Seed Activism, Global Environmental Justice, and Avant-Garde Aesthetics in Annabel Soutar's *Seeds*

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In *Seeds* (2012), a documentary play about Percy Schmeiser, the Canola farmer from Saskatchewan accused of growing Monsanto's genetically modified seeds without a licence, Annabel Soutar portrays Schmeiser sympathetically while also questioning how his legal battle against Monsanto has been narrativized by environmental activists. The play dramatizes how, following the court case, Schmeiser was mythologized as a farmers' rights icon who single-handedly challenged the global agrifood complex. In a scene that invokes the framing of his story as a "classic David versus Goliath" story in the 2009 documentary film *David vs. Monsanto*, a well-meaning but overzealous activist nun named Sister Catherine composes a newsletter in which she describes Schmeiser as a "modern-day David" who has "ventur[ed] forth to take on a seemingly impossible battle with a Goliath" (77). However, as reviewer Joel Fishbane notes, once "cracks [begin to] appear in Schmeiser's story," his status as a grassroots hero is thrown into question, and "the audience no longer knows whom to root for" (84). This ambivalence is symptomatic of a larger paradox that runs through *Seeds*: the play rallies public support for the burgeoning grassroots movement against the spread of GMO seeds while also questioning the rhetorical strategies and sloganeering tactics that seed activists have come to rely on to challenge global seed corporations. Soutar's play interrogates how, in their efforts to galvanize public support for their cause, seed activists often mobilize tropes that not only oversimplify the issues at stake in the public debate on GMO seeds but also compromise our ability to imagine ecological solutions to the problems posed by the corporate modification and patenting of seeds. Prompted by ecofeminist and seed activist Vandana Shiva's assertion that addressing the problem of seed biopiracy requires "building creative alternatives" to corporate seed monopolies (*Stolen Harvest* 3), I ask, what can literature contribute to

this creative project? More specifically, what role might literary texts play not just in addressing the simplifications made by mainstream seed activism but also in helping us to imagine ecological alternatives to GMO-based agriculture? These questions have important implications for Canadian literary studies, in which ecocritics such as Pamela Banting, Catriona Sandilands, and Jenny Kerber have been asking how literary texts can use their aesthetic resources to participate in the production of more powerful environmental imaginaries.[1] Drawing on ecocritical discussions of the function of experimental aesthetics in environmental literature (by theorists such as Ursula Heise and Timothy Morton), and reading *Seeds* as a textual and theatrical experiment in ecological form, I argue that literary experimentalism can make an important contribution to the seed sovereignty debate because it can illuminate — in ways that mainstream environmental discourse cannot — the dynamic ecological and social relations on which seed biodiversity depends. On one level, Soutar's play participates in a long-standing tradition of Canadian documentary drama that includes the collective documentary creations of Theatre Passe Muraille, particularly *The Farm Show*, and regional documentaries such as *No. 1 Hard* and *Paper Wheat* — two plays from the 1970s that dealt with the history of farming co-ops in Saskatchewan. However, as I show in this essay, Soutar takes this documentary tradition in a new direction by combining the conventions of documentary theatre with an ecological form of avant-garde experimentalism to grapple with the complex scientific, social, and environmental questions raised by the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case.

The Rise of Anti-GMO Organizing in North America

To examine how *Seeds* uses its aesthetic form to enable a more nuanced understanding of the stakes involved in seed activism, it is important to understand the history of the anti-GMO movement as it has developed in North America. This form of environmental activism grew out of the food and seed "sovereignty" movements launched by peasant organizations in the Global South in the 1990s to address two closely related phenomena: the rise of genetic engineering and the rise of intellectual property regimes that allow for the patenting of living organisms, including seeds. In the late 1990s, Shiva warned that seed corporations such as Monsanto were using genetic engineering and intellectual property measures to claim patent rights on seeds, appropriating the seed

varieties that farmers had developed across generations and restricting farmers' ability to save, replant, and share their seeds (*Biopiracy* 50-51). Seeds were thus being transformed from self-regenerating, collectively owned resources into non-renewable, privately owned commodities (50). Shiva warned that this phenomenon would have far-reaching ecological and social consequences, including a loss of seed biodiversity, the emergence of new forms of biological pollution resulting from cross-pollination between GMO and non-GMO seeds, an erosion of farmers' control over their own seed supplies, and, ultimately, a loss of food security in farming communities around the world (88).

Beginning in the 1990s, farmers and agrarian organizations across the Global South began launching initiatives to protect their seed supplies from corporate commodification (Iles and Montenegro de Wit 481-82; Shiva, *Biopiracy* 56-57). These early activist efforts coalesced around the principle of food sovereignty, defined in a declaration signed by multiple farmers' rights organizations as the "right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods," as well as the right for people to "define their own food and agriculture systems" ("Declaration of Nyéléni"). As this definition indicates, the principle of food sovereignty emphasizes the dynamic interaction between ecological and social systems and thus asks us to consider how questions of social and environmental justice are always entwined. Applying this framework to the struggle over GMO seeds, Shiva has stressed the importance of recognizing that seeds are biocultural artifacts that embody not just "nature's richness" but also "the experience, inventiveness, and work of farmers, past and present" (*Biopiracy* 120, 52). She therefore argues that protecting seed biodiversity requires strategies that address three key objectives: acknowledging the intellectual contributions that farmers have made to the seed commons, challenging corporate restrictions on the saving and replanting of seeds, and fostering seed biodiversity by establishing channels for seed exchanges among diverse farming communities (88, 124-26).

In recent years, the call for seed sovereignty has gained traction not just across the Global South but also in Europe and North America. As Shiva has noted in her more recent work, "Globally, we have seen the citizens [sic] movements against genetic engineering and corporate control over agriculture move concerns about genetic engineering from the fringe to the center stage of trade and economics" (*Stolen Harvest* 2).

However, the conversation on GMO seeds has undergone some problematic shifts as it has migrated across different national contexts. In Canada and the United States, popular manifestations of the anti-GMO movement often bypass the biocultural concerns raised by activists in the Global South and instead frame their efforts in terms of a need to restore the purity of natural seeds and to protect consumers from the health threats posed by GMO "Frankenfoods." This strategy has been very effective in rallying public support for the movement, partly because, as Donna Haraway has suggested, it resonates with deeply rooted anxieties about the dangers of interfering with the "sanctity of life" and the "integrity of natural kinds" (60). However, romanticizing non-GMO seeds as pristine natural resources that need to be protected from technoscientific mediation elides the work of artificial selection involved in conventional agriculture, paradoxically obscuring how genetic engineering appropriates the intellectual property of traditional farmers. This slippage not only ignores the economic dispossession that GMOs wreak on conventional farmers but also impedes conversations on the strategies that might be required to restore farmers' control over their seed supplies. Additionally, the focus on consumer health that informs mainstream anti-GMO activism elides the broader environmental and social conflicts created by genetically modified crops, framing seed activism as a matter of consumer choice instead of advocating for systemic changes in the global agrifood complex. In short, what began as a call to restore the intellectual and biological commons that seed sovereignty depends on has been rearticulated, in the North American context, into a movement that promotes a reductive understanding of plant cultivation, thereby devaluing the work of conventional farmers, and that privileges the health concerns of North American consumers while ignoring the threats that genetically modified seeds pose to other communities and to the wider environment.

The simplifications that run through North American seed activism can be attributed to three interrelated factors. First, these elisions reflect the "lack of systems thinking" that ecologist Jonathan Foley has identified as characteristic of public debates on GMO seeds. Indeed, as Foley explains, conversations on this issue often focus on the perceived advantages or disadvantages of genetic engineering without considering the broader "landscapes and environmental systems within which GMOs are deployed." Second, these simplifications point to the

gap between North American seed activism and what Robert Nixon has recently described as "the environmentalism of the poor" — that is, the forms of environmentalism practised by communities in the Global South whose "green commitments are seamed through with other economic and cultural causes as they experience environmental threat not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of inhabited risks, some imminent, others obscurely long term" (4). For communities affected by seed biopiracy, these "inhabited risks" include not just the environmental and human health risks posed by GMOs but also the loss of food security that occurs when indigenous crops are displaced by patented varieties. Third, the simplifications that characterize North American seed activism also speak to a problem that environmental humanities scholars have identified as one of the central challenges of contemporary environmentalism: communicating environmental concerns in a way that will galvanize public support while remaining attentive to the complex interactions between the social and the ecological, and between the local and the global, that shape contemporary environmental crises.[2] It is in addressing these imaginative and representational challenges that experimental literary works such as *Seeds* can make an important contribution to seed sovereignty activism. Soutar's play exploits the conventions of documentary theatre and combines them with an avant-garde experimentalism to complicate the appeals to the "natural" and narrow consumer health concerns that dominate North American seed activism, challenging readers to rethink the GMO debate from a more systems-based perspective so as to confront the widespread social and environmental consequences of seed biopiracy.

Reimagining Seed Activism through Avant-Garde Experimentalism

In *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Timothy Morton argues that, more than simply compelling us to care about a "pre-existing notion of nature," ecological art should prompt us to think about the complex set of relationships that shape the material environment (194). However, as many ecocritics have argued, this exercise can be especially challenging when dealing with environmental problems that are global in scope and involve interactions among multiple social and ecological systems. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Ursula Heise traces some of the aesthetic experiments that contemporary environmentalist writers

have drawn on to imagine the global environment in terms that avoid romantic constructions of nature and place — attending, instead, to the "complex global networks" that mediate contemporary environmental crises (50). Heise traces a shift from the "Blue Planet" imaginary that she argues characterized the environmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s to the "Google Earth" imaginary that she argues characterizes twenty-first-century environmentalist literature and art. She contends that this new aesthetic mode has abandoned the tropes of "synthesis, holism and connectedness" that characterized earlier representations of the global in favour of a "wary kind of experimentalism" that emphasizes the "dynamic and often non-equilibrated" interactions among "ecological systems" (63-64). Heise notes that this Google Earth imaginary frequently relies on the avant-garde technique of collage to "imagin[e] the global environment as a kind of collage in which all the parts are connected but also lead lives of their own" (64). New media have played a central role in this aesthetic, with authors drawing on elements such as database search results and the zooming capabilities of various imaging technologies to visualize how local ecological and cultural systems interact with global ones (65-67). According to Heise, these formal strategies model the kind of aesthetic engagement that might be necessary to address environmental challenges that not only disrupt romanticized constructions of nature and place but also involve multiple geographical, cultural, and ecological scales.

With a script derived from court transcripts, news clippings, and "verbatim" interview testimony, *Seeds* forms part of a long-standing tradition of Canadian documentary drama that draws on field research to examine socially significant events. However, Soutar moves beyond the works of Theatre Passe Muraille and other practitioners of this genre by combining the conventions of documentary theatre with the formal experimentalism that Heise associates with the Google Earth imaginary to raise complex questions about the social and environmental stakes of the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case. Indeed, as Fishbane has noted, more than just dramatizing the court's proceedings or using its documentary sources as authenticating devices, Soutar's play draws on an "array of innovating techniques" to explore "the larger impact of the story" both on the playwright and "on the world around [her]" (83). Central to this reinvention of the documentary form is the inclusion of Soutar as one of the characters in the play; indeed, it could be argued that Soutar, not

Schmeiser, is the true protagonist of *Seeds*. By incorporating herself as a character onstage, she dramatizes the process through which the play came into being, foregrounding the aesthetic, cognitive, and affective challenges that she faced as she reckoned with the competing sources of information that make up the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* archive. Thus, instead of weaving her source documents into a unified whole, Soutar leaves all of the "seams" of her play-text visible for her readers to see, implicating them in the difficult task of sorting through the complex scientific and legal contexts of Schmeiser's story. In this way, the play self-consciously exploits its fragmentary form to frame the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case as a site of political and scientific contestation that cannot be collapsed into the simple David versus Goliath story constructed by the *David vs. Monsanto* documentary and other popular environmentalist accounts of Schmeiser's story.

This aesthetic strategy surfaces in the performative as well as the textual aspects of the play. The stage production that Chris Abraham directed for Centaur Theatre and Theatre Porte Parole, which premiered in Toronto in 2012 and toured across Canada until 2016, used a variety of staging devices and performative techniques to amplify the fragmentary aesthetic of Soutar's play-text, immersing audiences in a theatrical space that, much like the "eco-cosmopolitan" works described by Heise, envisioned the global environment as a collage of interconnected but heterogeneous parts. As Soutar explains in the "Note on the Text" that precedes the play, Abraham and set designer Julie Fox "conceived of the *Seeds* stage environment as a laboratory and of the actors as scientists and lab technicians" (n. pag.). Soutar's description of the stage as both an "environment" and a "laboratory" is crucial here, for it frames the theatrical production as an experiment in environmental aesthetics — one that involved crafting dramatic devices and stage design elements that could help to situate Schmeiser's story in its broader ecological and social contexts. To evoke these larger contexts, the set design relied on a collage of disparate artifacts — including laboratory and multimedia equipment, farmhouse furniture, and plants — to create a modular environment reconfigured throughout the performances to produce a sense of ecological dynamism.

Fox's modular stage design provided a material analogue to one of the central organizing motifs of *Seeds*: its framing of Schmeiser's story, and of the play *itself*, as self-organizing systems constantly changing and

adapting through their interactions with the wider world. This motif is not without antecedents in the genre of Canadian documentary theatre, which, as Alan Filewod has shown, often "repudiate[s] the idea of a fixed, unchanging text which exists as a blueprint" and instead frames the play as the product of an open-ended process of "collective creation" between actors and performers (x). However, in *Seeds*, Soutar extends the metaphor of the documentary play as a "living" entity to stage a wider commentary on the dynamism of living systems and the creative challenges that arise when a playwright attempts to represent such dynamism. The opening scene of the play foregrounds these concerns by drawing a parallel between the coding of "life's genetic narrative" via DNA and the writing of a documentary play and then by emphasizing that both processes are contingent on the open-ended interactions between the source "code" (or text) and its wider environment (2). From the outset, the playwright confesses that this indeterminacy has become an obstacle to completion of the play: "I have been working for a long while on this story about life," she tells us, "[b]ut whenever I try to arrive at a final version of this story, I find that along the way something has . . . shifted . . . and I can no longer finish it" (2). This sense of mutability is amplified as the play goes on to dramatize the many layers of remediation that Schmeiser's story has undergone in the wake of the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* court ruling. Abraham's stage production dramatized this history of remediation by saturating the stage "environment" with various forms of multimedia, including video clips, images, and textual fragments that appeared on a screen that loomed prominently over the stage. In key courtroom scenes, the actors used video cameras to record the performance and then project it back onto the stage — a clever variation of the well-established documentary theatre technique of using media technologies as stage devices to blur the lines between the "mediatised event" and the "real" (Martin 88, 80). This layering of media elements worked to destabilize spectators' understandings of the stakes involved in the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case, forcing viewers to reconsider the multiple ways in which Schmeiser's story has been narrativized not just by various media outlets but also by grassroots environmental discourses.

The need to question this narrativization becomes more urgent as the play explores the scientific controversies involved in the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case. As I have suggested, *Seeds* exploits the dissonances

among its multiple source materials to create an environment in which readers are actively implicated in the task of sorting through conflicting sources of information. This sense of uncertainty is amplified as the playwright attempts to explain the science behind Monsanto's patent infringement claims and behind GMOs more generally. At the outset of the play, Soutar confesses that, when she first began to research the case, she "really didn't know exactly what a gene was and how it worked," and she quickly "realized . . . that if I wanted to understand Monsanto's patent claims . . . I had to take a crash course in microbiology" (19). Thus, the playwright addresses us as a layperson who has acquired the knowledge base necessary to guide us through the scientific questions at the heart of Schmeiser's story but whose own understanding of this science remains tenuous at best. As the play unfolds, we are confronted not only with her own misgivings about the scientific concepts that she is elucidating for us but also with the doubts of the very scientists who testified as expert witnesses during the original court proceedings.

This scientific uncertainty becomes evident in *Seeds* when the playwright investigates the allegation that a number of canola samples obtained from Schmeiser's fields were found to be ninety-five percent resistant to the herbicide Roundup, leading one Monsanto expert to declare that "the plants found growing in Mr. Schmeiser's fields . . . were from a Roundup-tolerant variety" and not the result of contamination, as Schmeiser famously argued in court (48). To understand these findings, the playwright consults Schmeiser's own expert witnesses — two plant scientists who dispute Monsanto's numbers but also acknowledge that, "at the time [of the court proceedings], [they] just didn't understand the nature of the case" because it was "the first case of its kind in Canada" (53). Schmeiser echoes their assertions about the newness of the case when the playwright presses him to explain how he determined that his canola fields had been contaminated by Monsanto's Roundup Ready canola. Schmeiser responds that "back in 1997 and 1998 there was very little information known about GMO canola, or contracts. . . . When I first found out . . . that it was a patent on seeds, *you didn't know what they were talking about*" (35). In short, far from establishing the truth behind Monsanto's patent infringement claims, the playwright's investigation yields even more questions about the provenance of the Roundup Ready canola found in his fields. These questions sometimes threaten to overwhelm the play, leading one reviewer to declare that, in

its effort to "provide a rigorous . . . presentation of every angle," *Seeds* becomes "an unwieldy piece of theatre" that "exhausts [its] audience" (Morrow). The play anticipates this response when one of the scientists interviewed by the playwright meditates on human beings' innate craving for "simple stories" and "one-to-one, linear proposition[s]" (121). Soutar frames this craving as a natural response to the uncertainty and complexity generated by GMOs. However, she also calls it into question through her ironic depiction of Schmeiser's mythologization as a seed activist and farmers' rights icon who has set out to protect the natural order from the dangers posed by genetic modification.

Schmeiser's trajectory as a seed activist reflects an impulse that Molly Wallace, writing about the representation of seed activism in Ruth Ozeki's novel *All Over Creation* (2003), identifies as a common thread within mainstream anti-GMO discourse: its tendency to replace the uncertainties generated by GMOs with the certainties offered by "existing moral, ethical, and philosophical belief systems" (163). Wallace argues that Ozeki's characters respond to the uncertainties raised by GMOs by filling the gaps in their knowledge with "what they do 'know' — about morality and reproduction, . . . about God and Nature, about corporations and toxic chemicals" (161). *Seeds* invokes a similar slippage through its treatment of Schmeiser's shifting environmentalist rhetoric. In his original court testimony, Schmeiser counters Monsanto's patent infringement claims by asserting his authority as an experienced farmer and horticulturalist who "lost fifty years of work because of a company's genetically altered seed getting into my canola" (74). However, when his expertise is dismissed by Monsanto's experts and he is unable to prove that his canola plants were contaminated by the company's genetically modified seeds, Schmeiser begins to rely on quasi-religious appeals to the "natural" to bolster his case against Monsanto, at one point declaring that a "life-giving form is . . . a sacred thing" and that biotech companies are "messing with something *God* created" (82). Ironically, however, these statements reinforce the very denial of farmers' creativity that biotech companies routinely rely on to bolster their intellectual property claims — the same denial that Schmeiser rails against earlier in the play when he states that he lost "fifty years of work" thanks to Monsanto. As Shiva and others have argued, corporate seed patents rest on the assumption that genetically modified seeds are products of human innovation, whereas conventional seeds are natural resources

that are "valueless and available for free" (*Biopiracy* 51). By highlighting how Schmeiser's activist rhetoric inadvertently reinforces this logic, *Seeds* suggests that protecting seed sovereignty might have less to do with preserving the purity of natural seeds than it does with recognizing the material and intellectual labour involved in traditional farming as well as fostering agricultural practices that might help farmers to reclaim control over their own seed supplies.

Soutar does not leave us with a clear vision of these strategies, and, as Heise argues in a different context, "neither would it be fair . . . to expect works of [literature] to deliver detailed solutions to complex [environmental] problems" (114). However, the play does identify a starting point for future alternatives through a localist subplot that explores the effects of GMO-based agriculture on the community life of Bruno, Saskatchewan. When the playwright investigates rumours that Schmeiser obtained Roundup Ready canola seeds illegally from one of his neighbours, she discovers that Monsanto has been stoking divisions in Schmeiser's farming community to force farmers to comply with its restrictive User Technology Agreement. This agreement, which has to be signed by anyone who buys seeds from Monsanto, not only dictates what farmers can do with their seeds, thereby impeding any seed-saving or seed-sharing activities, but also grants Monsanto the right to conduct "unannounced inspections of . . . farmers' fields" to ensure compliance with the terms of the contract (Kuyek 65). In a speech that he delivers to the Sierra Club toward the end of *Seeds*, Schmeiser laments that these stipulations have caused a "breakdown" of the "rural farm culture" in his community by preventing farmers from working together as well as encouraging them to turn on each other when Monsanto's "gene police" come to inspect their fields (113). The play does not delve into the history of Saskatchewan farm culture, but its emphasis on the crumbling relationships in Schmeiser's farming community suggests that building alternatives to the corporate seed-patenting regime must involve restoring the seed-sharing networks and farmer-to-farmer cooperation that once formed the basis of prairie agriculture. In this way, the play redirects the reader's attention away from Schmeiser's quasi-theological injunctions to restore the purity of natural seeds and toward the more actionable ecological goal of reinvigorating place-based agricultural practices that might help to restore farmers' control over their own seed supplies. This localist thread evokes the regionalist ethos of earlier docu-

mentary plays such as *No. 1 Hard* and *Paper Wheat*, which, as Filewod notes, explored the "history of grain capitalism in Saskatchewan" and celebrated the region's "tradition of co-operative socialism" as a safeguard against the dangers posed by corporate agribusiness (87, 82). Schmeiser's speech to the Sierra Club at the end of the play can be read as an appeal for the revival of a prairie-based tradition of cooperative farming. However, *Seeds* complicates this regionalist appeal by suggesting that it needs to be coupled with attention to the struggles for seed sovereignty taking place elsewhere in the world. The play illustrates the need for this coalitional approach by dramatizing the consumer fears that inform North American seed activism and then emphasizing the need to think beyond this consumer focus to consider the social and environmental threats that GMOs pose globally.

Apart from the impulse to romanticize heirloom seeds as natural, thereby overlooking the labour involved in traditional farming, a second feature of North American anti-GMO activism that *Seeds* calls into question is the movement's tendency to focus on the health threats that GMO foods pose to consumers in the Global North while neglecting the "wider social and environmental impacts of engineered crops" (Montenegro). Soutar draws attention to this problem by dramatizing her own anxieties about the potential health effects of GMO foods while using the play's collage-like *mise-en-scène* to emphasize that these health concerns need to be placed in much larger environmental and social contexts that include food and seed sovereignty issues articulated by seed activists in the Global South. *Seeds* brings the potential health effects of GMO crops into focus by playing on the fact that Soutar was pregnant while she was researching and writing the play. As Fishbane has noted, "by writing her pregnancy into the play, Soutar creates an urgency to the research," highlighting her misgivings "about the nature of genetically modified foods and whether she should feed them to her children" (84). From the outset, her onstage double is explicitly constructed as a mother interested in alternative food advocacy and therefore hyperconscious of the foods that she consumes during her pregnancy. In a scene that provides insight into her family life, the playwright tries to coax her husband into buying organic yogurt, assuring him that the extra cost is "worth it" (85). Later she wonders whether she should incorporate Shiva's frequently cited warnings about the health effects of GMOs into the play even though such risks have yet to be

substantiated by scientific research: "She's saying that GMO food is potentially harmful to human health but I can't find any . . . peer-reviewed science to back it up. . . . So, do I keep her voice in the play without backing up what she's saying?" (84). Soutar's skepticism begins to dissolve, however, when she interviews two scientists who express concerns about the unintended impacts that GMOs could have on human health and the environment. Neither scientist can offer "conclusive proof" that GMOs "are dangerous to ingest" (87), but their testimony leads the playwright to become increasingly anxious about the risks that genetically modified foods might pose to her as a pregnant woman. Thus, what begins as a journalistic investigation of the health claims made by anti-GMO activists soon transforms into a highly subjective exploration of her bodily immersion in the risk scenarios generated by GMO crops. These concerns are amplified when one of the scientists, Dr. Anne Clark, declares that she has decided to take a public stance against genetic engineering because, like the playwright, she is "very anxious not to make a mistake in what I feed my son" and "take[s] this very personally as a mother" (86). Abraham's stage production foregrounded the playwright's growing sense of bodily unease by layering this investigative sequence with screen projections that voiced her unspoken fears about the potential health effects of GMOs. When, following her meeting with Dr. Clark, the playwright drafts an email requesting an interview with another scientist who has questioned the safety of GMOs, she states that she "has some questions relating to the science of genetic engineering" (89). However, during the stage production, the onstage video projections showed a very different version of the email — one in which the playwright admitted that she was "scared and confused" and pleaded with the scientist to "please be the one to tell [her] the truth" about the dangers posed by GMO foods. Aside from using screen projections to represent the playwright's unspoken fears, Abraham's stage production exploited the affective impact of her pregnant body, often using chiaroscuro lighting to emphasize her belly and thus instigate spectators' concerns about the impacts that GMOs could have on the life growing inside the playwright.

The consumer fears invoked in *Seeds* echo the health concerns voiced by a burgeoning movement calling for mandatory GMO labelling laws in the United States and Canada. Drawing on preliminary data indicating that ingesting genetically modified foods could lead to "higher

risks of toxicity, allergenicity, antibiotic resistance, and immune-suppression," labelling advocates aim to raise public awareness of the "many unanswered safety questions" that surround GMO foods (see CBAN, "CBAN's Quick Guide"; Center for Food Safety). Thanks to this growing public pressure, several US states have now introduced bills calling for GMO labelling regulations (Center for Food Safety), with Vermont becoming the first state to pass a "right to know" law in July 2016. Canadian activists have long been pressuring the federal government to pass similar regulations, but their efforts have remained unsuccessful to date. However, current developments in the United States have revitalized the labelling debate in Canada, drawing increasing public attention to the lack of "monitoring of human consumption of GM foods" and its possible health impacts (CBAN, "GM Crops" 30). These campaigns have raised important questions about the continued absence of adequate safety testing for GMO foods; however, their tendency to centre the GMO debate on questions of consumer health often obscures the broader environmental and social justice issues raised by seed sovereignty activists. Indeed, as food systems researcher Maywa Montenegro notes, the growing anxiety about the health risks posed by GMO foods has deflected attention away from "the wider social and environmental impacts of engineered crops," which include the "overus[e] of GMO-compatible pesticides," a reduction of "crop genetic diversity," and a "strain on . . . food security when traditional crop varieties are replaced by GM varieties." To this we might add that centering the GMO debate on the health risks of ingesting GMOs creates the impression that addressing seed biopiracy involves making personal consumer choices instead of advocating a more ecologically sound and socially just seed system. In other words, though labelling campaigns interpellate us as consumers who need to know what is in our food to protect our own health and that of our families, they rarely encourage us to extend this concern to other bodies or other communities affected by GMO seeds. For instance, even though labelling advocates frequently emphasize that "GMO crops have led to massive increases in herbicide use" ("Moms"), they rarely raise questions about the health risks faced by farmworkers directly exposed to these herbicides. Instead, most advocacy efforts tend to focus on the consumption end of the food chain — particularly on mothers kept "in the dark" about the food that they feed their children, as the influential Just Label It! campaign warns on its website ("Moms").

In *Seeds*, Soutar's unease over the potential health effects of genetically modified crops elicits a similar reaction in us as readers/spectators, encouraging us to ask uncomfortable questions about the potential consequences of our own consumption of GMOs. However, the play also disrupts the consumer logic that frequently informs this kind of questioning by emphasizing that the risks posed by genetically modified seeds extend well beyond the limits of our own bodies and therefore cannot be addressed through personal consumer choice alone. Once again the play prompts this shift in perspective through its collage aesthetic, which juxtaposes Soutar's personal investigation of the potential dangers of GMO consumption not just against the farmers' rights issues raised by the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case but also against a much larger global debate on the social and ecological impacts of corporate seed patents. The second act of the play, which dramatizes Soutar's increasing fears about the health risks posed by GMOs, is book-ended by two scenes that interrogate the connections between the *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* case and the seed sovereignty movements taking place in the Global South. The first scene occurs after Schmeiser travels to India to receive "the Navdanya Award for the *defence* of seed sovereignty" from the hands of Vandana Shiva herself (81). In his acceptance speech, Schmeiser connects his personal battle against Monsanto to a larger global struggle against the "suppression of farmers around the world in the control of the seed supply by multinational corporations," and he urges his Indian counterparts to "fight and fight *hard* to always maintain the seeds of food, which are the seeds of life" (81). The ensuing scenes shift our attention from this globalized context to the highly localized context of the playwright's concerns about her own bodily immersion in the risk scenarios generated by GMOs. However, the final scene of the play turns our attention back to the Global South when Soutar, meditating on more recent developments in the "worldwide narrative about GM seeds," informs the audience that, "right now in Brazil, five million farmers are fighting a class action lawsuit against Monsanto to defend their right to save soybean seeds produced from Roundup Ready plants" (127). In the "Note on the Text" that precedes the play, Soutar indicates that these references should be updated "in future productions of the play to describe events that are . . . relevant to the present-day audience" (n. pag.). In this way, the play-text allows

for an ever-expanding inclusion of global references within the "living" entity that is the performed version of the play.

This repeated re-scaling from the local to the global not only forces us to consider the playwright's consumer fears in the context of broader global debates on the environmental and social impacts of genetically modified crops but also encourages us to meditate on the subject position that we ourselves occupy as we engage with these questions. Are we entering these debates primarily as consumers? And, if so, how might this subject position influence our sense of the issues at stake in the GMO debate? The play reinforces this questioning through a technique that Morton, discussing the role of avant-garde collage in environmental aesthetics, calls "radical juxtaposition" — a form of juxtaposition that draws deliberate attention to the "gap between contents and frame" and thus exposes its own artifice even as it attempts to produce the aesthetic experience of an all-encompassing environment (145). Along similar lines, *Seeds* juxtaposes multiple geographical scales (local versus global) and subject positions (Canadian playwright/consumer versus Canadian farmer versus Indian farmer) to produce a "narrative about GM seeds" that is global in scope and "continues to sprawl in contradictory directions even today" (Soutar 127). At the same time, however, the play *disrupts* its own construction of a global environment by emphasizing the gaps between the "Third World" anti-GMO struggles that it references and its own theatrical framing of those struggles. Crucially, in the scene that dramatizes Schmeiser's acceptance of the Navdanya Award, his efforts to establish a parallel between his own fight against Monsanto and the seed sovereignty campaigns of Indian farmers are disrupted when the news of his award reaches Canada. After Schmeiser gives his acceptance speech, the voice of a *Prairie Messenger* reporter interjects into the scene to announce that Schmeiser has been honoured with "India's Mahatma Gandhi Award," an "award given by Gandhi's family for the betterment of humankind" — to which the playwright pointedly responds that "the award was *not* given by Gandhi's family and was *not* called the Mahatma Gandhi Award — it was a statuette of Gandhi, but it was called the *Navdanya Award*" (82; emphasis added). This slippage indicates that there is a broader socio-political context here that has to do with the history of the Seed Satyagraha movement in India, but this context is lost not only to the reporter and her readers back in Canada but also to us as readers and spectators.[3]

In the stage production of *Seeds* presented at the National Arts Centre in the spring of 2014, this scene was made all the more jarring by the casting of Bruce Dinsmore, a white male actor, in the role of Vandana Shiva. The visual disruptions created by this cross-gender and cross-race casting, coupled with Dinsmore's laboured impression of Shiva's Indo-British accent, worked to disrupt the verisimilitude of the scene, thereby undercutting its status as a documentary representation of the original event. In short, both on the page and on the stage, *Seeds* highlights the insufficiency of its own theatrical staging as a vehicle for understanding the connections between the GM canola controversy in Canada and the seed sovereignty movements occurring in India and other parts of the Global South. However, by showcasing and thematizing this insufficiency, the play challenges its readers/spectators to think beyond their own subject position as North American consumers to consider the impacts of GMO crops on communities in the Global South. Thus, if a central function of the documentary play is to engage audiences as "citizens and putative participants in the public sphere," as theatre scholars Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson argue (3), then *Seeds* compels spectators to recognize that they must engage with the GMO debate not just as consumers concerned with the potential health effects of GMO crops but also as citizens imbricated in global networks of environmental and social injustice who thus have an ethical duty to think about their connections to these broader contexts. Among other things, the play prompts us to consider how a narrow focus on consumer health can erase the struggles of Southern communities that might be geographically removed from Northern consumers but are nevertheless directly affected by the Northern consumption of genetically modified seeds since many of the GM crops that form a regular part of the North American diet (from corn, to tomato, to rice) derive from seeds that have been biopirated from indigenous sources.[4] However, while *Seeds* encourages readers and spectators to question their own imbrication in global networks of seed biopiracy, it fails to identify clear alternatives to consumer-based forms of anti-GMO activism. It is here, perhaps, that the play fails to exploit fully the political possibilities offered by documentary theatre, which, dating back to its early beginnings in agitprop theatre and continuing with plays such as *No. 1 Hard* and *Paper Wheat*, has often "forged connections with populist organizations" (Filewod 80) such as the Saskatchewan co-op movement (in the case of *Paper*

Wheat) and the National Farmers' Union (in the case of *No. 1 Hard*). It is hardly surprising that *Seeds* does not engage in a direct championing of farmers' or other grassroots organizations, for such a gesture would be at odds with the play's efforts to construct what Gyllian Raby has aptly described as a "public space" where spectators can "consider the issues [raised by GMOs] from a variety of angles so as to find [their own] personal perspective[s]" (273, 272). However, in a play that strives for the inclusion of multiple discourses and perspectives, there could have been room at least to acknowledge the work of Canadian organizations such as USC Canada, Seeds of Diversity, and the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, three partner initiatives that have been working to rebuild the seed commons by facilitating collaboration and establishing networks of seed exchange across diverse farming communities both within Canada and around the world. Acknowledging such initiatives in future productions of the play might give a clearer sense of direction to spectators interested in finding practical avenues for the construction of a seed politics that acknowledges the interdependence of local and global struggles for seed sovereignty.

In her introduction to the recent special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* titled *Canadian Literary Ecologies*, Pamela Banting interrogates the role of literature and literary criticism in helping us to respond to "ecological problems characterized by global scale, temporal uncertainty, and multiple origins" (19). The widespread popular and critical acclaim garnered by *Seeds* — the play was lauded as the best of its decade by the Montreal-based *Rover Arts* review (Woolcott) — suggests some ways in which literature can be mobilized as a strategic resource in calling attention to and driving public action on pressing environmental problems, such as the spread of genetically modified seeds. Soutar's play draws on an array of documentary sources to position itself as part of a public sphere that includes multiple forms of discourse, from grassroots environmentalism to popular science communication to green consumer advocacy. In so doing, the play constructs a forum in which the fears and concerns of mainstream anti-GMO activism can not only be acknowledged and debated but also brought under scrutiny to create a more nuanced understanding of the stakes involved in the seed sovereignty debate. Writing about the strategies that *Seeds* draws on to engage its audiences, Raby suggests that the play "opens a public space where the concerns of artist, scientists, and citizens can be shared" so that

audiences can engage "with contradictory moments without cognitive restraint" (273). As I have demonstrated, Soutar's formal experimentalism plays a crucial role in the production of this public forum. Infusing the documentary theatre genre with an ecological form of avant-garde experimentalism, *Seeds* complicates the appeals to natural and narrow consumer logic that inform mainstream anti-GMO activism, challenging readers to think beyond their own bodies, geographical locations, and subject positions to consider the larger environmental and social justice issues generated by GMOs. Moreover, the juxtapositions that emerge from Soutar's use of avant-garde collage prompt us to consider how the concerns of North American seed activists intersect, but also conflict, with the concerns of seed activists in the Global South. By staging these intersections, *Seeds* enables us to envision possible points of departure for coalitional forms of anti-GMO resistance without resorting to homogeneous or overly sentimentalized visions of global solidarity.

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Notes

[1] For instance, in "Acts of Nature: Literature, Excess, and Environmental Politics," Sandilands queries what "literary texts in themselves, as points of environmental activity," can "contribute . . . to an environmental public culture" (128), while Kerber's reading of Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation A* explores the role of narrative form in mediating "environmental anxieties that operate at a range of geographical scales" (320). See also Banting's introduction to the special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* titled *Canadian Literary Ecologies*.

[2] I am thinking here of Heise's insistence, in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, that US environmentalism needs to be reoriented "toward a more nuanced understanding of how both local cultural and ecological systems are imbricated in the global ones" (59). My analysis here is also indebted to Nöel Sturgeon's suggestion, in *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*, that the narrative tropes (particularly the appeals to the natural) that characterize mainstream environmentalism can often work to obscure the interdependence of environmental and social justice issues.

[3] As Shiva notes, the Seed Satyagraha movement extends the Gandhian concepts of *satyagraha*, or "passive resistance," and *swaraj*, or "self-rule," to defend farmers' "right to

produce, exchange, modify, and sell seed" (*Biopiracy* 125). For a detailed description of the aims and strategies of this movement, see 124-26.

[4] For a detailed case study of the relationship between the consumption of GM crops in North America and social and environmental injustices in the Global South, see Bardnt, who follows the tomato from its origin as the Mesoamerican crop known as *tomatl*, to its commercialization by multinational agribusinesses, to its consumption by Canadian supermarket shoppers.

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