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New Appalachians of the Twenty-First Century: Reinventing Metanarratives and Master-Images  
of Southern Appalachian Literature

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Kelsey A. Solomon

May 2016

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Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes, Chair

Dr. Michael Cody

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Keywords: Appalachian literature, Appalachian studies, historical fiction, gender studies,

feminist studies, sexuality studies

## ABSTRACT

New Appalachians of the Twenty-First Century: Reinventing Metanarratives and Master-Images  
of Southern Appalachian Literature

by

Kelsey A. Solomon

The Appalachian studies tradition ascertains that Appalachian people politically, socially, and academically represent a heterogeneous minority group of our own. In post-capitalistic America, however, the Appalachian region serves as a hotspot for media misrepresentation and tourism that perpetuate through works of fiction, nonfiction, and scholarship both negative and positive stereotypes in the overall American consciousness. Twenty-first-century Appalachian authors, I contend, are reinventing Appalachia from its postmodern rubble through fictionalized reconceptualizations of our region's history, shifts in our collective consciousness from anthropocentric to ecocentric, and subversions of the heteronormative discourse of our internal colony through explorations of the psychosexual. The contemporary Appalachian texts that exemplify these abilities are Ron Rash's *The Cove*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Jeff Mann's *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* because each represents a paradigm shift within their own aesthetic metanarratives in Appalachian literary history.

## DEDICATION

To Susan O'Dell Underwood, for advising me to write what I know, to challenge constantly what I know, to find my own voice unapologetically for its own sake, and to holler for the multitude of my familial and regional history. Your professorial influence is the center of my academic and poetic pursuits, and the following pages attempt to emblemize your invaluable dedication to Appalachian literature and artistic expression. Thank you for teaching me that I can live proudly as a contradiction.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Appalachian studies tradition ascertains that Appalachian people politically, socially, and academically represent a heterogeneous minority group of our own, including women, people of color, differing nationalities, LGBTQIA communities, and stratification of social classes. In post-capitalistic America, however, the Appalachian region serves as a hotspot for media misrepresentation and tourism that perpetuate through works of fiction, nonfiction, and scholarship both negative and positive stereotypes in the general American consciousness. As a diametric opposite of the prevailing conception of Americanness, one of multiplicity and freedom, Appalachians were, and still continue to be, “typified by [a] strong sense of self-reliance, traditionalism, fatalism, and religious fundamentalism” (Swank 126). A core responsibility of Appalachian studies scholars is to understand and ideally deconstruct the falsified aspects of the Appalachian master-image, one that preserves Appalachia as Other. The following manuscript extends the foundational Appalachian literary theory that normalized the colonial relationship between Appalachia and the American mainstream, consisting of Henry D. Shapiro’s *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1970-1920* and Allen W. Batteau’s *The Invention of Appalachia*.

To quote Appalachian historian and literary scholar Dwight Billings, “While the peoples and cultures in the Appalachian mountains are decidedly plural, outside the region in the arts, the academy and popular culture, many representations of them now, as for the past one hundred years, are often monolithic, pejorative, and unquestioned” (qtd. Swank 126). Appalachian literature of the twentieth century focuses on largely the colonizing forces on the region, like religion, out-migration, cultural preservation, and monolithic industrialization in the form of coal



camps, mill towns, and the railroad. This body of literature retreats frequently from the oppressive effects of modernity on a people and a landscape and invents actively what we understand as a homogeneous, phallogentric Appalachia, an image of folkways, nature, and poverty perpetuated in cinema, television, literature, and, to some extent, in academia. On the other hand, especially at the turn of the twenty-first century, works of fiction and nonfiction propose new, game-changing ideas about how to paint an authentic picture of the region, how to reconceptualize accurately the past in order to inform their mimesis of the Appalachian condition today, and how to challenge master-narratives and master-images of the region that deepen continuously the divide between the American condition at large and Appalachia as Other. Twenty-first century Appalachian authors, I contend, are reinventing Appalachia from its postmodern rubble through fictionalized reconceptualizations of our region's history, shifts in our collective consciousness from anthropocentric to ecocentric, and subversions of the heteronormative discourse of our internal colony through explorations of the psychosexual. The contemporary Appalachian texts that exemplify abilities of reconceptualization, revision, and subversion are Ron Rash's *The Cove*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Jeff Mann's *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* because each represents a paradigm shift within their own aesthetic metanarratives in Appalachian literary history.

#### Mapping Boundaries of Southern Appalachia

The Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC] defines Appalachia as a zone spanning from northern Georgia, Alabama, and central eastern Mississippi to southern New York, from eastern Kentucky to western Carolinas, and the whole of West Virginia. Southern Appalachia consists specifically of the following sections according to the ARC's demographic definition in November 2009: central eastern Mississippi, northern Alabama, northern Georgia, northwestern

South Carolina, eastern and part of middle Tennessee, western North Carolina, and eastern Virginia. Elementally, the ARC maps Appalachia according to economic standards, of which the region scores lower than the rest of the United States. Within this economically-defined region, assorted social, economic, and environmental concerns endure despite federal funding and selective journalism directed toward general disputes in Appalachia (“Subregions”).

Despite the fact that the ARC aims to ameliorate the Appalachian condition from the evident social discrimination and economic exploitation that defines our regional history, Appalachia continues to experience recurring installments of dangerous industry and perpetuations of ill-contented stereotypes and historical documentation. The most pressing social and environmental issues affecting the economy of present-day Appalachia are radical strip mining, stereotypical misrepresentation, lack of healthcare accessibility, poor historical knowledge among insiders, and fragmented communities.

#### Internal Colonialism and Appalachian Otherness

Appalachia’s complicated relationship with American mainstream culture is parasitic; corporate and governmental powers manipulate residents and extract forcefully resources for industrial growth and monetary gain. Various processes of oppression exist to insure the persistence of the utilitarian good of the American condition through the dominating culture’s management of Appalachia as an internal colony. Helen Matthews Lewis defines *internal colony* as “a subsociety structurally alienated and lacking resources because of the process of the total economic political system” (25). The defining characteristic between the internal colony and mainstream culture is the unequal distribution of power. Since *Colonialism in America: The Appalachian Case* laid partially the groundwork for Appalachian studies in 1978, Lewis and others’ frequently-cited conceptual model of the internal colony continue to uncover, for

example, the origins of misleading stereotypes as well as the exposition of Appalachian history written between the lines of the colonizer's discourse.

Also published in 1978, Henry D. Shapiro's *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* expounds meticulously upon the crucial idea behind Appalachian studies scholarship today: the concept of Appalachian otherness. His argument centers on the idea that Appalachia as a region, according to the American mainstream culture, is "an anomaly" of the national identity in need of a savior (Shapiro 62). His work, although it does not didactically state, is concerned with the negative impacts on Appalachia as an internal colony, where the American masses are imposing "Americanness" on a region that will indefinitely be separated, therefore othered, from the American identity. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that the imposition of Americanness on Appalachia "had less to do with one's perception of the reality of mountain life than with one's conception of what America was or ought to be" (65). Shapiro ultimately contends that Appalachia is America's greatest project in exercising dominion and the whole of the American Dream.

Shapiro's detailed research illuminates the complexity behind the numerous problems of the Appalachian region between the years suggested in the title: 1870 to 1920. His research is sympathetic most of all to the well-being of the Appalachian, and he questions how much prosocial reform actually resulted from the philanthropy of missionaries and settlement schools. He goes into great detail about the historical events that helped to create the derogatory terms used to demean Appalachian people. For example, he states that Appalachian otherness became "a social problem" (61), according to the American masses, who believed and still believe to a certain extent that mountaineers live "in squalor and degeneracy" (61). Shapiro expounds upon

the historical contingencies that created a region that is arguably worse off because of internal colonization, first with religion, then literature, then education, and then industry.

Shapiro writes, “[T]he focus of denominational benevolence in Appalachia as among the so-called exceptional populations of America generally, was on the individual” (59). In other words, pseudo-ethnographic persons, like “artists, writers, sportsmen on vacation, [...] teachers, social workers, engineers, the agents of social and economic modernization” (63), focused on altering the mountaineer from a seemingly undiscovered individual into a pseudo-scientific, organized subject. Because of this insistence, however, the Appalachian individual became a synecdoche for “numerous individuals that led them to speak of mountaineers as a group, a class, or a population at all” (59). When the American masses were “discovering” the American South as a whole post-Civil War, Appalachia specifically “possessed no reality independent of its conceptualization as a discrete entity, however, naming was also an action of creation, and explaining was also an act of naming” (68). Missionary William G. Frost, for example, applied now-well-known phrases like “our contemporary ancestors” and “eighteenth century neighbors” that, as a result, actively shaped Appalachians as the deviant Other (Swank 126). Literature of the past’s contribution to prevailing misperceptions of Appalachia created a primary gap in the relationship between Appalachia and the American masses: “The manner in which explanation functioned to resolve the tension between Appalachia and America can be seen most easily in fiction, for the demands of the literary medium tended to prohibit an author from leaving this tension, characteristically expressed in the relationship between emblematic characters, unresolved” (69). Most local colorists resolved their narratives with separate realities for the protagonist and his or her love interest, one’s fate caged the isolated mountain culture and the

other free to roam America. Little if any fictional depictions of Appalachia during the local color movement portrayed the merge of Americanness and Appalachianess in harmony.

### Appalachia as an Invention

In the same critical vein as Shapiro's *Appalachia on Our Mind*, Allen W. Batteau's 1990 work of Appalachian theory *The Invention of Appalachia* reorganizes and extends the groundwork for Appalachian otherness, a normalized idea by this time in Appalachian studies discourse, and transforms it into a poetics. Batteau opens his analysis with his bold but often criticized—particularly by W. K. McNeil—statement: “Appalachia is a creature of the urban imagination” (Batteau 1). This statement implies that Appalachians have been historically defined by outsiders, or the American masses, from a bourgeois perspective. Furthermore, his controversial statement indicates—through his diction choice of “imagination”—that Appalachia “is a frame of reference, not a fact” (200). In 1990 and today, if one possesses knowledge of only the master-image of Appalachia and actively visits the area, then one would see evidences of the reference and also evidences of the fact. In other words, Appalachians themselves struggle with the validity and the existence of the master-image.

Because of Batteau's poetics, we know that literature, aside from the philanthropic attempts of post-Civil War missionaries, is the first successful colonizer of the region; works of local colorists like Mary Murfree, John Fox, Jr., Jesse Stewart, and William G. Frost, to name a few, are the first contributors to the organized “idea” or “invention” of Appalachia. Concerning the works of the twentieth century preoccupied with the Appalachian “problem,” Batteau places special blame on Harry Caudill, author of *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area* and crucial influencer on Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, for his “patronizing attitude toward the mountain people and for some unusual ideas about genetics” (5).

The “master-symbol” of Appalachia is that of “nature and the wilderness,” which Caudill perpetuates as the stationary, ever-present “backdrop to the human action of the mountains” (4). Batteau transforms the region’s history into a poetics so we can more readily perceive how the Appalachian image is falsified and exploited by American media:

With rare exceptions, all of the commentary about the ‘invention’ of Appalachia has taken place in a ‘myth vs. reality’ frame of reference, seeing the former term as pernicious or falsifying. My own position is that there exists a small number of generative symbols that define Appalachia; with various recursions and inversions, these symbols can generate an infinite variety of texts. If one attends only to the *semantic* values of these texts one will, like Henry Shapiro, get lost cataloging a variety of trees on the Appalachian hillside. To see the forest, to understand the unity of Appalachia, one must attend to issues of mood and motivation—in short, one must understand the poetic values of the image. (6)

Notice that Batteau describes a single image with the use of “the” in the last sentence. While Caudill’s text catalyzed the efforts of the War of Poverty in Appalachia, the region as an invention concretized in the American social consciousness with the telecast of the documentary “Christmas in Appalachia” on CBS News in 1964. The images of poverty “immediately shaped perceptions of Appalachia for the American public” (7) beyond the individual to overall public accessibility. Because of America’s growing familiarity in the postmodern world of the simulacra of television, cinema, and literature, constructing the Appalachian image for one-hundred years yielded to a monolithic image of Appalachia as nature, folkways, and poverty.

Therefore, if the American masses readily invented Appalachia as “a literary and a political invention rather than a geographical discovery” (1), then twenty-first century

Appalachian authors assume the responsibility to dissolve such arbitrary elements of the region's master-image. Furthermore, the difference between the creation of the Appalachian master-image and the new creations of twenty-first century authors is the displacement from outsider creation to insider creation, which yields to more authentic representations of peoples, landscapes, interpersonal relationships, economies, and social consciousnesses that recreate a heterogeneous Appalachia. With the emergence of more Appalachian writers—ones who feel a conviction about their own misrepresentation in the arts, television, and cinema—the region can produce, the more likely Appalachians can break down the barriers with their characteristically universal experiences.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL POETICS OF APPALACHIA: LAMENTATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF APPALACHIAN HISTORY IN RON RASH'S *THE COVE*

#### Graphing the Trend of Appalachian Gothicism and the Historical Appalachian Novel

An ongoing issue in the literature of Appalachian studies is the lack of authentic discursive knowledge about regional history. Disasters due to the coal industry, for example, continue to affect the land, the economy, and the families of the area in which the disasters occurred, but some hold that coal mining is a positive influence on the economy and the average household income, including employed coal miners and their families. In addition, some Appalachians willingly accept regional tourism, like the collected traffic through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, for instance, despite the reputation of the federal government's use of eminent domain, and we accept the Park at face value and think the whole forest is old-growth forest when seventy percent is new-growth (Brown, *Wild* 359). Furthermore, many often accept positive and negative stereotypes as fact despite their paradoxical nature; allegedly, Appalachia as a whole includes people who are ignorant but wise, lazy but hard-working, alcoholic but religious, and destructive but topophilic. Many outsiders and insiders alike succumb to stereotypical ideas about behavior as they tolerate industrial exploitation of the landscape and displaced peoples. However, Appalachian studies' scholarship subverts such generalizations through recreating our history that our mainstream colonizer—the American masses—transcribes with lesser value. Alongside research in academia, an emergent body of Appalachian novelists seeks to preserve and recreate a heterogeneous history that is actively and indirectly erased through misleading and erroneous stereotypes. Among the various representatives of this particular strain of literature in the twenty-first century, the collected works of Ron Rash, particularly one of his latest novels, *The Cove*, utilize the tools of both the



Gothic and historical fiction to illustrate Appalachia's increasing fear of extinction due to our lack of authentic representation in mainstream history and due to the ever-present oppressive forces of government agencies on Appalachian landscapes and people.

The thread of literary Gothicism in Appalachian literature is rooted in the works of the nineteenth-century local colorists. According to Allen W. Batteau in *The Invention of Appalachia*, local colorists like Mary Noialles Murfree, John Fox, Jr., and William Frost referred to the region using “images of innocence” alongside Gothic elements to enable readers’ understanding of the region’s poverty, but the Appalachian Gothic trend—distinct from the Southern Gothic tradition of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, for example—exploded in the late-twentieth century with the success of Harry Caudill’s 1963 work *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, an integral text that expedited the philosophy of the War on Poverty (Batteau 185). Caudill’s “biography of a depressed area” solidified the relationship between the region and American imperialism of the twentieth century in respect to the oppressive presence of the coal industry (185). This American inclination to colonize the Appalachian South has been “stock in trade of Appalachian poetics ever since the days of William G. Frost, the president of Berea College who made the salvation of ‘mountain whites’ into a national calling” (5), but in his biography of the region, Caudill emphasizes an agonistic conflict between the American metropolis and the Appalachian wilderness, a landscape that includes not only the natural world but the coal miner and the mountaineer as a spectacles of terrifying sacrifice (5). In lieu of portrayals of pastoral idealism and serenity, the Gothic horror laced in consequent fiction after *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* “replaced the sentimental” tendencies of the local colorists with Gothic “[s]ymbolism of death and decay abound” (185). Hence, the use of Gothic tropes is yet another invention of the urban imagination concerning the images and characteristics of

Appalachia and its people, particularly its inextricable connection to poverty, horror, and coal mining.

Following the normalization of Gothic discourse to describe Appalachia, as a result of Caudill's national success Gothic tropes surged in the region's literature ever since as a critique of Appalachian Otherness, a whole genre that emergent Appalachian studies scholars recognize as the Appalachian Gothic. A trope dating back to European Gothicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Gothic Other* is rooted in Oriental romances, but upon adaptation in the American Gothic tradition as a whole, otherness constitutes those who inhabit the untamed wilderness of the American frontier ("Otherness" 267-68). This genre of literature, like the Gothic genres that came before it, is connected to a specific landscape and culture. In addition, Appalachian Gothic literature deals with particularly Appalachian anxieties and fears.

Appalachians suffer from extreme psychological trauma as a result of witnessing the persistent regional decay or, more personally, their home place. Such physical and psychological abandonments grant fruitful subject matter to regional writers who contribute to the Gothic tradition because exploring the space between Appalachia and mainstream America often concretizes the most terrifying possibilities and sources of regional turmoil. Appalachian writers since the late-twentieth century are confronting their fears about our decaying culture in order to offer a viable path toward change. Thus, Appalachian novelists utilize the invention of Gothic discourse about Appalachia in order to conquer and to reestablish knowledge and historical meaning for vilipended voices and undocumented, seemingly forgotten micronarratives.

One of the first significant novels in the Appalachian Gothic tradition is Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973), a narrative that follows a cross-dressing necrophile named Lester Ballard along his murderous, sadistic exploits on Frog Mountain in Sevierville,

Tennessee, in the 1960s. At the beginning of the novel, McCarthy connects immediately Lester's persona with readers' identity when he writes that Lester is "[a] child of God much like yourself perhaps" (McCarthy 4). What Lester pines for, first and foremost, is human connection, but because of his isolated, basically parentless upbringing (his mother "run off" when he was "nine or ten," and his father "killed hisself" (21)) and the community's legal withholding of his property, extraneous familial abandonments and the society on Frog Mountain strip Lester completely of his humanity and reduce him to a semblance of a wild animal. For example, Lester cowers to the light outside the dark barn in which he has been watching the town assemble at an auction scheduled to sell Lester's confiscated land. The narrator illuminates Lester's animalism but also shows the soulless nature of the town, referring to it as a "ghost chorus" (5). The community participates in othering Lester contradictorily because they exist as mere apparitions—less than human—themselves.

Lester acts repeatedly sans conventional morality, as he masturbates, defecates, cusses, slaughters women, and fornicates with their corpses on the page. At the end of the novel, in his cross-dressing attire made from his female victims' clothes, Lester confronts violently John Greer, the man who bought Lester's property at the novel's opening. As a result, he is "sent to the state hospital in Knoxville and there placed in a cage next door but one to a demented gentleman who used to open folk's skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon" (193). After being sent back and forth from hospital to hospital after contracting pneumonia, Lester dies on "the floor of his cage" (194). From there, his body is sent to Memphis, and he becomes a subject of scientific experimentation. Medical students "flayed, eviscerated, dissected, [...] stripped" (194) Lester, a uncivilized man continuously subject to sociological disparity. Before his capture, he tells the deputy, "I don't remember none of it [his crimes]. I'm just follerin the man in front of

me” (186), which implies the inadequacy of his authoritative examples to set morally constructive standards. McCarthy equates Lester’s actions and experience, despite his appalling savagery, with the readers, who McCarthy asks to question how much different we are from Lester, another “child of God.” McCarthy’s critique of the Appalachian Other is a hyperbolic portrayal of a man who is subject to the fatalistic characteristics of his birth and to the inherent evil of humanity just like those who judge and demonize the mountaineer for immorality and savagery.<sup>1</sup>

Rash’s *The Cove* not only falls into the subgenre of the Appalachian Gothic but also contributes to a long line of historical fiction set in the region. Various examples exist concerning the inexhaustible trend of historical fiction set in the Appalachian Mountains, and pinpointing the exact text or body of works that shifted the paradigm from historiography to popular history—or the fictionalization of Appalachian history—needs further consideration, as it is not the immediate subject of this chapter. Although, generally speaking, transcribing history in fiction can also be attributed to the stories of the local colorists of the nineteenth century, even if their narratives perpetuate false narratives about mountaineers (Batteau 40). Sarah Johnson defines the *historical novel* as one “which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience” (Johnson 8). She continues to define the *historical novel* as a genre that “should only be called ‘historical’ if the plot reflects its historical period so well that the story could not have occurred at any other time in history” (8). With this definition in mind, works like Harriette Simpson Arnow’s *Dollmaker* or Mildred Haun’s *The Hawk’s Done Gone* do not fall into this category because neither setting takes place fifty years before its publication date. In the Appalachian canon as it stands, one of the many historical novels that fit Johnson’s definition is Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain*.

Frazier's *Cold Mountain* (1997) follows the Confederate soldier Inman—the only name he is given in the novel—and his trek home from a Confederate hospital in Raleigh to Cold Mountain, “a place where all his scattered forces might gather” (Frazier 17), to reunite with his informally betrothed Ada Monroe. As we will see in *The Cove*, Frazier also derives his plot from actual historical events and people:

Frazier based [Inman's] experience off his own great-great uncle, Confederate enlistee W. P. Inman, who in late 1864 escaped from an Illinois prison camp and made the trek home—on foot!—to his North Carolina home near Cold Mountain, a high but fairly non-descript peak some twenty miles southwest of Asheville, where the Blue Ridge Mountains merge with the Great Smokies. He was within three miles of home when he met his death in a skirmish at the hands of a particularly notorious Home Guard unit that had plagued local residents for much of the war. (Inscoc, “Appalachian” 304)

The fictional Inman's experience parallels almost exactly to the historical Inman, except with Frazier's invention of characters, a love affair, and the importance of the Blue Ridge Mountains to Inman's personhood, despite how unsympathetically Frazier writes Appalachian people, and the fictional Inman dies just miles from his home in Cold Mountain after briefly reuniting with Ada. Frazier's novel should be categorized as particularly Appalachian instead of Southern because his treatment of the Civil War in the Confederate South aligns with the historical metanarrative about Appalachia in the Civil War, where we see “few if any plantations, slaveholders, or slaves on his home front” (Inscoc, “Appalachian” 306). Frazier's novel invokes the “disillusionment, resentment, desolation, and brutality” (306) of war tied with a narrative of unrequired love, but, more importantly, Frazier gives life to a historical figure that would

continue to be lost in the marginalia of history, a practice that Rash's utilizes in many of his novels.

Rash's *The Cove*, like *Serena*, his most successful novel to date, serves as an example of two trends in Appalachian literature converged. Rash's novel aligns with the Appalachian Gothic tradition and its critique of the Appalachian Other through his sympathetic treatment of Laurel Shelton, and the novel utilizes history in a similar way to Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, as Rash's novel, I contend, is an allegory for the Shelton Laurel Massacre set in World War I. Because Rash writes within both strains of Appalachian literature, *The Cove* can be defined as *historico-Gothic*, what Mary Waldron defines as "a subdivision of the category of Gothic novel which shares many of its characteristics but is more historically specific, with invented or fictionalized historical characters participating to some degree in actual historical events" (274). With this specialized Gothic subgenre in mind, the paradigm shift that takes place in the collected works of Ron Rash signifies fictional reconstructions of history that possess little likelihood of exposure and circulation discursively after the region's experience with governmental exploitation and the overall exclusion of Appalachian history from American historical metanarratives.

#### The Historico-Gothic and Counteracting Appalachian Extinction in *The Cove*<sup>2</sup>

In an essay Rash wrote in his early career called "The Importance of Place," he posits that regional literatures across the globe contain the most universal principles of humanity and the preservation of regional histories:

When I wrote *One Foot in Eden*, I set the novel in a place, Jocassee Valley, that now is buried beneath a reservoir. [James] Joyce, another great regionalist, once claimed that if Dublin were destroyed, it could be recreated by reading *Ulysses*. I would make no similar claim for my novel's depiction of the Jocassee Valley, but

I have brought all that I know of that place into my story, hoping that I might go deep enough to bring something of that place, and all places, to the surface. (Rash, “Importance” 7)

After over a century of economic exploitation and social discrimination in Appalachia’s history, Rash began his creative reconceptualizations of the region’s history with the publication of *One Foot in Eden*, and he maintains a similar literary aesthetic in his proceeding works of both fiction and poetry. If the feared Appalachian extinction becomes fully realized, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Rash’s novels, short stories, and poems would persevere and would aid us in rebuilding images and narratives of Appalachia if only in our minds. In lieu of transcription and discursive circulation of linear history, Rash focuses on a “concept” of history in order to portray accurately Appalachia’s heterogeneity antithetical to the invented and false Appalachia perpetuated in American discourse. Rash serves as a literary historian who contributes to this desired shift in *The Cove* in his historical reconceptualization of Appalachia during World War I. Rash reimagines the region’s history in order to transfer discursive power from the American elite to the Appalachian Other. Setting his narrative in the past to illuminate truths about the present, Rash invites us to view World War I Appalachia through the narrative of his protagonist Laurel Shelton, her family, and her unlikely romance with a German hideaway, Walter Koch. We can learn that while Appalachia’s past is swollen with overuse and demonization—with specific emphasis on the potential erasure of Appalachian history and landscape—our future will continue to experience such ills if our attitudes toward the present remain the same.

Among other Appalachian writers Rash shares “a common anxiety about the persistence of regional authenticity” (Hovis 26). The deaths of Laurel Shelton, Hank Shelton, and Chauncey Feith align with the cove’s ultimate fate, as the TVA plans to flood the land. Similarly, because

the flooding inhibits future knowledge of the cove's existence, the stories of the dead will also be lost. During Walter's departure to the train station in Mars Hill, he contemplates the future of the cove: "Forty or fifty years, a blink of time for these mountains, and there'd be no memory of what happened here" (Rash 239). Walter possesses the ability to immortalize his experiences in the cove and his love for Laurel through his music, but the presence of governmental authority maintains a stronger influence on Appalachia's devaluation. Rash solidifies the rapid erasure of local history as well as the landscape with the image of the skull in the well and how it translates to technological domination of Appalachia.

The image of the unidentified skull from the prologue lingers behind the narrative outgrowth and connections among Laurel, Walter, Hank, and Chauncey. During this process readers develop emotional attachments toward certain characters, and as a result, they experience dread about characters' fates because the one with which they bond may be the skull's owner. When the narrative discloses Chauncey's descent into the well after his self-authorized murders of Laurel and Hank, readers justify the cove's revenge because Chauncey blunts the amelioration of the cove's bad reputation. The cove harbors the victim of its revenge until TVA staff member Parton peers into the well and confuses "his own dim reflection" (Rash, *Cove* 4) with skull's shadowy presence. Parton's association with the skull serves as a link between regional authorities of passing generations because both characters are intermediaries between the landscape and the American government. Chauncey recruits soldiers on the home front during World War I, while Parton surveys the cove as a preliminary act before the TVA overtakes the land to produce electricity or to restructure the landscape's beauty. Because of the connection between Chauncey and Parton, readers feel heavy anxiety about current and future issues in Appalachia, particularly with the colonizing forces of postmodern American society.



The parallel between Parton and Chauncey exemplifies how the role of government vilipends culture, lifestyle, and feelings of Appalachians for the overall public good. With each passing generation, governmental presence becomes more destructive despite their utilitarian arguments for their actions. After providing Appalachians with military purpose in World War I, the government uses the TVA to ameliorate the economic and social condition of the region by providing electricity. However, in order to alter living condition in Appalachia to conform to modern comfort, individuals are uprooted from their homesteads to benefit the greatest number. Because of the continual exploitation of the region's resources, landscape, and inhabitants, readers ponder the future according to the trends in American history, specifically the relationship between government and Appalachia.

Parton's surveillance in the cove alludes to the recurring silence of personal narratives as well as the survival of nature due to the resolute governmental presence in the mountains. Consider Walter's image of Appalachia during the setting of *The Cove*: "The oldest mountains in the world, one of the guards had claimed, and today they looked it, stark and gray brown daguerreotype" (191). Walter's vision typifies the degradation of the landscape's aura from the ideal panorama full of life and color. The demolished or modernized landscapes we see today are the result of the advanced technology of radical strip mining, hydraulic fracking, and alternative energy. Such practices threaten the health of the whole ecosystem from vegetation to human beings and present a more horrifying image than a discolored horizon. The trend of governmental presence in Appalachia increases the likelihood of additional hazards, and as we move into a post-coal society in Appalachia, readers fear the next exploitation may be worse for Appalachians and the landscape, including further illness, decay, and extinction in the most extreme case.

Rash adapts this phobia of extinction to the trend of historical fiction in Appalachian literature in order to solidify the discursive practice about vilipended micronarratives of the region's past. The main difference between Frazier's *Cold Mountain* and Rash's historical novels is their stereotypical treatments of Appalachian people. Rash attempts more sympathetic, objective, and authentic representations of Appalachian people and the landscape, and, according to Joyce Compton Brown, this is likely because of his creative obligation to illustrate *blood memory*, or "the memory that comes from a sense of identity" that can be "reinforced by research and exploration, but factual knowledge is absorbed through the blood of understanding one's identity" (Brown, "Dark" 19). Rash combats erasure and amnesia through his simple premise "to preserve" the blood memory in written form (Lang 4). His work maintains a recurring theme of mortality with an elegiac tone that John Lang accredits to Seamus Heaney's influence on Rash's writing (4). Rash, like Heaney, "avoids sentimentalizing or romanticizing agrarian life" (5). In Heaney's poem "Digging," he writes, "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (29-31). Heaney and Rash embrace the pen as the digging tool for archeological process of uncovering the dead unromantically, as he does not give in to sentimentality and instead depicts his characters' emotions and the landscape of the cove with grim authenticity.

Connected to Heaney's influence on Rash and his connection to unveiling unprivileged stories of Appalachian history and the landscape, Rash's fascination with the local history of Madison County, North Carolina, sparked a large section of his published works dedicated to the immortalization and discursive knowledge of the injustice of the Shelton Laurel Massacre, also known as "Bloody Madison." The Shelton Laurel Massacre occurred in January 1863 as a result of staunchly-divided loyalties between supporters of the Union and the Confederacy within western North Carolinian counties during the Civil War (Cockrell 1). Unionist outlaws initiated a

series of raid against Confederate sympathizers in Marshall, the city seat of Madison County, early in the month of January (2). However, after the raids the tensions erupted on the Confederate side:

Brig. Gen. Henry Heth dispatched Confederate infantry to the county to quell the disturbances. The operation's harsh objectives made it clear that Confederates held the Unionist renegades in low regard. Heth instructed his subordinates to take no prisoners should there be an engagement. Accordingly, a detachment led by Lt. Col. James A. Keith, a Confederate and native of Marshall eager to avenge the wrong done [to] his townsmen, entered the Shelton Laurel area and embarked on a rampage against the Unionists. Locals were tortured to reveal the names of the bandits, and, once identified, these 'Tories' (old men and boys) were apprehended: 13 were eventually shot in cold blood. This brutality brought down upon Keith and his men the wrath of the countryside, and constant sniper fire and attempted ambushes soon compelled them to leave the area. (2).

The youngest of the thirteen executed in cold blood was twelve-year-old David Shelton, a key historical figure in the plot of Rash's novel *The World Made Straight*. In this novel, Rash creates a Gothic atmosphere in order to show that even though most descendants of those who survived or died in the Civil War, whether Union or Confederate, are unaware of their familial or local history, the past injustices that transpired around their homeland haunts their everyday lives. Rash's success and vast body of literature dedicated to the immortalization of this historical event and the innocent lives lost as a result of the violent divided loyalties between the Union and the Confederacy expedited the narrative's discursive circulation in both academe and American marketplace readership.

The most prevalent Gothic element in *The World Made Straight* is how Civil War history continues to haunt characters' identities, their reading preferences, and their interpersonal relationships. The characters rely on their ancestors' connections to the execution at Shelton Laurel, and Travis Shelton, one protagonist of the novel, takes strong offense to Leonard Shuler's ancestors' Confederate involvement at Shelton Laurel when Travis's ancestors have been executed for Unionism. The actual haunting in *The World Made Straight* is subtle compared to European Gothic texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because readers do not encounter mystical embodiments like ghosts. The haunting ideas reside in tangible, worldly objects. For example, Travis straddles obsession with Shelton Laurel, especially his serendipitous discovery of David Shelton's glasses while surveying Shelton Laurel with Leonard and the historical texts that Leonard lends him. Travis's encounter with these objects adds to history's ability to haunt Madison County in their microscopic drug war outside the city limits of Marshall.

I contend that the historical narrative about Shelton Laurel Massacre as discussed above serves as the grounding for the allegorical content in Rash's *The Cove*. First, both the cove and the land upon which the Shelton Laurel Massacre took place shares similar characteristics. In *The Cove*, TVA surveyor Parton states the "cove was a place where only bad things happened" (Rash, *Cove* 1) and "where the sun hardly shines brightly enough to sustain a crop" (Hovis 32). Rash further describes the cove as "a cursed place [...] where ghosts and fetches wander" (Rash, *Cove* 17). In *The World Made Straight*, when Travis Shelton and Leonard Shuler visit Shelton Laurel, Leonard says, "You know a place is haunted when it feels more real than you are" (Rash, *World* 86), as it is haunted with the stories and massacred lives. Both landscapes retain haunted stories and essences that repel good fortune or affluence for the novels' characters.

Second, the central character Laurel Shelton's name is the reverse to the actual landmark Shelton Laurel. Her isolation in the cove while her brother Hank fights in World War I, her love affair with German hideaway and musician Walter, and her reputation as a witch stand as fictional supplements to Laurel's dynamic characterization, but through these creations, Rash gives written documentation and representation to not only Laurel but to David. Rash proposes fictional but possible hopes for David of being a teacher, an admirer of books, and, most of all, a love story. In addition, the ending of the novel parallels with David Shelton's execution in cold blood. Rash writes Laurel's death as one of a blameless casualty:

Laurel Shelton was backed against a tree, the hounds barking and slobbering as they surrounded her. Jack shouted that there was a shirt in the river. All the while, men and dogs and horses bumped and stumbled and circled. Traveler lost his footing for a moment and veered perilously close to the water. Chauncey had the dizzying sensation that he was on a horse astride a carousel, the world turning around him. [...] Chauncey squeezed the rein to hold on and the pistol fired. [...] The world no longer spun around Chauncey. It had shuddered to a stop and locked itself into place. Laurel Shelton's back still pressed against the tree, but now a tear appeared in the green cloth covering her left breast. She didn't appear to be in pain, her face expressionless. It's a briar scratch, not a bullet hole, Chauncey told himself. Then her knees buckled and she fell to the ground. (124-25)

Laurel becomes guilty by association with her harboring of Walter, even though he lacks all signs of fascism. Her death, like David's, is inherently immoral due to their young age, their innocence, and unintended involvement with the projected enemy.

Third, strikingly similar connections exist between Lt. Col. James A Keith and Chauncey Feith. Throughout the novel, Chauncey maintains a sense of entitlement, particularly with how he exudes pride in his recruitment, and he assumes responsibility for finding German sympathizers without specific orders to do so. As described above, Keith rebels against his orders “to take no prisoners” during the feud between the Union renegades and the Confederacy sympathizers, even though he lacked the authority to do so. In addition, the digging of the well serves as a form of retribution for Chauncey and, by extension, Keith, as he was never criminally persecuted for his crimes against the Union sympathizers at the Shelton Laurel Massacre (Crockrell 4). In order to solidify discursive knowledge about the Shelton Laurel Massacre, Rash steps beyond merely writing about the historical event or assigning narrative or characterizational significance and turns the event into a poetics, specifically without history repeats itself due to the simple mistake of not acquiring knowledge about history in order to prevent the recurrence of the same mistakes.

Aside from the historical allegory Rash employs in *The Cove*, he exerts various other Gothic elements to illustrate the particularly Appalachian fear of extinction. One recurring Gothic trope in the novel is Rash’s use of the uncanny. Sigmund Freud describes the *unheimlich*, or the *uncanny*, as “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud 833). In other words, the most terrifying semblance of human experience occurs when we are reintroduced to our repressed fears. Aroused from the dissonance of attraction and revulsion, uncanny images continue to be “the fundamental law of Gothic emotion” (Morris 307). The uncanny elements of *The Cove* emerge from Rash’s resurrection of the dead and the extinction.

What was once dead in the world as we experience it is alive and significant in the world he constructs.

Rash raises the Carolina parakeet from its extinction. This species of parakeet “was the only parrot species native to the eastern United States” (“Last” 1), and on February 21, 1918, the last known bird of its kind died in captivity (2). The largest catalyst to the extinction of the Carolina parakeet in North Carolina was farmers’ execution of them because they were considered pests (4), as exemplified in *The Cove* with Laurel’s father’s attitude toward them (Rash, *Cove* 9). Rash wrote an elegy to the bird entitled “Carolina Parakeet”:

Though once plentiful enough  
to pulse an acre field, green  
a blue sky, they were soon gone,  
whole flocks slaughtered in a day,  
though before forever lost  
found last here, in these mountains  
so sparsely settled a man  
late as 1860 might  
look up from new-broken land  
and glimpse that bright vanishing. (1-10)

Rash’s poem encompasses the bird’s beauty that began vanishing long before its extinction during the same time as World War I. In the novel, the rumor is that the Carolina parakeet still lives in the cove despite projections about its disappearance. Rash connects the Carolina parakeet to Walter Koch as an extended metaphor. The first description takes place when Laurel hears the song at the novel’s opening as similar to the song of the Carolina parakeet that turns into “[a] cry

but not a song” (Rash, *Cove* 9), and when Laurel approaches the source of the song, she finds Walter “with his back against a tree, eyes closed as his fingers skipped across a silver flute” (10). Walter plays his flute for Laurel when he decides to flee and when he returns to the cove out of fear of capture, out of paranoia that the Sheltons will find the Vaterland coin he has left behind, and out of developing love for Laurel. Walter escapes from the bloodshed but with a broken heart embodies metaphorically the song of the Carolina parakeet, one of loss but authenticity. Rash’s resurrection of the Carolina parakeet through Walter’s musical pursuit at the end of the novel immortalizes the bird to survive at best in the region’s literature.

Raising the Carolina parakeet from the dead is inherently linked to Rash’s creative maxim: “Landscape is destiny.” Rash implements often this maxim in order to clarify how the setting and the characters in his novels metaphorically correlate in their fates (Hauck 17). Although Walter leaves the cove with a broken heart, he becomes a symbol of hope. Rash describes his aesthetic most thoroughly in his earlier novel *The World Made Straight*:

*Landscape is destiny.* Leonard had carried that phrase in his head for years, though he could not remember the context or where it came from. But he knew what it meant here, the sense of being closed in, of human limitation. So different from the Midwest, where the possible sprawled bright and endless in every direction. He wondered if people in the Himalayas and Andes were affected similarly. Did they live in the passive voice, as if their lives were not really happening but instead were memories, fixed and immutable? (Rash, *World* 156-7)

In *The Cove*, the cove itself becomes that repository of “memories, fixed and immutable” because the novel is a written but fictional representation of the dead. In an interview with Stacy Cochran, Rash admits that one goal he sets for his fiction is to portray the past as commentary on



the present (Cochran). His fiction becomes a transgressive reality that speaks about the similarities and differences between the social issues of the past and of the present, and *The Cove* ends with notes of ambivalent hope, like Walter. Walter will obtain his opportunity to play his music but at the cost of Laurel's death and his broken heart. This sentiment extends to Rash's vision of the Appalachian condition as a whole, a region rebuilding itself from the death and decadence firmly solidified in the discourse about Appalachia in Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, and with more fictional representations of history or with other attempts of raising the dead conceptually and through the written word, the region can gradually rebuild itself in its own reinvented image.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY APPALACHIAN WOMAN: TOWARD AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

#### Portrayals of Womanhood in Southern Appalachian Literature

The portrait of the Appalachian woman in multiple genres of literature, including essay, short fiction, novel, and nonfiction, has dramatically changed since the nineteenth century from the helpless domestic in William Frost's "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains," to the overburdened, multi-role female and struggling artist in Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, and to the sexually-liberated woman in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* at the turn of the twenty-first century. Particularly Appalachian women of low social status across centuries "have been typically represented by stereotypical images not only in the media but, at times, in the professional literature," and such images "fail to communicate the diversity of interests, skills, and abilities among women in this segment of the society" (Fiene 66). Beginning in the nineteenth century, the metanarrative of Appalachian womanhood in the canon progresses slowly up to the end of the twentieth century, but Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, published the year of the new millennium, embodies a vision of change in female livelihood in the region and connects the amelioration of the female condition to the reassembly of the ecosystem in the Appalachian mountains.

In the nineteenth century, Appalachian literature generally focused on the socioeconomic amelioration of an entire region with specific emphasis on the underdeveloped mind of Appalachians. First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* for March 1899, William Frost's essay "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" attempts to liberate the "mountain

whites” in the underdeveloped area of what he calls “Appalachian America” (Frost 93). With the help of his authority and privilege as the President of Berea College at the time, Frost aimed to gain specifically private monetary contributions and funding in order to transform the institution into a tuition-free collegiate bureaucracy for those of low socioeconomic class in Appalachia. As a supporting detail for his cause, Frost describes the trials and weaknesses of what he calls the “mountain woman” (95) in order to show the benefits of a free collegiate institution in the region. The mountain woman, according to Frost, often goes without necessities like flour because the little country store does not operate within walking distance (95). Frost further insists that material and oral folkways of Appalachian culture are dying away with each generation of women, and “the health and grace and skill of womankind” is in need of preservation (98). In addition, he extends compliments to Mary Murfree, a widely-read local colorist during the nineteenth century, for her portrayal of the region’s poverty and its underdeveloped status in comparison to higher standards of mainstream American living (98). Because the responsibilities of child-rearing often fall to the female sphere in Appalachia during this time, Frost subtly blames women for children’s lack of role models or wise touchstones from which to frame their lives “outside these petty bounds” of underdeveloped surroundings (100).

Frost’s coinage of the loaded phrase “our contemporary ancestors” extends to his paradoxical portrayal of women in his essay. Although Appalachian women in the early nineteenth century passed down rich domestic traditions to future generations of women, the lack of the traditions’ reproduction through younger generations of women during the late nineteenth century shows that Appalachian America continues to decline in strength and education. Women do not serve as role models for their children, according to Frost, and he uses this lack of authority in the female sphere as a rhetorical tool to persuade his readers that the region needs

progressive social and educational reform (101). Appalachian women of Frost's essay contribute nothing to the culture or their welfare except their domestic creations, which locked Appalachian women into a rigid and impossible gender role. Frost is one of the many historical figures to exploit the crippling domestic sphere in order to rationalize the need for social action in Appalachia, and with his portrayal of women, Frost catalyzes the formation of the false master-image of Appalachia as poverty.

In contrast, Emma Bell Miles's nonfiction piece *The Spirit of the Mountains* treats Appalachian women with sympathy and understanding. After its publication in 1905, Miles's work fell out of favor in part due to how the elite literary circle at the turn of the twentieth century stigmatized women writers for their decadent subject matter or, on the other extreme, their critiques of patriarchal oppression of women socially, politically, economically, and sexually. Extending the tradition of nineteenth-century American domestic fiction, Miles represents an artist among many who embody the recurring complex, internal tension between a woman's need to create and the difficulty of the female condition.

Miles writes at length about the gender roles of women and men in Appalachia at the turn of the twentieth century: marriage, separate child-rearing responsibilities for female children and for male children, home life, and motherhood in general. Drawing on her explanations and examples, Miles contends that male dominance of the region stands as one of the major problems concerning individuals' well-being and happiness in Appalachia. Miles states that women are the underappreciated backbone of communities:

She has had her share of crosses. For all her gentleness and courtesy, there is something terrible about old Geneva Rogers, a fascination, as of the stern and awful patience of some grand, stubborn slave. At an age when the mothers of any

but a wolf-race become lace-capped and felt-shod pets of the household, relegated to the safety of cushioned nooks in favorite rooms, she is yet able to toil almost as severely as ever. She takes wearisome journeys afoot, and is ready to do battle upon occasion to defend her own. Her strength and endurance are beyond imagination to women of the sheltered life. (Miles 54)

The comparison of Geneva Rogers to a slave, a wolf, and a warrior disrupts the universal image of the “angel in the house,” or a woman who exemplifies gentility and duty to her husband. Rather than condemning Geneva for her wildness, Miles celebrates her physical and emotional strengths. While Frost uses the Appalachian woman as a rhetorical tool and insists that women should pass along cultural tradition, Miles states ironically, “Let the woman’s part be to preserve tradition” (Miles 68), harking back to Geneva’s untamed strength. Miles’s portrait of the Appalachian woman in Geneva Rogers was ahead of its time, due to her attempt at objective analysis mixed with sympathy for her subjects, and the poetic celebration of the “wolf-race” of Appalachian women does not fully bloom until Kingsolver writes *Prodigal Summer*.

Miles paints her most sympathetic, understanding portrait in the text of Mary Burns. Married too young, Mary struggles with a neglectful husband and with raising their children without his emotional or physical support, but she never complains. Because Appalachian women are overworked in the domestic sphere as mothers, wives, teachers, nurses, and maids, they age prematurely as a result of “toil, sorrow, child-bearing, loneliness[,] and pitiful want” (65). Miles’s portrait of Mary parallels with sociological sketches of the Appalachian woman:

A composite picture of the low-status woman [...] portrays a socially isolated woman whose role choices are limited to those of homemaker and mother except in the face of serious economic necessity. She is seldom self-assertive and

chooses to avoid problematic situations. She may be content with her lot in life or fatalistic about God's will. There is a high probability that she is dependent, at some time, on community social services and has more children than the national average. At various times in her life, she may exhibit symptoms related to chronic stress and depression. She may become the victim of family violence and yet be unable to act decisively for herself. Her inexperience in the larger social world makes it difficult for her to deal with impersonal representatives of assisting agencies. (Fiene 68)

Alongside her portrayal of women's oppression in Appalachia, Miles's ethnographic approach of respectful distance and objectivity in relation to her subjects slips little if at all. Mary's sociological standing shows that because men and women have very little social expectations outside marriage, children, and the basic human necessities, the problems in the area will worsen, and the quality of life and the pursuit of happiness for families, especially women, will diminish.

Miles's treatment of Mary Burns focuses on the difficulties of the rural, domestic Appalachian woman, but the arrival of iron and cotton industries in the late-nineteenth century facilitated the suffocating roles of womanhood. First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April 1861, Rebecca Harding Davis's novella *Life in the Iron-Mills* stands as one of the earliest fictional treatments of industrial capitalism in American literary history. Nineteenth-century American domestic fiction continues to interest scholars up to the present day because of the recurring complex, internal tension between a female author's need to create and the rigidity of the female gender role. Set in what is now Wheeling, West Virginia, Davis's story is often referred to as a tale of the *artiste manqué*, or an artist who is psychologically and, more so, sociologically inhibited from exercising his or her artistic talent (Goodman 57). The discourse of

*Life in the Iron-Mills* centers on her protagonists are Welsh immigrants working in the iron and cotton mills in an Appalachian town, and neither Deborah nor Hugh Wolfe fit into their assigned gender roles or conform to Appalachian stereotypes. Although the main protagonist of this story is arguably Hugh, his cousin Deborah's experience as an immigrant female and an assimilating Appalachian deserves distinct analysis in accordance with the metanarrative of the Appalachian woman in the canon.

Davis describes Deb, although young, "though no one guessed it," "deformed," "hunchback," and "hungry," depicting her as "even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery" than those features of Hugh, who works in the iron mill's ostensibly violent conditions (Davis 5-8). Working in analogous rough conditions in the cotton mill affects not only her physical appearance but her opportunity for self-improvement or leisure. Deb is altogether under-informed of her surroundings and unable to participate in Hugh's struggle because she is physically and mentally exhausted. She works long hours, which drains her energy, comes home to take care of Hugh and Janey, a young girl in the community who Deb envies internally for her beauty, and lacks financial means to further her education or self-educate. What Deborah truly needs is rest, amusement, and relaxation in addition to more humane working conditions. Mill girls enjoy little to no time for recreation or mental improvement in order to alleviate their domestic lives, let alone their social class. As a result, Deb lacks knowledge as to the repercussions for stealing money from the visiting mill owners, even though she acts to save Hugh for his oppressive conditions. Because of her lack education, her limited, working-poor perspective, she does not understand the consequences of her actions. Only when she and Hugh are imprisoned for thievery does Deb realize their punishment; however, she understands in as much as it affects Hugh's will to live. In the end, a Quaker woman, a *deus ex machina*, saves

Deb from her life of industrial slavery to one of spiritual enlightenment and physical nourishment. Davis's ulterior motive to promote justice lies in the possible empathetic responses for poor immigrants' social mobilization as well as the amelioration of the women writer among patriarchal literary circles during her life. Although the discipline of Appalachian studies often omits discussions of relevance concerning Davis's work, I posit that she set a precedent for writing the experience of the Appalachian laborer that later writers vilipend in their treatments of Appalachian identity and poverty.

In the mid-twentieth century the Appalachian female condition undergoes a fusion of experience of both the oppression of the domestic sphere in *The Spirit of the Mountains* and industrial slavery in *Life in the Iron-Mills*. The culmination of out-migration, the domestic sphere, industrial slavery, and the plight of the artist in Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker* exemplifies overt inescapability of social homogeneity for the protagonist Gertie Nevels through the destruction of her art. Arnow describes Gertie as a masculine Appalachian woman who throws heavy sacks of flour over her shoulder and who wields an axe with ease. Gertie and her children migrate reluctantly from Kentucky to Detroit, Michigan in hopes that her husband Clovis creates an ameliorated life for their family through the industry supporting World War II. The capitalistic society of Detroit shocks Gertie upon arrival, particularly concerning commodified kitchen appliances that she lacks knowledge to use and her neighbors' willingness to pay for her "wittlen foolishness" (Arnow 19) of dolls, baskets, and crucifixes. In the closing chapter of the novel, we find Gertie carving away at her magnum opus of sorts, a faceless crucifix. The following passage from Arnow's narrative describes the crucifix's aura as Gertie carves:



She tried to work faster on the uplifted hand, held close against the chest.

Gradually the man in the wood brought some calmness to her; he was alive; the hands, the head, even the face were there; she had only to pull the curtain of wood away, and the eyes would look down at her. They would hold no quarreling, no scolding, no questions. Even long ago, when only the top of the head was out of the wood, below it had seemed a being who understood that the dancing, the never joining the church, had been less sinful than the pretending that she believed[.] (660)

Gertie's religious animosity prohibits her creative progress concerning Christ's face in the carving. However, the faceless crucifix's aura manifests from her religious inner struggle to find Christ in the mechanical consciousness of Detroit. The two are alone together in her social imprisonment, a small section of industrial housing.

Gertie, as well as her son Reuben and her daughter Cassie, refuse to "adjust" (228) to their environment in Detroit. As a result of their unwillingness to conform, Reuben returns home to Kentucky, and Cassie dies during play on the neighboring train tracks. To add to Gertie's suffering, Clovis's membership with the union forces him out of work due to a strike on wages and working conditions, and Gertie becomes the sole source of income through her dollmaking. Clovis convinces Gertie to rethink her talent of woodcarving. In exchange for the specialized piece of art, the family recreates mass-produced, cheaper dolls with a jigsaw in order to expedite their product and profit more promptly. The oppressive powers of industrial Detroit as well as the pressures from her husband force Gertie to reproduce her carvings mechanically into what she thinks are ugly dolls void of unique craftsmanship, an aura, or a soul. Locked inside a

carceral-like cage, Gertie's soul and her carving's aura exemplify the parallel elements that rebel against conformity in industrious Detroit.

Nonetheless, because Gertie needs quality wood to produce dolls for a church fundraiser in her community, she resorts to destroying the faceless crucifix for parts. Arnow's description of the destruction is as follows: "The wood, straight-gained and true, came apart with a crying, rendering sound, but stood for an instant longer like a thing whole, the bowed head, the shoulders; then slowly the face fell forward toward the ground, but stopped, trembling and swaying, held up by the two hands" (676-7). With an axe Gertie chops the crucifix into multiple pieces from which she will use to make dolls to support what remains of her family. Gertie finally conforms to her surroundings, one that devalues art and commodifies materials for monetary gain.

Gertie removes her carving from their mystic moment of intrinsic connection and destroys it with her own hands. With the death of her art, Gertie becomes a machine, a docile body, or a homogeneous specimen where capitalism maintains power. Conformity becomes the objective rationale for the Nevels family in order to survive. Arnow's proletarian novel shows how intrinsic human beings become their surroundings in a capitalistic, materialistic society, and with the oppressive, chillingly panoptic powers of industry, the mystic quality of art dies with artists' inherent need to create. Hence, the conditions worsen for Appalachian women, and Arnow emblemizes Gertie's tragic story as the living hell for women in adjusting to the new technological advancements of the time while continuing to perform the female gender roles.

The most deep-rooted issue in Appalachia is the lack of cohesive communities to expedite progressive change. This issue overlaps with our general lack of knowledge about regional history, since we can locate contemporary problems with past injustice. Fragmented

communities exist in the region because Appalachians often hold segregated morals and loyalties to corporations and political ideologies. With the publication of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), the metanarrative moves toward a possible solution of community organization through the strength of the matriarchal space. The culminated oppressive powers of the domestic sphere and industrial slave in the Appalachian literary metanarrative of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became so commonplace in the discourse about the Appalachian subject that the doubly-oppressed individual was deemed "white trash," the central label that the Allison's protagonist Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright must overcome. "Certified a bastard by the state of Carolina" (Allison 3), Bone's imposed identity of "illegitimacy" on her birth certificate—and all the extraneous social inhibitions—and her mother Anney Boatwright's obsession with legitimizing her daughter through the presence of a stepfather Daddy Glen prevents her from rising above her social standing of "white trash." Bone conflates her feelings of sexual desire with pain of sexual abuse; the measure of how "bad [...] ugly, nasty, willful, stupid, [and] ugly" (Allison 252) she feels is contingent upon the higher levels of physical pain upon which Daddy Glen inflicts. The possibility of her social ascension seems impossible without intervention or a shift in the social system; Bone's first-person narration stands as her attempt "to transform her nightmare into narrative as a means of coping with what she considers to be her 'damaged' and 'ruined' body, but that proves impossible since her stories themselves, along with her desires, wishes, and passions, are entrenched in sadomasochism" (Horvitz 244). Fused with her social standing, her illegitimacy, her womanhood, and her incestuous abuse, Bone's identity as "white trash" emblemizes the most extreme case of the low-status Appalachian woman represented in Appalachian literature because she shows signs of misplaced sexual pleasure and fatalistic social ends.

Furthermore, Allison not critiques the myth of “white trash” in Appalachia, but, more important to the metanarrative of Appalachian women, she subverts “also the ideology of motherhood underpinning a sex/gender system that cuts across social classes” (Baker 117). Anney attempts ritualistically every year to legitimize Bone’s birth, and her attempts end in humiliation. As a result, Bone’s tainted reputation intensifies with each public proclamation of her illegitimacy because of her mother’s conformity and sense of high importance to the sense of meaning-making the social order provides. The space where Bone accomplishes an improved self-image is through the matriarchal lineage of Boatwright women who do not conform to the established social norms of identity construction. Instead of prizing society’s definition of legitimacy, Allison and Bone privilege “the private discourse spoken among the Boatwright women,” including Granny and Bone’s lesbian aunt Raylene, because it provides Bone with a path to self-development. The matriarchy of the Boatwright women “enable Bone to resist subjection to mutually reinforcing class and gender ideologies that define her as trash because she is both poor and a woman” (Baker 121). Allison’s redistributes power to the matrilineal bloodline of Appalachian women who ameliorate existentially their lot through each other’s support.

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*, a novel published eight years after *Bastard Out of Carolina*, touches on similar issues women’s roles and the struggle for financial freedom; however, Kingsolver illuminates the war on the social and natural environment as a whole and steers away from centralized conflicts of the internal colony. Postmodern examples of social justice literature like Kingsolver’s novel go a step further than *The Dollmaker* in its efforts because Kingsolver’s novel expedites the shift in reader’s consciousness in order to alleviate the female condition in the same way that Allison rewards Bone with a matriarchal bond but also

factors in the ecological consciousness. In *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver deconstructs conceptually what Batteau's *The Invention of Appalachia* proves about Appalachia in American discourse, which is that Appalachia is an invented concept—not a geographical discovery—of Appalachia as folkways, nature, and poverty. Instead, Kingsolver sets her novel beyond the themes and motifs of coal and into a multi-perspective narrative on Zebulon Mountain, a tripartite peak between Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The three female protagonists in this novel—Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski, and Nannie Rawley—benefit from their education and life experience in order to obtain innovative forms of employment. They embrace technology and experimental economies in order to undo damage multiple patriarchal bureaucracies have wreaked on concerning the ecosystem, including the near extinction of predator species. In addition, the extinction of the red wolf destabilizes the equilibrium of the ecosystem, and the emergence of the coyote population, according to Deanna and her graduate work on the coyote, is a positive sign about the health of the landscape and deserves protection. Other ecological imbalances are visible in Kingsolver's narrative, and the female characters exercise their gender and their innovative means of employment to restore order to the landscape. Kingsolver challenges “the continued stereotyping of low-status women” (Fiene 78) and adds a new perspective to our overall picture of Appalachia at the turn of the new millennium and deconstructs the prevailing idea of the Appalachian woman thus far portrayed in the region's literature of the past through her presentations of strong female characters and the redevelopment of the ecosystem.

#### An Analysis of the Paradigm Shift in *Prodigal Summer*

The twenty-first century Appalachian woman finds power outside the domestic sphere. According to recent ethnographical study by Judith Ivy Fiene, self-defined career choices holds

“precedence [over] identification in homemaking roles” (Fiene 75), and they “search for alternatives. However, lower class Appalachian women do not obtain generally the education and the social skills necessary “to enter competitive job markets or even given them the skills of interacting with the world outside the circle of their immediate acquaintances” (77). The central female characters of Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* participate in eccentric careers, partly because of their financial needs, but also because of their innovative natures. Women become “creative actors within their social sphere” (Fiene 72).

For example, Lusa Landowski creates an innovative business model of goat farming to support her adopted children after her husband’s death. Additionally, Nannie practices organic farming despite the negative criticism of her neighbors who practice insecticidal agriculture. In *Prodigal Summer*, elements of nature, particularly the coyotes, the moths, the honeysuckle, and the organic farmland, possess an equal speaking part alongside the human characters. Because humans and nature are characterized equally in the narrative, the ecosystem as a whole, both its working parts and the dynamics, stands as the protagonist. Specifically, however, one thread of the braided narrative called “The Predator” focuses on Deanna Wolfe, a U.S. Forest Service worker, a native of rural Zebulon County in Appalachia, and a committed environmentalist who dedicates her academic and personal lives to rebuilding the coyote population on Zebulon Mountain. Deanna’s coexistence with coyotes undercuts socially-constructed animal versus human dichotomies and illustrates the latent semantic revision of Kingsolver’s language. Kingsolver admits her problems concerning writing about sex in *Prodigal Summer* due to the fact that sexual language either leans toward the pornographic or toward the medical, and she creates a new way of speaking of sexuality with the most socially-transcendent language as possible (Jones 20). Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* reinstates nature’s restored relationship with

humanity, one of ubiquity and “bisexuality,” the true language of the ecosystem so complexly simple and socially-unidentifiable that one can recognize it only through metaphor.

Deanna Wolfe, like the other ecologically enlightened characters of Kingsolver’s braided narrative, prospers in the narrative’s closing pages “because [she] understand[s] both the human and nonhuman ecology of their bioregion” (Kingsolver 89). According to Laurence Buell’s ecocritical tenants, historical prose about nature remains an issue concerning “literature’s sensitivity—or insensitivity—to the history and phenomenon of human dominance of the nonhuman world; and [we] should look for symptoms of autocritique, troubled uncertainty, alternative environmental-ethical models of thinking” (1440). Deanna exemplifies this new ecological thinking about the natural world in her work as a socially-secluded environmentalist who searches the woods for signs of predator recultivation on the mountain. She expresses her connection to natural predators when she says, “I don’t love animals as *individuals*, [...] I love them as a whole species. I feel like they should have the right to persist in their own ways” (Kingsolver 177). Her worldview as a cultivator of predators for the benefit of the ecosystem allows a new place or “location” to merge, “where the social and the natural meet, where the production of nature by the social is not clearly distinguishable from the production of the social by the natural” (qtd. Jones 3). Deanna does not mantle humankind over nature and, therefore, does not conform to patriarchal human dominance over the natural world. During her first encounter with Eddie Bondo, a coyote killer with whom she paradoxically maintains a love affair, Deanna says, “Every single thing you hear in the woods right now is just nothing but that. Males drumming up business” (Kingsolver 13). Deanna recognizes the destructive forces of patriarchal agribusiness and selfish killings of predators. He and the coyotes share a ubiquitous

relationship as they create ecological equilibrium and community from the rubble of patriarchal dominance over the land.

The ubiquitous relationship between Deanna and the coyote survives because even though they cannot communicate through the spoken word, they understand the signs written along the earth: the prints in the soil, the inhabitants of the trees, and the remains of animals. Kingsolver reveals Deanna's seclusion from human society when she writes, "She'd forgotten how to talk with people, it seemed—how to sidestep a question and hide what was necessary" (10). Language, either written or spoken, exists as a human construction, and because language is a human construction, it possesses extreme limitations in describing the communicatory connection between Deanna and the coyotes. Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodern understanding of language holds that "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of general agonistics" (qtd. Benhabib 113). Agonistic language consists of aggress and defense within the same species, like the behavioral elements of submission, territory, and togetherness of a wolf pack. Considering Lyotard's definition of speech in relation to the coyote, speech becomes a synonym for the written word, an *écriture*, which is defined as "everything about writing that can neither be subsumed into an idea nor made to correspond exactly to empirical reality" (Gilbert 1938). During one of Deanna's daily surveys of the woods, she hears a coyote howl, and the narrator states, "no social creature could grow up mute, it wouldn't survive" (Kingsolver 200). In the fragmented world of postmodernity, coyote *écriture* stands as a form of authentic communication that connects Deanna to the coyotes.

A celebrated contribution to *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, is Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of Medusa." She writes to women that "Woman must write herself" (1643). For a woman to "write herself," she must be in tune with her sexuality, a sexuality that she defines for



herself outside patriarchal, heteronormative standards. Yet, Cixous writes that it is impossible to define “a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another” (1644). In order to prevent a singular definition for female sexuality, Cixous revises Virginia Woolf’s notion of *androgyny* as *bisexuality*, which Cixous defines as “each one’s location in self of the presence—variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of the one sex, and, from this ‘self-permission,’ multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body” (1649). The key term to understanding *bisexuality* is “desire.” Women should act upon their desires without the limitations of patriarchal, dichotomous labels, like gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, or transgender. In short, different from the mainstream definition of a man or woman who is attracted to both heteronormative sexes, when Cixous says “bisexual,” she means “neuter” (1649). During a debate about coyotes with Eddie Bondo, Deanna argues, “There’s no such thing as *alone*. [...] There’s all these connected things you’re about to blow a hole in. They can’t *all* be your enemy, because of those connected things is you” (Kingsolver 320). This dialogue characterizes Deanna as agonistic, as argumentative, as challenging the views and actions of a power-hungry man, as a defender for Eddie’s targets, and as a survivor of the loneliness and divorce.

As a divorcee Deanna believes that she would “not survive being discarded again as she had been by her husband at the end, with his looking through her in the bedroom for his glasses or his keys, even when she was naked, her body a mere obstruction, like a stranger in a theater blocking his view of the movie” (21). In the wilderness Deanna possesses the time to reflect on her sexuality outside the confines of her unfruitful marriage. During her reclusion from society, she redevelops her sexuality in order to “write herself.” Writing “herself,” however, is

communicating with wilderness and participating in what she desires, even if she is involved sexually with a man who kills coyotes. Often after Eddie leaves Deanna's cabin to stalk the coyotes, Kingsolver narrates that Deanna "would not let herself name this craving what it was, so she named it food, a thing that normally didn't merit a second thought in her life here—she ate when she was hungry, and anything would do. But for this whole day her body had been speaking to her of its presence: an ache in the thigh, a need in the gut" (Kingsolver 64). However, she projects and blames the mice for eating her food, which are animals frequently hunted by coyotes. Deanna says, "But they were only doing their job, which was the same as everybody else's: surviving" (65). Yet, in the end, she chooses the coyotes over Eddie, her lover on Zebulon Mountain, because the coyotes are inseparable from "herself." If Deanna is to "write herself," then she is to write and, in turn, speak coyote. To speak or write coyote is to *act or be* coyote, according to Lyotard's definition of language as agonistic. Using Cixous's terminology Deanna becomes the liberated "New Woman" (1645), a survivor, like the growing population of coyotes on Zebulon Mountain.

Kingsolver uses Deanna's relationship with the coyotes similarly to when nineteenth-century women writers use the *mad double* to portray their true feelings or selves that patriarchy suppresses. In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the feminist theorists propose that in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's "mad" hidden wife Bertha, or *the madwoman in the attic*, "stands for everything the woman writer must try to repress—though never with complete success—in order to write book acceptable by male standards" (Gilbert 1924). Mary Jane Sherfey, a physician and radical feminist, illustrates what women writers repress the "madwoman" in order to meet male standards of writing:

The *forceful* suppression of women's inordinate sexual demands was a prerequisite to the dawn of every modern civilization and almost every living culture. Primitive woman's sexual drive was too strong, too susceptible to the fluctuating extremes of an impelling aggressive eroticism to withstand the disciplined requirements of a settled family life[.] (qtd. Jaggar 89)

Patriarchal authority of the literary scene during the nineteenth-century seeks to eliminate these archetypally "wild" qualities of women. Kingsolver, however, published *Prodigal Summer* in 2000, a time when women writers possessed an ameliorated voice alongside their male colleagues and competition. Critics of Kingsolver and *Prodigal Summer* claim that she "is at the height of her verbal powers in this novel, [and] employs elaborate Darwinian conceits to link human and natural worlds, both to show how they are connected and how they are similar in needing variety to sustain the health of a complex interdependent ecosystem" (Jones 2). Echoing the technique of celebrated nineteenth century women writers, Kingsolver creates an obvious characterizational interdependence between Deanna and the coyotes, who may speak to women to seek their true selves and sexualities.

Critics also claim that Kingsolver often and uniquely animalizes people and personifies animals in *Prodigal Summer* (Jones 22). Kingsolver animalizes Deanna as a coyote when she writes, "Her body was free to follow its own rules: a long-legged gait too fast for companionship, unself-conscious squats in the path where she needed to touch broken foliage, a braid of hair nearly as thick as her forearm falling over her shoulder to sweep the ground whenever she bent down" (Kingsolver 2). Because Kingsolver connects the two freely, she evidently does not experience what Gilbert and Gubar coin *anxiety of authorship*, which is defined as "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will

isolate or destroy her” (1929). Kingsolver not only has access to strong women writers as precursors in her tradition, but she also has the coyote *écriture* to motivate “The Predator” thread of the braided narrative in *Prodigal Summer*. The sexual and overall instinctual repression in a woman’s psyche parallels with synonymously mad, predatory, or wild qualities attributed to coyotes.

Coyotes migrate to the Appalachian area along the Virginia-Tennessee-Kentucky border where they are not native, and Deanna later interprets their arrival to Zebulon Mountain as an ecosystematic necessity because coyotes replace native but slain predators like the red wolf (Kingsolver 14). Deanna informs Eddie that we “have no real record of them ever living here. And then they just up and decided to extend their range into southern Appalachia a few years ago. Nobody knows why” (Kingsolver 15). Again in reference to Gilbert and Gubar, these feminist theorists claim that nineteenth-century women are admonished “to *be ill*” (1933). However, twenty-first-century women writers and their narratives are able to overcome this illness. With the arrival of coyotes, and hence the arrival of a reclaimed sexuality, the ecosystem can thrive healthily. According to Clarissa Pinkola Estes and her work on the wild woman archetype, she states, “Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion” (4). We know that Deanna possesses “keen sensing” because she spots Eddie in the woods before he spots her (Kingsolver 3). In addition, we notice the coyote playfulness in Deanna when she jokes with Eddie as he urinates off the porch as she says, “You’re still in my territory” (26). Deanna possesses a high sense of devotion when she first spots the coyote pack of females in the woods. Kingsolver writes Deanna’s thoughts: “She wondered if there was anyone alive she could tell about these little dogs, this tightly knotted pack of survival and nurture. Not to dissect their history and

nature; she had done that already. What she craved to explain was how much they felt like family” (203). Once Deanna witnesses the coyotes’ presence on Zebulon Mountain, she compromises nothing, even her relationship with Eddie, to protect them like her own family, her health, and the sustainability of the Zebulon ecosystem.

In Cixous’s “The Laugh of Medusa,” she describes Medusa as a bisexual woman under Cixous’s reclaimed definition of bisexuality. Medusa’s ultimately terrifying yet freeing laugh is nothing to fear: “You have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (Cixous 1650). The Medusas of the world threaten patriarchy because with the power of their realized sexuality and their exercised *feminine ecriture*, women possess the potential to tear down hierarchies, ostracization, and suppression of women. However, paralleling with the criticism of Gilbert and Gubar, the Medusa symbolizes a woman who is “branded ‘an active monster’” (“Sandra” 1924). Yet, if the woman chooses not to laugh or is unable to laugh as a result of her repression, the silence cultures the risk of madness (1924). Cixous calls from women to “to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (Cixous 1652), the truth being the social constructions that deem women weak and submission to patriarchal power. Women are now free to laugh, but where is the voice for the coyote? One of the “General Wolf Rules for Life” according to Estes is to “howl often” (461). To howl is to terrify any prey, to connect with other coyotes, and, most importantly, to reclaim territory.

The most intriguing section and last thread of “The Predator” chapter ties together feminist tenants of Gilbert and Gubar and Cixous. During a life-threatening storm Deanna escapes the cabin on the mountain in order to protect her own life as well as her unborn child. The following passage harmoniously fuses Kingsolver’s revision of the mad double, Medusa’s laugh, and bisexuality: “When the rain and thunder died and the wind had gone quiet, coyotes

began to howl from the ridge top. With voices that rose and broke and trembled with clean, astonished joy, they raised up their long blue harmony against the dark sky. Not a single voice in the darkness but two: a mated pair in the new world, having the last laugh” (Kingsolver 435). The simultaneous laugh and the howl solidify the link Deanna and the coyotes. After the storm both parties fight to agonistically protect their families and teach their clan to sense keenly the interconnectedness of the ecosystem. As Cixous states in her essay “The Laugh of Medusa,” the desire to write includes other desires like “a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (1654). During this “season of extravagant procreation” (Kingsolver 51) that Kingsolver calls *prodigal summer*, the sexual, cyclical process of the ecosystem resurfaces within females of all species once they break ties with patriarchal oppression, adopt their own *écriture feminine*, and laugh (or howl) to terrify those who threaten their territory.

## CHAPTER 4

### WARMING THE REGIONAL CLIMATE: THE APPALACHIAN SEXUAL BODY AND DISCURSIVE SUBVERSION IN JEFF MANN'S *LOVING MOUNTAINS*, *LOVING MEN*

#### Representations of Sex and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Appalachian Literature

The lack of literary representations of sex and sexuality in the Appalachian canon is well-known among the discipline's scholars. Narrative examples of marital relationships in Appalachia retell the same dynamic: little if any illustrates performance of libido within—predominantly heterosexual—unions. For example, Emma Bell Miles's *The Spirit of the Mountains* delineates the marital issues between a young Appalachian couple named Mary and Gideon Burns. Miles posits that Appalachian culture forces couples to marry too young. She writes of Mary: "But this was a child's face, with a child's ignorance behind its lovely mask, a child's readiness to flash into smiles at least provocation, a face that ought surely to have met only with tenderness everywhere" (Miles 47). Miles's treatment of marriage in her work implies consummation, as Mary lives miserably during her pregnancy and the early months of her child's infancy because her husband Gideon's absence emotionally and physically isolates his wife in the domestic sphere without support. Miles's deduces Gideon's personality as "simply a young savage with an overabundance of energy" (59); instead of supporting his family, he spends time with his friends and hardly, if ever, interacts with his child, Buster. Miles states, "Rare is a separation of a married couple in the mountains; the bond of perfect sympathy is rarer" (69); in other words, aside from their sexual relationship, Miles implies that the Burns couple, an example among many, lacks emotional and sexual intimacy.

Fifty years after the publication of Miles's *The Spirit of the Mountains*, Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker* changes the Appalachian literary metanarrative little if at all concerning

the presentation of sex and sexuality. The protagonist and *artist manqué* Gertie Nevels submits to her husband Clovis's request for their family to relocate to Detroit, Michigan despite her plans to buy a neighboring farm in her Kentucky hometown, and, furthermore, she has no choice but to mass-produce less artistic dolls to sustain financially her out-migration Appalachian family after various tragic events involving her children and her artistic, domestic strength.<sup>3</sup> Gertie pines for Clovis's approval of her, but her strongest displays of affection are maternal, directed toward her children and her Detroit neighbors. Arnow writes of Gertie:

She was a coward, worse than any of the others. If she could have stood up to her mother and God and Clovis and Old John, she'd have been in her own house this night. Oh, if she were back with the money in her pocket, she'd say No to them all and move to her farm, sin or no. She straightened, and sat unseeing. Her hands were fists across the bodies of her children, but they slept on, limp heads jolting as the steel wheels clicked over the steel rails. (Arnow 162)

Gertie's evident frustration with her new home and lifestyle affects her emotional bond with her children. In the above quotation, Gertie represses her fury for the sake of her children's rest, and psychological internalizations build to the closing pages of the text when she agrees to the ultimate submission—the abandonment of her wooden carving of Jesus or, according to some readings, Judas.<sup>4</sup>

Heterosexual desire constitutes major characteristics of main characters only around the turn of the twenty-first century. In Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* we see signs of sexual desire devoid in many preceding Appalachian works in the following passage from the novel when protagonist Inman and his lover Ada are reunited after Inman's long trek home after his escape from Civil War theater:



The world was such an incredibly lonely place, and to lie down beside him, skin to skin, seemed the only cure. The wish to do it swept through Ada's mind. Then, like leaves stirring in the wind, something akin to panic shivered within her. But she put it away from her and stood and started undoing the waist button and long strange row of fly buttons on her britches. (Frazier 341)

Frazier, however, omits Inman and Ada's sexual encounter. The narrative shifts to Inman's thoughts and his jaded nature while lying beside Ada after sex, which highlights his inability to communicate emotionally his experience of war. Hence, readers return to the norm of the Appalachian canon, which presents characters' emotional impotence as a result of dehumanizing social practices. The only thing Inman "knows" is "something as fleeting as the smell of [Ada's] breath. No one could know the entirety any more than we can know the life of any animal, for they each inhabit a world that is their own and not ours" (342). In this quote we see that Inman, a fictional example of the psychological dehumanization of Civil War and the American-Appalachian condition, becomes an apparition and, in the end, a corpse defeated and annihilated from the only element of his life that he can possibly "know." The sexual intimacy in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, published three years after *Cold Mountain*, is similar to Frazier's novel in the themes of heterosexual tension and unrequited love.

Although scenes of sexual intimacy in Appalachian fiction shift discourse and the genre's reputation, one of the first nonheterosexual characters surface in Dorothy Allison's 1992 novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Allison's novel incorporates not only a lesbian presence but one of narrative power. The novel constitutes a first-person *Bildungsroman* of the protagonist Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright's journey to legitimacy and escape from incestuous abuse, discussed in the previous chapter, to a matriarchal safe haven. Although most critical readings of Allison's

novel analyze the arbitrary characteristics of “white trash” through Marxist-deconstructive lenses, I contend that the importance of this text lies in how it shifts the narrative power from the heteropatriarchal sphere to the nonheterosexual with the wisdom and influence of Bone’s lesbian aunt Raylene Boatwright, “a queer woman free from men and their patriarchal conscriptions” (Cook 81).

Raylene refuses to work in the local factory system or any other organized workplace in Carolina, and, as a result, she supports herself financially through her art, created out of trash she collects from the river, and actively defies bureaucracy and its heteropatriarchal ideologies. She performs fluidly her gender and her sexuality; for example, she wears clothes traditionally associated with both gender roles, including overalls in one scene and a black serge skirt in another (Baker 122). In addition, she performs domestic tasks like canning preserves and overseeing the play of children, but she also displays typically masculine behavior like spitting and possesses no desire to bear her own children (123). Allison writes in Raylene’s voice: “I like my life the way it is, little girl. [...] You better think hard, Ruth Ann, about what you want and who you’re mad at. You better think hard” (Allison 263). Raylene’s invaluable influence catalyzes Bone’s self-discovery and disavowal of arbitrary polarizations that heteropatriarchal society imposes on their identities, and with this dissolution, Allison shifts power to the sexual minority and lesbian subjectivity. Raylene’s protection of Bone at the end of the novel, after the sequence of events when her mother Anney chooses her husband Glen, Bone’s rapist, and after Bone escapes sexual abuse “carves out a space in the fissures and cracks, and there they preserve the oppositional discourse of Boatwright women that is muffled or silenced in the mainstream” (Baker 125). Allison’s main contribution to the Appalachian literary canon at large is the exposition of the “psychological sickness that pervades a whole society and infects the state

apparatuses and their functionaries” (120), and Allison utilizes the power of the matriarchal space to escape the sicknesses of oppression, illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and sadomasochistic pleasure. Despite Allison’s subversive portrayal of lesbianism in Appalachian literature, Raylene remains in the margin because of her status as a minor character.

A groundbreaking shift in Appalachian literary discourse surfaced in the publication of Jeff Mann’s multi-genre creative nonfiction *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* (2005), a text that has been famously coined as the first book about being gay in Appalachia, because the sexual minority discourse shifts from the minor character in *Bastard Out of Carolina* to the center voice of experience. I further modify the importance of Mann’s memoir as a coming-out performance piece about being a previously closeted gay man as well as a closeted Appalachian. Mann’s memoir follows the standard trajectory of a coming-out narrative, one that follows a “gay character on the well-worn path of confusion, internal torment, self-loathing, and resistance, followed by self-acceptance and emergence to oneself and others” (Walters 64). In addition, the interconnection between text and reader consequentially invites us into Mann’s experience in the closet of denial and duplicity as well as along his journey to construct his own “heaven,” one where he can integrate his ideal gay, academic, and Appalachian communities in one place. Mann’s cultural representation of the psychosexual subverts the heteronormative discourse of our internal colony and the Appalachian body as presented above because he universalizes his sexuality and his experience, one that is “preoccupied with his sexuality and its relevancy to place” (Inscoc, “Sense” 167), that has been largely absent in the literature of the Appalachian past.

### Clarifying Terminology

The LGBTQIA spectrum delineates as follows: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual. The essence of the term *spectrum* constitutes a fluidity of meaning, in which the above classifying terms overlap according to the individual who adopts the term to describe his or her sexuality. The goal of queer studies, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is to “keep our understanding of gay origin, of gay cultural and material reproduction, plural, multi-capillaried, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished” (Sedgwick 44), which entails that both heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals should understand the characteristics of each letter on the spectrum but also should refrain from conformity to the dangerous isolation of peoples to only one identification. As stated above, critics and reviewers catalogue *Loving Mountains*, *Loving Men* as the first book about being *gay* in Appalachia. According to Sedgwick, the connotation and application of the term *gay* insinuates that recipient is “*to be sexed or gendered*” (Sedgwick 54); in other words, *gay* is a term used within heteropatriarchal discursive practice to describe a person, typically male, who engages in sexual activity with a person of the same biological sex. The inherent essence of the term *gay* comes “under the radically overlapping aegises of a universalizing discourse of acts or bonds and at the same time of minoritizing discourse of kinds of persons” (54), meaning that the term’s origin and usage is flawed, contradictory, and susceptible to misuse.

However, the term *queer* implies the same discursive anomaly, but since the late-twentieth century, sexual minorities adopt the term *queer* as a term of endearment in hopes of accumulating community solidarity (Sedgwick xvii). For example, in his discussion of what he coins the “mountaineer queer,” Mann shares how readers receive his work *Loving Mountains*, *Loving Men*: “Many tell me that my work reflects their lives as mountain folk, as ‘gay rednecks,’

as queer who, like me, are reluctant to leave home for the more tolerant but less tolerable bustle of cities” (Mann, “Appalachian” 26). In this statement he uses the term *gay* to illuminate how others view him and the term *queer* to describe himself. Mann presents this pattern again in the following segment from his memoir: “I was to discover, like most queer youth, the pains of being gay long before the pleasures” (Mann, *Loving* 16). His painful experience as a closeted youth is the result of others’ homophobic gazes and judgments, whereas he refers to his “queer youth” as a time when he was constructing his existential identity. In Mann’s essay “Appalachian Subculture,” he writes the following about his reclaiming fusion of two taboo yet self-endearing terms:

‘Hillbilly’ and ‘queer’ are two words that oppressed groups have tried to reclaim. They are words that I may apply to myself but that outsiders had better not use to refer to me unless they want an argument. Being a member of both subcultures is often a double burden, one that many mountain people are eager to escape (19).

Hence we see that *queer* plays a role in his own self-identification. It is to be understood prior to the following analysis of Mann’s work that he utilizes both overlapping terms *gay* and *queer*, and, by extension, *redneck* and *hillbilly* to describe himself according to the interrelational variants in his prose; however, their usage overlaps and sometimes does not conform to the above established pattern. In the chapter “Sunset over Hinton,” Mann illustrates an account of his othered young life as a student compared to his othered life as an adult when he writes, “I am no longer that defenseless pacifist from high school. I am a pissed-off queer” (*Loving* 47).

Marginalized groups experience animosity toward discrimination against them as socially inferior individuals in the patriarchal structure, and, particularly for Mann, anger is often used a defense mechanism against hate.

### Warming the Regional Climate

My contribution to the conversation about how *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* reshapes prevailing views of Appalachia rests on the single epiphenomena seemingly nonexistent in the American-Appalachian conflict of the twentieth-century: empathy. Cognitive literary theorist Suzanne Keen shows that cognitive responses to literature subvert reductive metanarratives and readers' consciousness to engage in prosocial action in response to social or interpersonal injustices presented on the page. In order to be effective, Mann must spark the emotions of his readership in the Appalachian studies network as well as the American marketplace, because according to recent work in cognitive literary studies, Mann's agency for social amelioration must first ignite empathy in his readers due to the region's historical relationship of subordination with the American masses.

In Rodger Cunningham's *Apples on the Flood*, he maintains that a complex social obstacle exists and, as a result, inhibits empathetic response from the American masses for the Appalachian condition. Not only are Appalachians seen as socially and politically inferior because of the region's role in supplying the essentials of American consumerism, we also blindly conform to the exact lifestyle that disparages our communities, bodies, and ecosystems (Cunningham 85). This dynamic portrays a region of mindless, depthless beings susceptible to further unrelenting imperial oppression. Empathetic response to literature possesses the ability to disintegrate the barriers of the Appalachian internal colony necessary to reinvent or to repaint portraits of Appalachia because new feelings and images with which we associate an exemplary account of Appalachia replace the outdated, holistically false attitudes toward the region and its peoples. The key element of this reinvention of the Appalachian image must rest on the region's

responsibility to dissolve this thick barrier in the America-Appalachia relationship, or the region's inferiority to the grand American image will continue.

Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* holds a solid place in the subcategory of cognitive literary studies called the empathy-altruism hypothesis, defined as an empirical, scientific field of research concerning how and why we empathize and who we empathize with in connection to the act of reading. Although her work focuses primarily on empathetic responses to fiction, she argues in various sections that the first-person narrative and "the discourses of witness [like] the confession, the diary, the autobiography, [or] the memoir" (98) perform just as well as texts with self-proclaimed fictionality. Mann's memoir employs a narrative style commonly found in fiction called *psycho-narration*, or "generalizations about the characters' inner states, including thoughts and feelings, with the result that the text itself announces how the [person] feels" (136). Furthermore, the style and form of Mann's work mimic traditional tenants of literary fictionality, like nonlinear plot, authorial intrusions, and elevated poetic language. The liminality of this work with respect to its fictionality and its realism grants Keen's theories about the connections between empathy and fiction reading to be just as applicable to nonfiction.

Keen proposes that empathy "may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization" (69), and this merely extends to "the very start of a narrative [that] can evoke empathy at the mere gesture of naming and quick situating, then readers may be primed by the story-receiving circumstance to get ready to empathize. The mirror-neuron manifold for shared intersubjectivity may be activated by simple cues announcing the existence of another being" (69). After Mann hooks his readers to his authentic personal account of his external and internal struggles as a Wiccan, a gay man, an

Appalachian, and a scholar, he can more readily adjust their behaviors, ethics, and attitudes toward human and natural interconnectedness.

The University of Berkeley-California's Social Justice Symposium defines *social justice* as “a *process*, not an outcome which seeks fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities; challenges the roots of oppression and injustice; empowers all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential; and builds social solidarity and community capacity for collaborative action” (qtd. Blanton 3). Mann's view of the effect of social justice parallels with the above “process” when he states, “It will come to us all, sooner or later. The money runs out or the love leaves. We survive with what little is left. Poverty gnarls us, yes, but it can make us humbler, more compassionate, less judgmental. It can keep us human” (Mann, *Loving* 76). The “gay Other,” the one that heteronormativity collectively fears, is people like Jeff Mann. Motivational texts like *Loving Mountains*, *Loving Men* lead us to “destroy what needs destroying” (Mann, *Loving* 126) and redefine Appalachia through collaborative reading and like-minded community cultivation in favor of reinventing the master-image of Appalachia into multiple Appalachias, fighting back against the suffocating effects of modernity instead of retreating into the pastoral where the American masses have defined our desires and wishes for the last two hundred years.

#### The Gay and Appalachian Closets and the Journey of Coming Out

Mann's coming-out narrative seeks beyond feelings of tolerance in the most crucial areas of political and social thought, including “gender nonnormativity, expressive sexuality, and political engagement” (Walters 67), because he “forces an ‘audience’ to witness rejection and discrimination and the effects of living a life not fully open” (69). Acts of tolerance insinuate a the presence of buffering space between the observer and the observer, or the judge and the



judged, but readers' interaction with Mann's subversive panerotic prose further characterizes his honest humanity, of which empathy is the basic qualifier. Suzanne Keen cites psychologist Martin Hoffman's work on empathy: "The link between empathy and caring is reflected in the prosocial moral reasoning that accompanies people's behavior when they encounter someone in [mental or physical distress or pain]" (qtd. 21). Mann's creative reconstruction of his gay closet in his memoir *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* revolutionizes the Appalachian sexual body because it shifts the discourse from the outsider's view to the insider's internal struggle with Appalachian culture and self-acceptance.

Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, a useful tool for illuminating the structure of Mann's closet, serves as both a genealogy of the closeted space and the semantic variations of the term *closet* in hyper-psychoanalytic, heteropatriarchal society. She published her work on queer theory amidst the social tensions of a Post-Stonewall consciousness in America, particularly, and she first contends that the closet "is not a thing of the past in this country or around the world. For all the talk about the brave new world of open gayness, [...] where we are supposedly everywhere; it remains the case that—at least in the space of the public square—surprisingly little has changed" (Walters 74). Sedgwick transcribes the various definitions of *closet* from the Oxford English Dictionary in order to illuminate the various connotations of the term. The *closet* is referred to as "[a] room for privacy or retirement; a private room; an inner chamber," but the term is also defined as "a private repository of valuables or (*esp.* in later use) curiosities" in part as a space for religious contemplation, particularly prayer (Sedgwick 66). Thus, the closet serves multiple roles for non-heterosexuals, including comforts, buffers, barriers, but also negative feelings such as anger, scorn, and alienation.

Mann's coming-out narrative fashions his closet in vignettes for the reader to inhabit so that readers may fully understand his subjective experience as a gay man growing up in an Appalachian town called Hinton, West Virginia. Mann became aware of his sexuality at age fifteen, and in the section titled "Hinton and *Hejira*," he shares information about the contradictory forces of his youth while living in "an isolated railroad town" as well as his construction of safe mental space in reaction to his homophobic environment (Mann, *Loving* 7). During his youth when he desired more contentious music, he developed an intellectual and emotional attachment to Joni Mitchell's first album *Herija*, meaning "a journey undertaken to flee hostility or danger" (6). He brings this album into the closet with him to increase the space's consoling powers and relieve his "loneliness and melancholy, to shore up my dreams of escape" (6). In addition to the comforting elements of his hidden identity, he developed defensive fantasies about his identity to combat the unacceptance and violence of his hometown. Mann describes his persona as an adolescent boy as "shy, quiet, plump, insecure, unattractive books kid, with long, dark, rebellious hair, good southern manners," an antithetical persona to the one he assumes as a self-realized adult and intellectual. As a growing queer youth, he developed survival mechanisms to repel any homophobic oppression: "lies, omissions, subterfuge, protective coloration, a skilled peripheral vision with which to admire men on the sly" (9).

Because the closet serves as a repository for both positive and negative identity formation, the space emblemizes a substitution for the individual's true sexual desires; therefore, the individual lives incompletely and unsatisfyingly in the "loneliness, self-doubt, and fear" of the closet (xiv). In the section titled "Wintry Woods," Mann admits that many gays and lesbians resort to alcohol and drug abuse as well as suicide. Mann's honesty spans from his sometimes sexually explicit content and the tragic reality of suicidal thoughts: "Suicide is an act, a

temptation, I well understand. It is a way to stop pain you think will end no other way” (Mann, *Loving* 41). For readers who have contemplated suicide and who have thoroughly identified with Mann thus far in the narrative, they have been given the opportunity to understand that they are not alone in their struggle. He contends thoughts of suicide as a grown man because he views the world from a child’s eyes, because a child “takes delight in country-fried steak and lots of gravy to sop up with biscuits. Sometimes it is the love for such small things that keeps us from suicide” (56). Mann acknowledges that suicide is no longer an option for him because “almost every pain passes” (41), and his memoir subsists as a victorious, academic testimony, confirming that suicidal thoughts can be overcome.

When Mann uprooted from Appalachia to explore the urban gay scene, his hopes floundered in his pursuit of true love. Mann’s construction of his existential heaven involves mending wounds. In the section “Remember This Healing,” Mann recounts his first true love with a man named Paul, who teased and manipulated Mann. Despite Mann’s desperate efforts—sending flowers, writing love poems, and opening his home to Paul even while he slept with other men, waiting faithfully by his side when Paul had a health scare—Paul never fully committed to the monogamous relationship for which Mann pined (Mann, *Loving* 39). Mann admits that he “chose those men not only for their desirability but for their inaccessibility (41). Mann’s memoir subverts even the most celebrated coming-out stories of those in the American marketplace because he does not normalize with the convention heterosexual routine but lives in a multiplicity of abjections and stereotypes. Mann’s approach to the internalized homophobia in Appalachia is warranted because the region needs a recognizable framework and conventional plot structures in order to expedite others’ coming-out stories and gay experiences in print.

While residing in the urban gay scene, Mann realizes how the challenges of gay men and Appalachians interconnect according to their struggles in identity formation and in their social oppressions. Consider the following excerpt concerning Mann's distress from the chapter "Even in Heaven We Cannot Forget": "Strange to be an Appalachian, to love the landscape and the small towns, the winding, ice-edged streams, the burning maples of October, the shocked cornfield, the home cooking and the folk songs, yet to know how unwelcome I might be in so many of those small towns and homes" (Mann, *Loving* 141). This "strangeness" alludes to his psychological stress and the uncanny sensation he feels toward his homeland. The uncanny, or unhomeliness, occurs in human beings' psychological experience as a loss of security or recognizability of home, whether their home is Appalachia (like Mann) or those who cannot feel welcome in a place where they once felt at home. Such psychological stress heightens for the author and the reader with each memory, familial unacceptance, or discriminatory event and causes individuals to rely on certain mind-altering coping mechanisms. Thus, Mann differentiates between Appalachia as society and Appalachia as landscape, according to which element of the Appalachian condition he embraces in his identity. Mann confesses his vacillation between his gay closet and his Appalachian closet when he writes, "If men could not love me, then I would learn to live without love. I would devote myself to the beauty of the landscape" (10). Moreover, Mann chooses the mountainous landscape as his private room, his inner chamber, or his closet, expelling the homophobia of his hometown and surrounding communities.

Modifying the Appalachian region as a closet ameliorates the political and literary statuses of the Appalachian identity as "a more amorphous space of endless becoming or even a more banal fluidity" (Walters 65). The performance act of coming out exemplifies "the

psychological imprimatur of mature identity formation” (Walters 65) that extends not only to Mann’s sexual revelation but his revelation and redefinition of Appalachian identity. Mann’s Wiccan spirituality may heighten our empathetic reading experience for the marginalized because of his views on inherent human interconnectivity to the natural world. Under this spiritual practice the ecosystem does not discriminate among human, animal, or vegetative, and all living organisms interconnect equally. Wiccans believe in karma and the afterlife, omnipresence of ancestors, gender polarity in the Divine, sanctity of humankind and nature alike, moral and behavioral responsibility, and religious tolerance (Blanton 11). As a Wiccan, Mann steps beyond secular inequality with his application of his spiritual worldview in order to show that we as human beings are all connected via a deeper reality. Mann interprets his inescapable connection to his Appalachian homeland in the context of his Wiccan beliefs:

For so many years, unable to meet other men with any ease, I made of sexuality a kind of shrine. To touch a beautiful man was one entrance into a sense of the divine. My neopagan beliefs only encourage this attitude: deity is not transcendent—a detached force located in some distant heavenly realm—but immanent—present in natural phenomena, the human body, and sensual delight.

(49)

Because of his spiritual attachment to nature and the human body, when Mann does not discover love in urban gay cities, he decides to devote himself to the Appalachian landscape.

In the section “Two Lovers,” Mann posits, “Sometimes it feels as if my Appalachian roots and my desire for men are two lovers I vacillate between. When I feel spurned by one, I take up with the other” (Mann, *Loving* 42). Mann shifts the primary Appalachian problem from dangerous stereotypes, like inherent ignorance for instance, to the abusive bigotry of “intolerant

fundamentalist Christians” (xii). The gay and the Appalachian closets are neither as small nor as isolated as the prevailing epistemological understanding of the closet implies (Walters 70). When the gay world betrayed him, he returned to Hinton, his second closeted identity with which he could not fully embrace outside its Appalachianess, including the landscape and cultural characteristics. Gayness and Appalachianess are “not typically marked on the body,” so they “must be uttered or performed or enacted to make it manifest to others” (Walters 67). Both identity groups become the “hidden other,” covered up with false media representations, only partially true cultural representations perpetuated in festivals devoted to folkloric preservation, until we open our mouths.

Mann experienced double-discrimination in both the Appalachian South as well as the urban cities to which he fled, and he was “often encouraged to drop ‘that funny accent’ and ‘those country ways,’ to feel ashamed of his mountain culture” (Mann, *Loving* xii). Mann’s disinterest in “passing” in heteronormative interrelations, including his academic, poetic, and familial personas, and his confession about the link between his sexuality and his emotional connection to the Appalachian mountains empowers him to “declamatory self-naming” (Walters 68). One of Mann’s motives for writing *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* is his reaction to continual rejection of hybridity in academia. He either has to publish his “hillbilly” poems in one place, his “queer” poems in another, and in one nonfictional collection, Mann can publish his writings that include both socially contradictory parts of himself.

Alan Sinfield states that successful queer texts that write against prevailing social values are risky ones, and the danger can either lead to victory or utter failure (203). However, Mann’s memoir conveys a solid social message on behalf of American marginalized groups with a special focus on his punitive experiences in Appalachia because he touches on homophobia as

well as racism, gender inequality, and heteronormativity. In the chapter “Even in Heaven We Cannot Forget,” Mann’s ability to emotionally reach different cultures and mindsets can be found in the following passage:

I love the cultures that gave birth to my blood, but I have too much of a knowledge of history, too much self-knowledge, to feel entirely at home anywhere. Even in America I don’t feel entirely at home, when the president of the nation takes a public stand against gay marriage, when the Religious Right gains more and more political power. There is something to be said for a ghetto: Jewish ghetto in Prague, Appalachian ghetto in Cincinnati, gay ghetto in San Francisco. In a ghetto, what began as fate begins to feel like choice. (143)

A majority of Mann’s readers understand what it feels like to be vocally persecuted on a national level. Readers may respond empathetically to Mann as they feel pain and angst as he illustrates them through his prose because their religion, sexuality, skin color, or regional identity is attacked and ridiculed via mass media or in public social settings. *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* as a successful queer text creates a voice for all “foreign” individuals in American society and allow readers with firsthand discriminatory experiences to identify with Mann’s subjective journey as a gay man in Appalachia.

Even though Mann’s text is well-received among contemporary Appalachian social justice literature, he receives his share of negative criticism from the punitive powers that he writes against. Successful queer texts are risky, and one of the risks of writing against social norms is the possibility of critical hatred and negative effects antithetical to Mann’s authorial intention. Mann receives hate mail, advising him to “‘get medical help’ and to stop ‘promoting’ [his] ‘queer life’” (26). However, the less empathetic readers that react negatively to the thought

of a “mountaineer queer” are outside Mann’s target readership. As the trend suggests, social justice cannot come about without an opposing fuel to fight against it.

Mann’s address of social justice issues would not be as successful without his educational leadership in Appalachian academia. In the history of social change in America, social activism strengthens when people of higher social classes or socially-privileged gender, sexual orientation, or race utilize their social power to ameliorate marginalized groups from their discriminatory situations. A professor of gay and lesbian literature as well as Appalachian studies, Mann advantageously uses his academic leadership to speak to fellow scholars with the power to teach and to spread the discourse within *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*. Cognitive literary theorists further discuss how reading for scholarship is different from empathetic reading, but scholarship can further enrich potentially empathetic responses in professional readers (Keen 85). Professional readers, who we assume know the Western canon in a general sense, grasp through critical reading how canonical texts are overwhelmed with heteronormativity. Reorganizing and adding inclusive texts that touch on subversive sexualities results in social change because it changes our views of where our altruistic actions are better spent. However, Keen recognizes a difference between altruism and empathy when she writes, “while filled with inspiring anecdotes of extraordinary individuals, [reading] does little to encourage reliance on empathy as inexorable leading to altruism. About the role of [...] reading [...] and] the path to moral development, it has nothing to say” (23). Knowing that the relationship among empathy, altruism, and moral development is seemingly underdeveloped in the cognitive literary scene, we should also recognize that the answer lies within our own moral developments, a shift in our energy toward prosocial action. Mann writes bluntly about his disinterest in his own work’s canonization: “If my work reaches, moves, makes space for



members of my clan, then I can live without the Norton anthology” (27). Mann’s honest detachment to literary immortality indicates further where his goal resides: to create joy for marginalized groups in America as a means of social justice.

In his poem “Ambush” Mann explores his angst about his inability to live peacefully in the West Virginia hills and his animosity toward the hating, homophobic glares of others while he tries to formulate everyday security. In the following lines, Mann pleads to the reader:

*How long, how long*

*how much longer*

*must we pay*

*for joy? (19-22)*

These lines relay his two identities through poetic tension, and readers may be led to think about certain social restrictions that keep them from the people, places, and ideas they may want most, whether it be a partner of another race or of the same sex, equal representation as a women, as homosexuals, or a racial minorities, or educational opportunity despite their lower socioeconomic standing. Keen touches on a realistic characteristic of an unempathetic society when she states, “In a world where so many people exhibit indifference to others and respond only to egoistic desires, an increase in altruism or even simple helping certainly seems like a good thing, even if multitudes of needy people still experience neglect” (23). In summary, even though empathy may expedite a more just society concerning our legal rights, the above lines from “Ambush” state that the speaker pays not for justice but for “joy,” which seems to be the ideal aim according to Mann because at least marginalized groups experience a positive change within their communities or within themselves, with or without secular equality. The ideal goal

for Mann and social justice is an overall existential peace of mind and happy heart for himself and for others who experience the pain and alienation of similar discriminatory attacks.

In the preface to *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* called “Constructing Heaven,” Mann’s presentation of his existential utopia includes “a gay-owned bed and breakfast [called Lost River] in the hills of Hardy County, West Virginia” (xi) where he reminisces about the pleasantries of his familial past and where shares a bed with his partner John. Mann utilizes the famous lines from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” as an epigraph: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (Whitman 1323-5). This epigraph illustrates immediately that the contradictory parts of Mann’s identity coexist despite the prevailing metanarratives about Appalachian identity as well as gay openness, and furthermore, what are falsely considered to be polarizing identities are wholly contained in one person. Mann confesses that the construction of heaven is seemingly irreconcilable for Appalachians who want to “embrace both their gay and their mountain identities, who refuse to dismember themselves in order to assimilate [...] love of the same sex and love of home” (xii). Even so, Mann’s construction is not ideal because he resides in Appalachian university towns as a compromise (xii). He cannot “feel entirely welcome, entirely safe” (xii) in his hometown Hinton, West Virginia, as it is too burdened with traumatic experiences of homophobia (xii).

Certain Western dichotomies, alongside the heterosexual vs. homosexual, must be revised in order to increase empathetic responses for minority groups. One dichotomy that cognitive literary theory deconstructs is the rational vs. emotional binary. Keen suggests that Western binary oppositions need to merge in order for us to understand human cognizance. Keen states, “Human empathy clearly involves both feeling and thinking. Memory, experience, and the capacity to take another’s perspective (all matters traditionally considered cognitive)

have roles in empathy” (27). In order to “take another’s perspective,” the perspective must enable feeling as well as thought to catalyze an empathetic response. In reference to *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, a recurring praise of Mann as an author is his honesty. His honesty as a poet may challenge readers to think through Mann’s conflict between the two dueling parts of himself. Mann cannot fully come out as a doubly-marginalized queer and Appalachian man until he can integrate his identities and present both in his poetry. *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* stands as Mann’s way to reconcile the two marginalized groups in Appalachia as well as within himself.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Ron Rash's *The Cove*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, and Jeff Mann's *Loving Mountains*, *Loving Men* contain narratives and images of Appalachia that dissolve the pastoral, nostalgic, and often contradictory images of Appalachia people and reinvent a seldom unquestioned metanarrative of regional ubiquity into heterogeneous examples of Appalachian people and attitudes toward the landscape in relation to the projected Appalachian image perpetuated in the American mainstream. Placing these works side-by-side in a manuscript illustrates the complex issues at hand in the Appalachian canon and set precedents for Appalachian artists of the upcoming generation, particularly with how we document fictional representations of Appalachian history, the verisimilitude and heteroglossia of Appalachian women's voices, and the process of identity formation in a region divided in religious, social, political, and sexual issues. First and foremost, the works following the examples of the paradigm shifts of the previously assessed creative works "must continue to tell the stories of people drowned in invisibility" (Brown, "Dark" 18). Because each of these texts represents a paradigm shift in its own literary thread of trend and subject matter, the texts that come after must capture the region with the same specificity but through previously undocumented or underrepresented perspective, histories, and micronarratives and through the voices of the here-and-now, separate from Appalachian voices of antiquity.

The uniqueness of contemporary Appalachian creative works in accordance to their subversions of the literature of the past subsists because of their ability to circulate discursive knowledge about regional issues concerning social conflicts and environmental disparities. Appalachian authors should embrace the power of the American marketplace to circulate

subversive representations of Appalachian people and the landscape. As a subgenre of American literature, we deserve our own literary metanarratives. In order to accomplish a seemingly impossible creation, the viability of creating the most inclusive metanarratives hinges on two necessities. One, assembling literary metanarratives would allow more readily scholars to gain academic acclaim within and without the discourse of the American canon in hopes to shift power from the elite to a diverse minority group. Two, with the normalization of the metanarrative in the classroom and within academic discourse, students and scholars can use the metanarrative as yet another tool to analyze past and current Appalachian literature, and, more importantly, have a framework against which to argue. Scholars should see the preceding analyses as a call to action, particularly with evident abundance of forthcoming reading, research, and writing in order to convey accurately the trends, reactionaries, subversions, and reinventions of the preceding and current generations.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> An abundance of other novels supersedes the publication of *Child of God* and McCarthy's other Appalachian Gothic novels *The Orchard Keeper* and *Outer Dark*. These novels include but are not limited to Sharyn McCrumb's ballad novels like *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* and *She Walks These Hills*, Amy Greene's *Bloodroot* and *Long Man*, Wiley Cash's *A Land More Kind Than Home* and *This Dark Road to Mercy*, and, most recently, Charles Dodd White's *A Shelter of Others*. Ron Rash's collected works—varying in degrees of Gothic affluence—also belong in this literary subgenre because of his repeated familiarization and universalization of the Appalachian Other, grotesque imagery, terror, horror, Promethean heroes, and claustrophobia, to name a few.

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<sup>2</sup> The original hardbound copy of *The Cove* suffered unfortunate reviews in comparison to the success of its predecessor *Serena* due to the novel's one-dimensional depiction of the World War I recruiter and villain of the novel, Chauncey Feith. The following analysis stems from the revised paperback edition of *The Cove*, as it is Rash's preferred version, in which he omitted two chapters and various paragraphs dedicated to the characterization of Chauncey (Lang 96).

<sup>3</sup> An in-depth discussion of Appalachian womanhood in *The Dollmaker* can be found in Chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> Up to this point in Appalachian literary history, Appalachians—women in particular—display characteristics of emotional and sexual impotence, a result of harsh social conditions and their inescapable social oppression. There is also a trend of absent husbands who leave their wives to oversee the entire family dynamic and who expect their wives to acclimate to changes upon the husband's insistence.

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