bringing its very reproduction into the private market. This appropriation is represented through a generic discourse of the crop's profitability and "exchange value," but can be opposed by farmers' discursive "cultural and institutional attachments to wheat" and the distinctiveness of wheat as a plant.

As I hope my summary indicates, Eaton's book begins with clear concepts and questions and then moves into more nuanced, complex analysis and arguments. This structure makes the material accessible for a wide audience—scholars in a variety of fields, activists and policy developers, as well as farmers and food producers—

without oversimplifying it. And given the recent discovery of RR wheat in Oregon, this material continues to be relevant.

In the second chapter, Eaton begins to show why the resistance to RR wheat found fertile ground for democratic critique. She outlines how biotechnology has been regulated and analyzes Canadian governmental strategy, specifically the reliance on “principles of substantial equivalence and product-based regulation.” For RR wheat, this allowed for scientific regulation that nevertheless discounted “concerns over broader social, political, and ethical dimensions of biotechnology.”

Chapter three, “The Difference Between Bread and Oil: People-Plant Relationships in Historical Context,” is perhaps the most captivating from an ecocritical perspective. Eaton connects Donna Haraway’s ideas with the history of settler colonial agriculture in order to posit wheat and canola as “companion species of Canadian farmers and eaters.” These plants are both cultural and material entities; they are socialized by humans at the same time that they influence human actions. Specifically, “[w]heat is co-produced through the agronomic, scientific, and ecological practices of farmers, scientists, and plants. These co-productions are thoroughly political and involve value judgments about what is agronomically, socially, and economically useful and desirable.”

Eaton traces the history of wheat through the development of the “white settler wheat economy,” paying particular attention to how wheat’s disease resistance, usefulness in crop rotations, and amenability to seed saving have meant that private investment in wheat is less attractive than it was in the development of canola. Cultural and national narratives of

crops in Canada link wheat to populist community and canola to scientific and technological innovation.

Though we tend to associate genetically modified crops with issues of consumer rights, in chapter four Eaton uses the case of RR wheat to demonstrate the power of producers’ concerns, which are prompted by environmental and political questions as well as “practical attention to agronomic viability and access to markets, and more longstanding questions about how to keep profit and control on the farm.” This leads to chapter five, which describes the fight between a neoliberal vision of the market as “the only appropriate site and mechanism for social change” that is conducted by consumers, and the RR resistance coalition’s call for a public sphere that fosters citizens’ collective action for the common good. Here, Eaton interrogates the rhetoric of “choice,” pointing out how choices on the “free” market are in fact constrained and controlled by corporations. Furthermore, as one of her interview participants points out, “the result of narrowed choice is the deskilling of the farmer and a loss of knowledge about biodiversity and productive practices” because subsequent choices are even more limited.

Roger Epp has similarly explored globalization’s “political de-skilling of rural communities,” and Epp’s call for a “political economy of place” (318) seems applicable to the conclusions of *Growing Resistance*. So too might environmental justice advocates build on and respond to Eaton’s analysis, especially her argument that the intensification of corporate control of biotechnology and agriculture in fact provides the new terms of resistance: it unites producers and consumers in opposition, and it centralizes “a problem

that requires collective action in order for it to be challenged.” *Growing Resistance* teaches the value of connecting local histories to global issues in order to resist corporate control through diverse collective actions. So finally, and most importantly, the need to decolonize agricultural economies and the ways in which indigenous communities and cultures in the Global South are also already engaged in growing resistance must factor into this future work.

Work Cited

Epp, Roger. “The Political De-skilling of Rural Communities.” *Writing Off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments and the Transformation of Rural Communities*. Ed. Roger Epp and Dave Whitson. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2001. 301-324. Print.

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