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Liminal Livestock

Why are women like chickens and chickens like women?
—subRosa Art Collective (2005)

Two versions of the same children's story have pride of place on my office shelf: a large-format illustrated pulp paperback version of *The Little Red Hen*, produced by the Saalfield Publishing Company in Akron, Ohio (1928), and a glossy child-sized hardback version of *The Little Red Hen* (1957). These children's books provide my point of entry to an exploration of the relations between women and the most liminal of livestock: the chicken. In the old children's folktale, the Little Red Hen finds a wheat seed, asks the other farmyard creatures for help planting it, and when they refuse her, she goes on to plant, reap, thresh, and take the wheat to be ground at the mill, all by herself. She mixes and bakes the bread, still without help, and in the end she eats the bread, ignoring the pleas of her fellow creatures to share it with them.

As a folktale, *The Little Red Hen* has generally been read as exhorting young children to work hard, accept responsibility, and share with others. Children's stories are more than simple didactic tracts, however. Feminist critics have shown that because such texts reflect their time and place, they frame what is considered gender-appropriate behavior at the time, even modeling that behavior to their young audience. But these folktales do more than that, I want to suggest: they raise a number of linked questions about women and agriculture, and they do so through the figure of the chicken—or specifically, the little red hen.

Whether due to their widespread domestication, their small size, their relative ease of management, or their ability to subsist by scavenging, chickens hold a potent liminal position between backyard and farm fields, between the "egg money" of the farm wife and the formal farm economy, between the private world of women and the public world of men, between

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the realms of animal agriculture and human reproductive medicine.[1] Most recently, chickens have occupied a space between the practices of traditional farming and the new world of industrial meat and egg production and "pharming" (genetically engineering chickens to lay eggs that express pharmaceutical-grade proteins, used to create profitable new drugs). I use the term "liminal" to refer to "those beings marginal to human life who hold rich potential for our ongoing biomedical negotiations with, and interventions in, the paradigmatic life crises: birth, growth, aging, and death" (Squier 2004, 9).

As liminal livestock, chickens play a central role in our gendered agricultural imaginary: the zone where we find "the speculative, propositional fabric of agricultural thought . . . which supplements the more strictly systematic, properly scientific, thought of agriculture, its deductive strategies and empirical epistemologies" (Squier 2004, 14).[2] Looking at chickens and chicken farming as they are explored in art, we can uncover the basic unarticulated assumptions that help to shape the role of women in farming and the role of farming in women's lives. Because the arts not only give us access to but actually bring into being the agricultural imaginary, I turn to several children's stories, a novel, and a film in order to ask, adapting the memorable question of the subRosa Art Collective, what does it mean, to feminism and to agriculture, that women are like chickens and chickens are like women? (subRosa 2005).

[1] As M. G. Kains explains in *Profitable Poultry Production* (1910), "Formerly hens were regarded as a necessary nuisance, tolerated mainly because they lay the foundation of custards, cakes and other dainties, the enjoyment of which offsets somewhat the losses of grain and garden truck. . . . It is little wonder that poultry raising has had difficulty in shaking off the disrepute in which it was formerly held. The whole trouble has been in the mental attitude of the farmer. This has subjected the fowls to systematized neglect. Hens relegated to the stables, wagon sheds, fences or trees for roosting places; to the mow or the manger for nests; to the barnyard and field for feed, cannot do well. . . . This condition of affairs is happily being replaced by better management, because better management pays" (Kains 1910, 6). Kains is equally dismissive about the economic value of chicken keeping: "The cost and value of the eggs consumed at home is rarely considered by the general farmer. Hens are kept because the housewife must have eggs for making certain dishes as well as for boiling, poaching, frying, etc. If they were not kept the farmer would either have to do without or purchase eggs. As the former does not suit his palate nor the latter his pocketbook, he tolerates a few hens which care for themselves more or less, and which pick up a considerable amount of forage that would otherwise go to waste. If they supply the family's needs he is content to consider the yield in eggs and chickens as offsetting his losses of grain which he has to feed the flock" (16).

[2] This quotation was taken from Waldby (2000, 136). I have adapted the phrase, inserting the word "agriculture" in place of Waldby's word, "medicine."

Art and the agricultural imaginary

From the ancient children's fable *The Little Red Hen* to contemporary works of art in a number of different media, chickens are frequently represented as liminal livestock, and as such they articulate the complex intersection of women and agriculture. I sketch out how this operates, beginning with an analysis of the changes in the anthropomorphic character, the Little Red Hen, that testifies to the U.S. agricultural transition from family farming to intensive confinement agriculture. I will trace how Ruth Ozeki's novel *My Year of Meats* (1998) repositions the seemingly simple dyad of woman and chickens in a global context, dramatizing the racialized nature of U.S. chicken consumption and distribution and exploring the transnational links between animal agriculture and human reproductive medicine. Ozeki's novel also exposes troubling connections between the international food and pharmacology industries and the global media. I then turn to John Fiege's documentary film, *Mississippi Chicken* (2007), which explores how female chicken-processing workers in contemporary Mississippi are subjected to interlinked gender-, race-, and ethnicity-based oppressions. And finally, I argue that another children's tale featuring a little red (or brown) hen, Katie Smith Milway's *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference* (2008), suggests how even the well-intentioned efforts to improve the lot of one single mother in Ghana through the purchase of one hen introduce not only new economic possibility but also the problematically gendered structures of Western high-volume poultry farming into what had been a very different agricultural mode. Taken together, these images offer no answers but rather suggest that the multiple practices, spaces, and forms of the woman/chicken relationship embody some important questions that are integral to the topic of women and agriculture.

From barnyard to farmhouse: Poultry moves indoors

Consider two versions of *The Little Red Hen*: one published in 1928, only eight years after the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote, and the other published in 1957, in the midst of a major retrenchment of women's social stature and political rights.[3] As its cover illustration suggests, the 1928 version of *The Little Red Hen* features a rather blowsy big hen—probably a Rhode Island Red, a highly popular hen in that era—

[3] See the United Food and Commercial Workers Women's History Timeline, http://www.ufcw.org/womens_history_month/timeline/index.cfm.

Figure 1 The Little Red Hen circa 1928 (Saalfield Publishing Company, 1928)

whose plump, capable, aproned body conveys a sense of strength and responsibility extending beyond her many chicks to the farm itself (see fig. 1). She is no vegetarian, believing that “fat, delicious worms . . . [were] absolutely necessary to the health of her children.” In fact, when she finds the wheat seed, she is “so accustomed to bugs and worms that she supposed this to be some new and perhaps very delicious kind of

meat" (*Little Red Hen* 1928).[4] Only after making inquiries does she discover that it is a wheat seed, which "if planted . . . would grow up, and when ripe could be made into flour and then into bread." She isn't much of an agriculturalist, either, being "so busy hunting food for herself and her family that, naturally, she thought that she ought not to take time to plant it." So she asks the Pig, "upon whom time must hang heavily," the Cat, and the "great fat Rat with his idle hours" if they will help her by planting the wheat seed. "Not I," they all say. "Well then," says the Little Red Hen, "I will." And despite the cries of her chicks that she is neglecting them, her time-consuming daily task of finding worms to feed them, and the increasing fatigue of those "long summer days," she plants the wheat seed.

Come harvest time, the same thing happens. The hen's attention is "sorely divided between her duty to her children and her duty to the wheat, for which she [feels] responsible," so she asks again "in a very hopeful tone . . . 'Who will thresh the wheat?'" Once again, the answer is a unanimous "Not I," and once again she sets to work. She threshes the wheat (alone) and drags it (alone) to the distant mill, where she orders it "ground into beautiful white flour." Then the flour must be made into bread. Although far from a homebody and "not in the habit of making bread," still the Little Red Hen is determined and confident, knowing that "anyone can make it if he or she follows the recipe with care [and] she [can] do it if necessary." So when once again the Cat, Rat, and Pig refuse to help, she bakes the wheat herself. At last, as she takes the aromatic loaves from the oven with an air of perfect calm, she suppresses "an impulse to dance and sing": "Then, probably because she had acquired the habit, the Red Hen call[s]: 'Who will eat the bread?'" However, when all the animals in the barnyard chorus "I will," she comes to her senses: "No, you won't. I will," she pronounces. And, the narrator concludes, "she did" (*Little Red Hen* 1928).

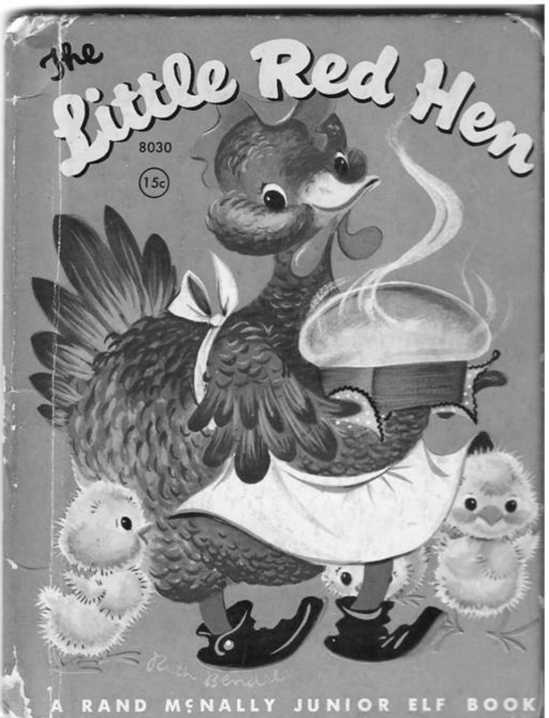
We can see the changing cultural context if we turn from the 1928 version's barefoot barnyard matron, striped apron drooping on her ample body, to the 1957 version's cuddly caricature, the Rhode Island Red hen as young suburban mother. She sports black boots with silver buttons and a spotless white apron, a pair of very human front-facing eyes with prominent whites, and a beak far more duck- than chicken-like. Unlike the earlier matron with her customarily large brood of eight chicks, this somewhat Disney-like hen is pictured with a socially appropriate fifties-era small

[4] Both the 1928 and 1957 versions of *The Little Red Hen* are unpaginated.

family of just three chicks (see fig. 2*A*). Like the hen, the farm around her has also changed. The 1957 illustrations include no insects for the hen to hunt for her family's dinner; no cat or rat among the farmyard creatures to lazily refuse to help her with the wheat; no hard work or fatigue as she plants, reaps, and threshes the grain or bakes the bread. Instead, the hen plants the "few grains of wheat" she has found "scattered about on the ground"; marvels at the "golden holiday clothes" the wheat seems to be wearing at reaping time; and when the Duck, Goose, and Fat Little Pig refuse to help her, finds a perfectly sized sickle, flail, and sack to reap the wheat, thresh the golden grains, and carry the sack on her back (along with a chick) to the mill.

Cheerful, tireless, tidy, and uncomplaining even when the Duck, Goose, and Fat Little Pig refuse to help her, this new model Hen is also a natural in the kitchen, baking the bread herself without a moment of hesitation. But there the Little Red Hen's cheerfulness ends. "You remember that I planted the wheat and cut it, I threshed it and carried it to mill, I made the bread and baked it—and now all of you would help me eat it! No indeed!" she tells the Duck, Goose, and Fat Little Pig. As they lament their lot—"A little work and a little less sleep wouldn't have hurt me any"—she firmly closes the farmhouse door on them. The moral is clear: as I discuss below, the Little Red Hen has labored not for herself but for her family. In the last scene of the 1957 version, we join the Little Red Hen inside the little red-roofed farmhouse where a framed portrait of the paterfamilias—a Little Red Rooster—hangs over the coal-fired stove (fig. 2*B*). Community has given way to the nuclear family; the public barnyard is shut out from the private hearth: "But the Little Red Hen who had worked so hard was happy, and she sang as she cut thick slices of the fresh bread and spread them with butter and jam for her hungry chicks."

Drawn respectively from the dawn of women's suffrage and the antifeminist late fifties, these two stories reveal a change both in the Little Red Hen and in the farm woman on whom she is anthropomorphically modeled. The Little Red Hen of 1928 is resourceful and self-directed, a hunter and meat eater. While she has to negotiate the competing demands of her unappreciative chicks and her demanding, exhausting working conditions—as we learn from the narrator—she does so with rueful pragmatism. She even drops her habit of asking for help and briefly drops her diminutive to become—perhaps significantly—just "Red Hen." By the story's end even her chicks seem marginal to her private pleasure as she claims the delicious bread for herself. In contrast, the Little Red Hen of 1957 is an energetic worker, cheerful and above all self-sacrificing. The



A

B

Figure 2 The Little Red Hen as suburban mom (Rand McNally, 1957)

story ends with her preparing to feed the freshly baked bread not to herself but to her hungry little chicks.

Livestock farming for meat is addressed only obliquely in the 1928 version of *The Little Red Hen*, where one illustration shows the pig with an apple in his mouth in allusion to his impending slaughter. But in the 1957 version, no ominous future looms for the goose or pig; like animal farming, death itself was an increasingly distant reality to the sheltered suburban children who were the target audience. Still, these two versions of the classic folktale reflect a changing understanding of the farm and the farmer in twentieth-century America, an understanding that was catalyzed by a transformation in chicken farming. Traditionally, chickens were not figured as part of the farm economy but were raised on the side by the farm wife; they ran freely in the farmyard, living on scavenged grain and table scraps. The cockerels and pullets provided low-cost accessible protein for the family, which helped them ride out the fluctuations in the farm market, while the laying hens provided a product that could be bartered or sold, giving a measure of economic autonomy to women otherwise without a private income. As personnel in the Bureau of Chemistry of the U.S. Department of Agriculture put it tellingly in 1914, "eggs and chickens supply a large proportion of what might be called the ready spending money of a farm woman" (Pennington, Pierce, and Shrader 1915; see also Cooke 1997, 70).

Yet over the course of the twentieth century, the face of U.S. farming changed dramatically. While more than one-third of the U.S. population lived on family farms in the early 1900s, by the 1990s that number had dropped to less than 2 percent, according to Linda Lobao and Katherine Meyer (2001, 103). This decline was twofold, consisting not only in the precipitous drop-off in the number of people who attributed their family livelihood to farming but also in a dramatic change in the structure of agriculture itself. No longer small-scale, single-family operations, farms were increasingly large-scale, vertically organized corporate ventures to which the farmer contributed labor, materials, and risk, while the agribusiness retained the product and the largest share of the profits.

The role of women in this change in the nature of farming in the United States has been particularly hard to specify. Like the chickens they raised, which were not part of the livestock census nor figured as part of the farm economy, women have not counted in the Census of Agriculture, which "allows for only one self-defined operator per farm" (Lobao and Meyer 2001, 109–10). Like chickens, women too have been held apart from the public face of farming. As Berit Brandth has argued, "Especially

relevant to understanding gender relations in family farming is the separation of the household from the economy, the family from wider kinship groups, and the private from the public" (2002, 110). This transformation in the place and personnel of farming took place on several scales, as Carolyn Sachs (1996) has shown. As chickens made the transition from marginal household creatures to livestock for the farm economy, they were increasingly raised not in small farm flocks but in the large-scale indoor barns of the poultry industry, where their control was increasingly the province of men rather than women.

Comparison of the two versions of *The Little Red Hen* reflects this transition-in-process. Since rationalized scientific agriculture increased and the farming population declined in the period between 1928 and 1957, the agricultural setting of the later version of the children's tale has become less realistic and more sanitized and fanciful. By 1957, certain details had disappeared that were important to the 1928 version, like the bugs and the fat, delicious worms that the hen views as "absolutely necessary to the health of her children," the ever-fattening pig whose time hangs heavy on his mind because of the impending end-of-summer slaughter, and the ever-present threat of predators like the "great fat rat." Instead, by 1957 both illustrations and text reveal an antiseptic barn, silo, and windmill. And in a shift that parallels the move to confined animal feeding operations catalyzed by the poultry industry, by 1957 the Little Red Hen and her chickens live indoors. These changes are all indicative of the role that chicken farming played in the consolidation of the new industrial agriculture, as rural sociologists, geographers, and historians have documented.[5] To summarize, in the difference between the 1928 hen (an assertive hunter-gatherer mother who gathers worms for her chicks and lives on a very real and unsanitized farm) and the 1957 hen (a decorous, dutiful, farm wife and mother who sacrifices all for her chicks, with whom she lives indoors in her little farmhouse) we can see reflected the changed position of the woman farmer in the United States between 1928 and 1957.

In response to subRosa's question, "Why are women like chickens and chickens like women?" we might answer that the Little Red Hen illuminates women as indeed very much like chickens: underappreciated yet omnipresent, part of the foundation of a well-functioning farm. Despite the hard and essential work of planting and reaping, food growing, and

[5] See Sawyer (1971), Bugos (1992), Sachs (1996), Midkiff (2004), Striffler (2005), Horowitz (2006).

meal preparation that they perform on the farm, both women and chickens have come to be viewed by the dominant culture as marginal parts of the farm economy.

However, this interpretation replicates a major shortcoming of twentieth-century feminism: its one-dimensional understanding of gender. With the powerful reorienting effect of intersectionality theory, feminists have come to see the category woman as reciprocally constituted with and by race, ethnicity, class, and nationality, among many significant identity categories (Crenshaw 2005). As the family farm responded to the economic pressures of conglomeration and industrialization, farmers increasingly relied on farmworkers drawn from other socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups; other regions; even other countries. With migrant or immigrant (documented or undocumented) workers laboring in the fields, a new dimension was added to farm labor, and new sorts of personnel were increasingly viewed as essential to the farm economy. As farm women worked alongside these new categories of farmworkers and extended their involvement beyond farmyard chicken raising to practices of chicken breeding, processing, and distribution, their experiences came to reflect such multiple overlapping identity positions, practices, and commitments. Bearing the powerful effects of intersectionality in mind, the contrast between the first and second Little Red Hens seems not only geographically overdetermined (rural to suburban) but racialized as well. The 1928 hen's expansive physique and exemplary perseverance invokes the stereotype of the enduring black mammy, while the perky, petite 1957 hen, holding out the steaming loaf of what appears to be white bread, calls to mind not Dilsey but Donna Reed.

From BEEF-EX to the Chicken Bone Express

In Ruth Ozeki's satirical novel about the global meat industry, *My Year of Meats* (1998), an American documentary television producer's work on the Japanese television program *My American Wife!* catalyzes her exploration of how her race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are cocreated through the international food system. Jane Tagaki-Little has been hired by the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, a "national lobby organization that represented American meats of all kinds . . . as well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups" to produce a series of television documentaries for the Japanese market (Ozeki 1998, 9–10). Each program is to feature an American woman in her home environment extolling

the virtues of American beef. Despite the fact that "The BEEF-EX people are very strict [and] don't want their meat to have a synergistic association with deformities. Like race. Or poverty. Or clubfeet" (Ozeki 1998, 57), Jane's project morphs as she gradually discovers the environmental, social, and health costs of the meat industry for which she is working. Soon she soon finds herself subverting the beef-o-centric, heteronormative narrative of the program in favor of episodes featuring nonbeef, seafood, and finally vegetarian meals served by a lesbian couple and a biracial couple with a family of multiracial adoptive children (Ozeki 1998, 57).

As Jane Takagi-Little is producing *My American Wife!* on the other side of the world, a young Japanese housewife named Akiko Ueno is discovering the horrific extent of her own sexual subjugation to her husband who, as the representative of the advertising agency in charge of the BEEF-EX promotion, happens to be Jane Takagi-Little's "de facto boss" (Ozeki 1998, 41). The interwoven stories of Akiko and Jane embody the ways that interventions in animal reproduction have shaped the reproductive experiences of very different women. The women's stories converge in the novel's final chapter, when Akiko shows up on Jane's doorstep in Manhattan's East Village. Their encounter embodies multiple, painful ironies. After being savagely beaten by her husband, Akiko has discovered that she is pregnant and has left him to go to the United States so that the child inside her can grow up to be "an American wife" (Ozeki 1998, 318). In contrast, Jane is mourning a miscarriage that may have been caused by her work on *My American Wife!* since she was exposed during filming to the hormones used in cattle raising "to synchronize the estrus of a herd for easier artificial insemination" (Ozeki 1998, 261–62).

The links between beef and chickens, and between the breeding and consumption of meat, that entangle Jane Takagi-Little and Akiko Ueno also intertwine gender and species in the management of reproduction. As Sarah Wilmot (2007) has shown, innovations in reproductive medicine were not merely the results of clinical research but were also based on years of careful attention to reproductive mechanisms, in the laboratory and the barnyard. Arguing that "we should begin to question the privileging of the language and practices of genetics in popular historical accounts of modern reproduction in agriculture," Wilmot points out that for experts in reproduction, developmental embryology and reproductive physiology were as important as genetics. "Among laypeople, genetics competed with existing cultures of breeding. In Britain, the dominant language of breeding was conducted in terms of 'blood' and 'prepotency' and craft skills were about selecting and blending 'blood'" (Wilmot 2007,

304–5). Clearly there is, as she puts it, "ample evidence of the value of attending to the reproductive sciences that lie between craft and genetic science" (305).

While Wilmot does not address poultry breeding, her argument has even more force there because the industrialization of animal agriculture was modeled on innovations in poultry farming, in particular the rationalization and standardization of chicken reproduction through the electric incubator and the electric hatcher/brooder as well as the move to mass confinement grow-out buildings. Moreover, the poultry industry's leading-edge innovations extend beyond genetics and "hard" technologies to "soft" or social technologies as well, as William Boyd has pointed out: "While breeding and genetic improvement were clearly central vectors of technological change in making the industrial chicken, they were by no means the only ones. Intensive confinement, improved nutrition and feeding practices, and the widespread use of antibiotics and other drugs also represented important aspects of a larger technology platform aimed at subordinating avian biology to the dictates of industrial production" (Boyd 2001, 633).

Adele Clarke has analyzed how innovations in animal agriculture have traveled to human reproductive medicine. She highlights in particular "two key interventions" that occurred in chicken farming and beef farming, respectively, producing major improvements in animal production (Clarke 1998, 159). The first intervention was the transformation of chicken farming from a female-centered activity carried out in the family backyard and barnyard to a factory-based industry carried out at a large-scale indoor location away from the family home. This was made possible by technical innovations like electric light and kerosene heat for henhouses, which transformed the hen into "a mechanical oviduct"; electric breeders that did away with the need for a hen's "maternal functions" (Clarke 1998, 159); and artificial incubators that made possible the production of uniform, standardized chickens and eggs.[6]

The second intervention Clarke highlights is the introduction of artificial insemination to cattle breeding in order to improve "the production of herd animals" (1998, 159). Not only did this make it possible to breed selectively to improve the herd, but the refinement of the whole range of

[6] The poultry industry reliance on artificial incubation resulted in the preferential breeding of "nonbroody" hens, so that even rare-breed hatcheries such as Murray McMurray specify hens that will make good mothers as an exception worth noting, as in this description of the Buff Orpington: "They also make excellent setters and mothers" (Murray McMurray Hatchery, http://www.mcmurrayhatchery.com/product/buff_orpingtons.html).

practices required to carry out artificial insemination also improved the field of animal science in general. While Clarke focuses primarily on cattle breeding, it is important to point out that animal science itself was an outgrowth of poultry science, a thriving research field fully thirty years before the appearance of animal science in the 1940s. Since the early years of the twentieth century, the chicken has been seen as an ideal experimental model because of its small size, its relatively fast rate of reproduction and growth, and the crucial fact that its egg is accessible outside the body (Boyd 2001, 636). Indeed, women's reproductive timing has been managed and standardized toward the goal of increased fertility using techniques adapted from animal agriculture, including the synchronization of laying hens.

A couple of landmarks can suggest the importance of the chicken to the female reproductive terrain ranging from infertility treatment to gynecologic oncology. As early as October 5, 1937, the *New York Times* reported, "Science spanned 200 miles of land and water . . . to mate a batch of barred rock hens with Rhode Island red roosters by remote control, and then turned the experiment over to time and nature" (1937, 26). Characterized as "the first time chicken egg fertilization had been attempted between such widely separated fowl," this experiment entailed bringing sperm from Maryland in a special container that kept it at 40 degrees Farenheit and then inoculating three hundred hens with one-tenth of a cubic centimeter each (or, as poultry geneticist Joseph P. Quinn of the National Agricultural Research Center figured it, 15 million spermatozoa; *New York Times* 1937, 26). The resulting eggs were then incubated at the Northeastern Poultry Producers Association exposition at Port Authority, New York City, in November 1937. While American gynecologist James Marion Sims can be said to have launched artificial insemination in humans in the 1860s through his notorious experiments on slaves, the techniques for sperm freezing and transport used in fertility clinics today were adapted for humans from animal science experiments such as this (Squier 1994, 213, n. 64; Clarke 1998, 45). Chickens were also an important tool for researchers studying abnormal growth or cancer. As early as 1911, researcher Peyton Rous experimented with the viral introduction of a sarcoma from an afflicted chicken into healthy chickens. An effective vaccine was created for the chicken lymphoma known as Marek's disease in 1976 (Steck and Haberstich 1976; Stone 2003, 34). Flash-forward just thirty years, and researchers are celebrating the chicken as a uniquely promising model organism for research on ovarian cancer (Giles, Olson, and Johnson 2006).

The link between chickens, reproduction, and reproductive cancer

brings us back to Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*. As the novel comes to a conclusion, Jane is recovering from the cervical cancer possibly caused by diethylstilbestrol (DES), the hormone first used in agriculture to increase growth rates in chickens, while Akiko's reproductive life is just beginning. Akiko takes the "Chicken Bone Special" train to Louisiana for Thanksgiving and then back up to Northampton, Massachusetts, where she soon finds an apartment of her own and a new American life with the aid of the lesbian couple who were among Jane's "spokeswives" for the meat industry (Ozeki 1998, 338). As we follow this newly single, pregnant Japanese woman traveling north from Louisiana in a train car filled with African American families, the train scene dramatizes some of the more complex meanings of chicken for the African American community. The legend of the Chicken Bone Special, also known as the Chicken Bone Express, originated during times of African American migration out of the South to the North and West in search of employment, education, and equality. Routes became known as the Chicken Bone Express because the travelers—forbidden by Jim Crow law or prevented by penury from eating in the train luncheon cars—packed shoe-box lunches of fried chicken, throwing the bones out the train windows where they littered the ground, mute evidence of the African American migration. Akiko learns this from her guide for this journey, Maurice, the Amtrak attendant on the northbound train, who explains the lively scene in her railway car in terms that straddle the line between authenticity and stereotype: "'It's called the Chicken Bone, Miss A-KEE-kow, because all these poor black folks here, they too poor to pay out good money for them frozen cardboard sandwiches that Amtrak serves up in what they call the *Lounge Car*, so these poor colored folk, they gotta make do with lugging long some home-cooked fried chicken instead, ain't that right now?' The passengers cheered. 'Which one of you's got a piece of home-cooked fried chicken to share with Miss A-KEE-kow who's come all the way here from Japan? Give her a taste of some Southern hospitality now'" (Ozeki 1998, 338–39). Maurice turns on the loudspeaker and rallies the passengers into a chorus of "chicken bone, chicken bone, chicken bone" while he sings "She's a mighty old train / But she's runnin' just fine, / An' the folks who ride her, / They have a good time, / On the Chicken Bone, Chicken Bone, Chicken Bone Special!" (339). Throughout *My Year of Meats*, Akiko's sweet naïveté has provided the foil for Jane's mordant realism, and here too she accepts Maurice's sanitized message without realizing the deeper history of racial oppression it obscures: "*This is America!* she thought. She clapped her hands and then hugged herself with delight" (Ozeki 1998, 339).

To Psyche Williams-Forson, the tale of the Chicken Bone Express also provides valuable evidence of the forgotten work done by African American women as waiter-carriers, women who worked "the trade of selling chicken, hot biscuits, coffee, and other foodstuffs to hungry train passengers who were eager to purchase their goods when trains stopped in their rural town" (Williams-Forson 2006, 1, 114–34). Black women created a thriving informal economy selling chicken to travelers who were excluded by race, poverty, or both from the amenities available to wealthier white travelers: meals, beverages, even beds in rooming houses. The tradition of waiter-carriers kept alive a specifically African American social identification, but more than that it provided black women with an economic, social, and even "metaphorical way of moving from one domicile to another" (115). This tradition is not accessible to Akiko, still reeling after the uprooting from her home in Japan. Her outsider status blinds her to the painful truths beneath Maurice's smooth, sunny narrative: that the vibrant African American community she has witnessed on the Chicken Bone Special is rooted in the economic hardship, social inequity, and suffering that are the enduring legacy of slavery.

"Tyson steals."

While African American women have played a culturally central role in the preparation and consumption of chicken, according to Williams-Forson, attaining self-definition and agency despite the racist and hostile environment of the U.S. South, they have also played a prominent and far less empowering role as minimum-wage workers in poultry processing plants. At the site of the global poultry industry, race, class, and species come into complicated and highly fraught relationship with one another. Poultry processing plants are "highly organized industrial structures for slaughter, disassembly, and packaging of birds," and until the mid-1960s these highly dangerous, low-paying jobs were filled mostly by black workers (Lipscomb et al. 2005, 1834). But with the steep increase in the population of Latino/a immigrants (documented and undocumented) in the South between 1960 and 1990, U.S. poultry-processing corporations started to employ more and more Latino/a workers. By 2005, according to Steve Striffler, "about three-quarters of plant labor forces [were] Latin-American, with Southeast Asians and Marshallese accounting for a larger percentage of the remaining workers" (Striffler 2005, 112).

Latino/a workers were, and are, frequently brought to the poultry plants illegally, recruited as undocumented immigrants. In December 2001, Tyson Foods was indicted on thirty-six counts of "conspiracy to smuggle illegal aliens for corporate profit," charged with operating a secret

corporate "recruitment" scheme that advertised for poultry workers in Latin American newspapers and attracting undocumented immigrants from Mexico, Argentina, and Guatemala from August 1998 through December 2000 (U.S. Department of Justice 2001; see also Jackson 2001; *Mississippi Chicken* 2007). These workers, who in many cases were allegedly brought into the United States by coyotes working under the table for the major poultry corporations, were bused into Mississippi from Florida and Texas, where they were hired as line workers by the poultry plants. While Tyson was cleared of the charges in 2003 after only five hours of jury deliberation, possibly because it had retained a high-profile legal team, the ongoing smuggling of immigrants on a piecemeal basis was an open secret in the poultry industry (Sidley Austin LLP 2003). The situation of such immigrants as new employees was dire: they often spoke no English and had no legal status or awareness of their rights as workers (*Mississippi Chicken* 2007). John Fiege's documentary film, *Mississippi Chicken* (2007), documents the lives of poultry workers in Canton, Mississippi, as they deal with brutal employment conditions and a hostile local environment.

Nominated by the Independent Feature Project for a Gotham Award for "Best Film Not Playing at a Theater Near You" (*IFP News* 2007), *Mississippi Chicken* paints a complex picture of the interaction between African American and Latino/a communities as they negotiate a rapidly changing employment picture for low-wage workers. There are harrowing interviews with Latina women who have been injured in poultry processing, particularly one quiet young woman whose finger was trapped, partially amputated, and the remainder of the digit flayed to the bone when it was caught in the shrink-wrap line. But the film focuses on the tale of Guillermina, from Mexico, and her newly arrived fourteen-year-old daughter Rosario, or Charro. Gender and class inequity play a pervasive role in the lives of Guillermina and Rosario, new immigrants to the United States and workers in the poultry industry. Narrated by Anita Grabowski, a workers' rights advocate who meets the two women when she is starting to organize a center for poultry workers in Mississippi, the film reveals how for these immigrant Latina women a job in the poultry industry, which once held out the hope of stable work and a viable life for themselves and their families in the United States, has instead come to mean the high risk of injury and the near certainty of low-wage exploitative labor.

The film's joyful opening scene shows preparations for Charro's fourteenth birthday celebration, as her family works alongside an African American farmer to slaughter a pig for the birthday meal. A later scene captures Charro's hopeful early days of high school; though she declines

to predict her future, she firmly assures the interviewer she will never work in the poultry industry. The film's initially celebratory mood fades quickly, however. On her next visit to Guillermina, Anita (the worker's rights organizer) learns that Charro has been raped by the twenty-year-old man she has been dating secretly. Her mother has sent her away to live, at less risk, she hopes, with relatives in North Carolina. On the film's final visit to Guillermina, several months later, Anita learns that Charro has left school in North Carolina and is working in a poultry plant.

The conclusion to Rosario's sad story happens off camera, but with visual and verbal economy Fiege's film makes very clear the charged and complex relationship between these particular Latina women and the chicken industry of Canton, Mississippi. One brief scene speaks volumes. David, the Catholic brother who has been helping to organize the poultry workers, using the power of religion to pressure managers to improve working conditions at the poultry plant, arrives for dinner, bringing food with him. "Chicken?" Guillermina sniffs, with evident disapproval. "I don't buy from Tyson," she says. "Tyson steals" (*Mississippi Chicken* 2007).

One Hen

Who has access to the fruits of one's labor is a central theme of the children's story with which I began: *The Little Red Hen*, whose anthropomorphic protagonist epitomizes the close connection between women and chickens in our agricultural imaginary. Another children's book published to some critical acclaim in 2008 concerns the same theme, yet this story about a small reddish brown hen also demonstrates the other issues that must complicate any exploration of the role of women in agriculture. Katie Smith Milway's *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference* might be called documentary fiction because it is based on the true story of Kwabena Darko, "a real boy from Ghana's Ashanti region who really did lose his father and have to help his mother support his family" (2008), and it relates how the purchase of one small brown hen led to a successful venture into microcredit lending. Unlike both versions of *The Little Red Hen*, where the advocacy of a cooperative sharing of work and profit seems to extend no farther than the boundaries of the farmyard, *One Hen* is explicit about the importance of a broadly framed notion of community, both to the characters in the story and to its readers.

Young Kojo, the only child of a widowed mother in a small village in Ghana, has been forced to quit school upon the death of his father in order to help his mother make enough money selling wood at the market so that they can support themselves. When Kojo is able to borrow a few coins from the fund of money shared by the twenty families in their village,

he gets a good idea. He travels to the neighboring village and buys a little red hen, which he carries home in a basket on his head and settles in beside his bed mat in an old laundry detergent box. To his delight, the hen not only lays eggs but can survive on the fruits and loose grains that Koto scavenges from the market. Kojo's good idea provides more than sustenance for his mother and himself: it introduces him to the life of an entrepreneur. Within six months Kojo has three hens that lay enough eggs for both of them to eat an egg every day and sell the rest at the village market. Within a year, he has saved enough money that he has options: "Maybe he will use his egg money to build a fine wooden chicken coop. Maybe he will buy some things his mother needs, such as a new water bucket and a good knife. Or maybe he can pay for something he's been dreaming of: fees and a uniform so that he can go back to school. 'Your eggs have made us stronger, Kojo,' says his mother. 'Now go to school and learn . . . for both of us'" (Milway 2008, 11–12).

Tellingly, Kojo takes the long-term option for both of them. He goes to school and wins a scholarship "to an agricultural college to learn more about farming. His mother will care for his chickens while he is away" (Milway 2008, 15). By the time Kojo reaches adulthood, he feels ready to take the biggest risk of his life: "He will use all the money he and his mother have saved to start a real poultry farm" (16). He goes to the capital city of Accra, to the bank's headquarters, and finally meets with the busy bank president. As Kojo tells his story, the dubious bank president smiles at the story of little Kojo's business acumen: "This is not a story he hears every day. He smiles and nods—Kojo will get his loan" (16).

The tale takes on the familiar cast of any successful business narrative. With a steady income, Kojo is able to marry a teacher who shares his dream of (male) self-betterment: she "has many stories about boys just like Kojo once was—boys who want to learn and who have big dreams" (Milway 2008, 19). Kojo's poultry business thrives so much that he has to hire other workers to perform tasks that seem assigned by gender: "Men come to feed the chickens and clean the coops. Women collect the eggs and pack them in boxes" (20). Soon "Kojo's farm is . . . the largest in Ghana. And his town has grown, too. Some people come to find jobs on the farm and build homes for their families. Others come to the town to open shops and sell wares to the workers" (23). Kojo even lends money to Adika, a young woman whose family has worked for years on his poultry farm. In a plan that recalls *The Little Red Hen*, Adika hopes to combine her savings with the loan to "buy a mechanical grain mill and start a small business helping families turn their grain into flour" (23). By the story's end, "Kojo's poultry farm [has become] the largest in all of West Africa"

(24). A ripple effect from the taxes Kojo pays—along with those paid by "his workers and the shopkeepers who sell his eggs"—has led to improvements in "roads, schools and health clinics across the country" and even to "the port at Accra where ships from many countries come to trade" (24). The children's book ends with a vision of a secure nation, trading globally, with a vibrant infrastructure and a secured patriarchal lineage, all produced by one small loan to buy one red hen: "One more egg truck drives away, and Kojo looks down at his youngest grandson. The next time the boy asks Kojo where an egg will go, Kojo will say, 'To your future, my child'" (24).

Such an expansive perspective on community is important not only to the people in the tale of *One Hen* but also to its readers, who are asked to consider the good of their global community. "What can you do to help?" the author asks in an afterword and then responds to her own question: "There are a number of organizations in North America that donate money to 'village banks,' such as Sinapi Aba Trust in Ghana [founded by Kwabena Darko, the model for *One Hen*'s Kojo], BancoSol in Bolivia and Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. These and similar groups in other countries lend people money to start or build a small business and pull themselves out of poverty" (Milway 2008, 30).

The microcredit loan plan for sharing investment costs and thus expanding social benefits seems like a far more appealing solution than the chorus of "Not I!" that greeted the Little Red Hen's appeals or even her deliberate decision not to share the bread but to eat it alone or to feed it all to her chicks. The Sinapi Aba (Mustard Seed) Trust that Kwabena Darko, the real Kojo, started after completing his poultry science studies makes small loans to groups of people, enabling them to start their own businesses. Yet unlike the patrilineal model that seems built into Kojo's story, in the Sinapi Aba Trust "about 90 percent of the people who receive loans are women like Kojo's mother" (Milway 2008, 29). It seems curious that the children's story focuses on the more unusual 10 percent of male loan recipients and devotes only passing notice to the effect of the small loan on the women of the village. We learn that Kojo's mother cares for his chickens while he is away at agricultural college and then comes to live with him and his wife in their new cinder-block house, freed forever from the need to sell wood for a livelihood. Only Adika, of all the women in the story, follows an entrepreneurial vision and path resembling Kojo's. If we reexamine the story in light of a contemporary critique of microcredit lending, we will see that the strategy of a microloan to support small businesses may have a far more complex impact if the loan recipient is female.

Katharine N. Rankin has challenged the notion that such microcredit

loan programs are an answer to the problem of global poverty. In a fine-grained analysis of the emergence of microcredit lending in Nepal, where the overwhelming majority of such loans are granted to women, she concludes that only if the lending programs enable the collective identification of the female loan recipients "as women, across polarizing social differences," are they actually empowering for poor women (Rankin 2001, 31). Rankin concedes that microcredit has "politically progressive potential . . . to mobilize local resources for social change," and she does not agree with the most critical interpretation, which would view microcredit as a pernicious governmental strategy "in its appropriation of feminist languages of empowerment and solidarity to alternative (and fundamentally conservative) ends" (Rankin 2001, 31). However, she draws attention to the differences between women that shape the potential effectiveness of microcredit loans: "Caste, ethnicity, and class are obvious examples of the kinds of social distinctions that might structurally preclude women in some social locations from viewing their interests in solidarity with women in others" (31).

While Kojo's narrative avoids these complications by limiting the notion of community solidarity to the familiar and seemingly natural patriarchal family—himself, his mother, his wife, and ultimately his male descendents—*One Hen* cannot avoid some troubling contradictions in its newest iteration. A recent story in *Stanford*, the university's alumni magazine, titled "Department of Good Works: Counting Their Chickens," reports that author Katie Milway, working as consultant for the Bridgespan Group and using Sapient Interactive's technology, has created a Web site, OneHen.opportunity.org, "with the goal of demystifying microfinance and explaining sustainable development to 5- to 12-year-olds" (Mehren 2008, 41). On the One Hen Web site, children can take an online quiz and "earn virtual beads that the website translates into actual loans for small-business ventures in the developing world." As the story reports, Milway dates her "passion for economic development" to a junior year spent in Italy where, she recalls, "I saw poverty in a way I had not seen it before" (41). After a senior-year stint with California farmworkers and graduate school in international development at the Free University of Brussels (on a Rotary International scholarship), Milway went on to work in international development in a dozen African countries (Mehren 2008).

The complexities and tensions of the international development response to global poverty are in evidence as Kylie Medeiros and Jaisha Tate, two eleven-year-old participants in Boston's City Year program from the "tough Roxbury neighborhood," play the OneHen online quiz (Mehren 2008, 41). Kylie comments, "This game is really fun because when

you get the correct information, you earn more beads and you can help more people in poor countries. It's a little bit hard—but I know that I am helping somebody who really needs it." And Jaisha adds, "You also learn important stuff you don't know, like economics" (41). But what are these two inner-city preteens learning? Milway's explanation of the curriculum suggests that it may be more than merely economics: "Microfinance is something children can understand because it happens in increments. . . . When kids wash cars or mow lawns to earn spending money, that's microfinance" (Mehren 2008, 41). Yet how likely are the children of Roxbury to have cars to wash or lawns to mow? The incongruity of these examples of microfinance suggests that the lesson can inadvertently convey not only entrepreneurial skills but also the philanthropic mind-set, the class and regional identifications—with middle-class suburban children from the global North—and perhaps even the spiritual and technological paradigms that accompany this elementary lesson in economics.[7]

Even if we confine our assessment of *One Hen* to its text version and put aside for a moment the specific focus on microcredit lending, the history of the globalization of poultry farming suggests some additional complexities that are swept aside by the simple optimism of Kojo's story. Microcredit loans introduce more than welcome capital to a poor com-

[7] Research into the funding sources for the donations that Kylie and Jaisha make as they win beads suggests that education in specific informatic and spiritual perspectives may also be part of the *One Hen* curriculum. A $25,000 donation to the initial loan fund of "$50,000 in 'angel donations'" came from the Jenzabar Foundation, the philanthropic arm of an information technology company whose products promise "The Era of Total Campus Management." Explaining that its name means "Class of the Best and Brightest" and dedicated specifically to supporting student charities, the Jenzabar Foundation also features on its Web site an impressive slide show of some of the institutional grantees, from the Hole in the Wall Gang camps and China Care to Thomas More College Jamaica Learning Service Project and Southwestern Christian College (see http://www.jenzabar.com/about_jbar/JenzabarFoundation_JAM_Show.pdf). Opportunity International, the organization chosen to disburse the OneHen loans, is more religious than informatic in perspective. It was founded by Al Whittaker, the former president of Bristol Myers International Corporation, and David Bussau, an abandoned New Zealand orphan who became a breakthrough Australian entrepreneur, Christian hero, and Senior Australian of the Year in 2008 (*Perth Now* 2008). Opportunity International is one of the oldest microfinance organizations. Through the Women's Opportunity Network, this organization focuses on helping "the poorest of the economically active poor—70 percent of whom are women" by providing them with loans that "make possible not just economic advancement but also social and spiritual transformation." This focus on empowering women is accompanied by a stated commitment (featured prominently on its Web page) "motivated by Christ's call to serve the poor" (http://www.opportunity.org/Page.aspx?pid=218).

munity, Rankin argues; they also import into the global South the neoliberal business models of the global North. Kojo's evolving poultry farm is an instance of this. It reflects the gendered economies of scale that Northern industrial poultry farming introduced to agriculture in the United States, as chicken farming moved from a female barnyard economic supplement to an agricultural industry in its own right.

Kojo has learned well the poultry science lessons of his agricultural college. While his initial schooling taught "practical lessons for country life . . . how to use chicken manure and compost made from garbage to fertilize soil and grow vegetables," as the farm grows to be the largest poultry farm "in all of west Africa," its inputs and outputs are increasingly segmented. Clearly those chickens no longer feed on barnyard scraps, and the sheer volume of manure they would produce suggests that they no longer fertilize nearby vegetables. Moreover, the "thousands of eggs a day" that Kojo's chickens lay circulate beyond the local community, feeding families in such adjoining countries as Mali and Burkina Faso. A caption on an illustration celebrates the effects of the farm's productivity: "This is the country that grows as businesses like Kojo's and Adika's prosper" (Milway 2008, 25).

The development of Kojo's poultry business, guided by his work in poultry science at the agricultural college, not surprisingly echoes the gendered changes inherent in the move away from family poultry management, characteristic of so-called developing countries, to a Western-style intensive poultry business. "Women are the main poultry owners in developing countries, though there are variations within and between countries," points out El Hadji Fallou Guèye, adding, "On the whole, women's involvement in poultry farming tends to decrease with increased level of intensification" (Guèye 2005, 41). While Kojo abandons the message of sustainable growth that he learned in his local village school along with the family poultry farm model it incorporated, the childhood vision of entrepreneurial expansion that won him the loan in the first place is retained and compounded.

Why are women like chickens and chickens like women?

"Cultures of Eugenics," a pamphlet combining ad-busting play with poultry advertising, fact sheets, narratives of the linked projects of eugenics and animal agriculture, parodic rephrasings of documents from the pharmacology and poultry industries, and a statement from the DelMarva Poultry Justice Alliance proclaiming the rights of poultry workers every-

where, provides the epigraph to this essay: “Why are women like chickens and chickens like women?” (subRosa 2005). As the subRosa Art Collective testifies in this collage-assemblage, both women and chickens occupy the position of sex workers for global industry: both are subject to sexual and reproductive regulation and systematization for profit, and both are shaped biomedically and socially to be the object of male sexual and/or economic desire. While subRosa’s pamphlet distills with wit and insight an understanding of the opportunistic connections forged by the agricultural and medical sciences through the manipulation of reproduction, there is an even more basic context in which women and chickens have been like each other, coexisting in mirrored relation: the institution of agriculture. Both began as foundational, if underestimated, parties in the day-to-day operations of the conventional (“family”) farm. Both went on to be manipulated to serve the ends of global capital: women to become consumers and nurturers rather than producers, and chickens to become highly controlled producers of meat and eggs, increasingly efficient consumers of specially engineered feed, and denatured reproducers through the deliberate breeding out of the setting instinct in hatchery birds.

There is one major way in which women and chicken are *not* like each other, of course. With some contested exceptions, cannibalism and the reproductive farming of women are primarily features of dystopian science fiction, from Richard Fleischer’s *Soylent Green* and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* to Marianne Wiggins’s allegorical *John Dollar* and the cult favorite television series *Battlestar Galactica*. In contrast, chickens are farmed for food. Yet within the culture of farming, both women and chickens share the experience of being misrepresented, overlooked, and underestimated—conceived of as unitary, homogenous beings rather than the complex, geographically, socially, and biologically varied emergent life forms that they (we) are. By examining several works of art that portray the relation between women and chickens from a perspective attuned to the intersecting influences of race, ethnicity, and nationality, we have arrived at a more complex and situated portrait of woman’s role in one realm of agriculture: the practice of poultry farming. And perhaps we have a better understanding of the liminal nature of that long-beloved character, the little red hen.

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